

David Seawright

The British Conservative Party and One Nation Politics

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David Seawright



NEW YORK • LONDON

2010

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-8974-6

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the United States of America

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Acknowledgments

As is often the case, the work on a book such as this incurs a multitude of debts. Thus, there is the obvious obligation on my part to express my gratitude to all those who have helped and assisted, in a variety of ways, with the completion of this research monograph. With this in mind I would like to begin with an acknowledgment of the assistance of the British Academy, for the research grant SG 35058 which enabled me to undertake the research for this project and to the staff of the various libraries and archives for their generous help and assistance.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sheridan Westlake of Conservative Central Office for permission to consult and quote from the Conservative Party Archive (CPA) at the Bodleian Library Oxford and also to Emily Tarrant, the archivist and Colin Harris and Oliver House for their generous help and guidance in the use of this resource. I am grateful to the British Library of Political and Economic Science and to the archivist, Sue Donnelly, for permission to consult and quote from the papers of Sir Gilbert Longden and for access to the British Oral Archive of Political and Administrative History (BOAPAH). For the work gleaned from the papers of Sir John Rodgers, at the Centre for Kentish Studies, Kent, a thank you to Sir Piers Rodgers for his permission to view and quote from his late father's papers. I would like to thank Robert Butler, the Librarian and Nigel Cochrane, from the University of Essex, for all their help and for their permission to consult the papers of Lord Alport and I would also like to thank the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge for their permission to consult and quote from the papers of Richard Austen (RAB) Butler. I am grateful to Lord Howard of Rising who, on behalf of the trustees of the Enoch Powell papers, gave permission to quote from this archival resource and in particular to Katherine Thompson of the Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, for all her generous help with regards to the Powell papers.

For granting helpful and informative interviews I would like to thank, Alistair Burt MP; Lord Mark Carlisle; Sir Philip Goodhart; Damian Green MP; David Heathcoat-Amory MP; Lord David Howell; Jacqui Lait MP; Andrew Mitchell MP; Caroline Spelman MP; Sir Michael Spicer MP and David Willetts MP. I would also like to thank Robert Jackson and members of the One Nation

Group for permission to consult the “attendance book” for 1992–2004 and Keith Simpson MP for his correspondence with regards to updates on the membership of the group.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the many colleagues and friends at the University of Leeds for their unstinting encouragement and advice over many years and for their comments and advice regarding this project: especially Geoff Fry, Ed Gouge, Clive Jones and Kevin Theakston; and in particular Stuart McAnulla who has consistently offered guidance and constructive criticism and who speedily alerted me to the “Responsible Society context” when it was in its initial development by David Cameron. I owe a debt of gratitude to Joe Organ, then a research student at Leeds University, who coded all the One Nation pamphlets and the housing sections of the Campaign Guides and in this context I would also like to thank Andrea Volkens, of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, for her generous help and her advice on understanding the Manifesto Research Group coding procedures. My thanks also to Chris Wylde for his help in constructing the excel graphs for Chapter 3. I am indebted to Katie Gallof and in particular to Marie-Claire Antoine at Continuum for their patience and for their support of this project. I must pay a special tribute to Andrew Gamble for his support and guidance over many years and for his generous help and encouragement with this particular project. Of course, and no doubt to the immense relief of many of those mentioned, the usual disclaimer applies, that the interpretation of this work, its inaccuracies and mistakes are mine and mine alone.

During the course of the research and writing of this work there has been much personal and family support to which I must give a special mention. My neighbors are acutely aware of this work as an excuse for my shortcomings with regards to such necessary maintenance and gardening activity. So for their generous help and understanding with this I thank Paul and Jane Hyman and Colin and Jean Glasby; with particular thanks to Colin and Jean for the concomitant supply of the “water of life.” There have been many happy family events that also need mentioning. It was special to see Joanne, Craig and Sarah again after so many years and the marriages of Craig and Tracey, Robert and Elizabeth and Aaron and Joanne were wonderful events but it is with particular delight that I mention the arrival of the newest generation: Ava, Reuben and my own little Zachary. Family is just so important and I thank them all for the support they have given me over the years and I am sure they will all join with me in thanking my sister Tricia for all her longstanding selfless work on our behalf and to whom this book is dedicated.

Foreword

The British Conservative Party has been one of the most successful political parties in any modern democracy. Between 1915 and 1997, the Conservatives were never out of government for more than six years. They were in government either alone or in coalition for 62 of those 82 years, or 75 percent of the time. In its long period of success, the party became strongly identified as a party of the nation, promoting a particular national idea, and seeking to appeal to all citizens. In one sense it had no choice. Once the suffrage began to be extended the Conservatives could not rely on the votes of the country areas to return them to office. In a country so urban and industrial as Britain had become, the Conservatives needed to be a party of the whole nation, and to seek to represent the cities as well as the shires. The genius of Conservative statecraft was to adjust to the demands of the new democracy, and find a way to create a genuine national appeal. Disraeli had understood much earlier that if politics in modern Britain became a contest between the two nations, the rich and the poor, the Conservatives would lose.

The One Nation approach has been associated at times with a particular ideological tendency in the party, but David Seawright is correct to point out that the approach does not belong to any one faction. It is what every Conservative leader must seek to follow. Margaret Thatcher may not have used the term, One Nation, but she famously declared after her third election victory in 1987 that her next task was to win the votes of the citizens of the inner cities, declaring that she wanted them as well. It was not enough to rely on the votes of the bankers and the comfortable suburbs. Margaret Thatcher was often accused of shattering national unity and creating two nations, but her own view was very different. She believed that only her policies could recreate a true national community again. In that sense she was acting as many Conservatives before her, seeking to unite the classes rather than to divide them and to stress the principles and values which were shared in common.

One Nation has been threatened however not only by the two nations of the social classes, but also by the four nations of the territorial politics of the United Kingdom. Being a national party in the multinational United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has sometimes been difficult, because within this state, the British identity has always been to some extent contested, and considered by some as subordinate to the primary loyalties of being Scottish, Welsh,

Irish, or English. The Conservative Party has always drawn its main strength from England, and although a quintessential English party, it has never believed it could prosper by being only an English party. In recent years, when at times it has appeared as little more than a southern English party, with no significant representation in many parts of Northern England, or in Wales, or in Scotland, let alone Northern Ireland, fears were raised for the survival of the party. The true One Nation tradition was when the Conservatives proclaimed themselves a Unionist party and won significant representation through the United Kingdom, not least in Scotland. In the 1950s, the party was still able to win half of the Scottish seats. At the core of this Unionism was a particular conception of Britain as an empire, an expanding power, which incorporated other nations and territories within its rule.

Central to Conservative statecraft has been the aim of finding the policies and the symbols through which both the two nations and the four nations might be transcended in One Nation. The Empire played a major role in this, but after 1945, the Empire went into retreat, and at the same time new forms of social citizenship in the shape of universal welfare and health programs became an alternative focus for national unity. Fresh thinking was needed by the Conservatives, and the One Nation Group was an important source. It is the history of this group, and the importance of its thinking to the development of the subsequent evolution of party thinking which David Seawright seeks to demonstrate. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Conservatives had become a collectivist party and an interventionist party. One Nation was interpreted to mean that the government should protect citizens, especially in hard economic times like the 1930s. The Conservatives imposed imperial preference, encouraged industrial cartels, and protected small businesses from competition. The One Nation Group in the 1950s attempted to move the party in a very different direction, drawing increasingly on the tradition of economic liberalism, which had never gone away, but which had become rather muted.

David Seawright brings out very well the different emphases within this new One Nation approach, and its considerable influence within the party. He shows how it appealed strongly to David Cameron, who has set himself the task to revive both Unionism, while accepting devolution, and social justice, while avoiding too great a reliance on the state. His espousal of green ideas and his promotion of the third sector are distinctive aspects of his particular adaptation of the One Nation approach. The importance of civil society in Britain, the dense web of voluntary, not-for-profit organizations has always been one of the things which has made Britain distinctive. The failure in the 1990s to prevent most of the building societies from abandoning their mutual status and becoming banks was from this perspective a failure of One Nation Conservatism. By signaling his determination to rely on the third sector to a greater extent than ever before in the delivery and design of public services and the development

of the green agenda, David Cameron seeks to revive the spirit of One Nation thinking. If the Conservatives as expected return to government in 2010, they will confront very difficult economic circumstances, and this new One Nation approach will face a stern test, but it is now once again central to Conservative strategy and will not be lightly abandoned.

Andrew Gamble
University of Cambridge

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: One Nation, Food for Thought

In 2006, just months after winning the Conservative Party leadership contest, David Cameron launched a process that he termed “Built to Last.” Included in the process was a statement of aims and values that were to be the essence of Cameron’s modern compassionate Conservatism: setting out the general political platform for the Conservative Party under his leadership. Such aims and values were debated in a series of countrywide road shows before being endorsed overwhelmingly by members of the Conservative Party in a ballot in September 2006.¹ The front page of this *Built to Last* document declared:

We are a modern, compassionate Conservative Party. Our enduring values mean we believe in trusting people, sharing responsibility, championing freedom and supporting the institutions and culture we share as one nation. Conservatives are not ideologues. That is why in each generation we change, applying our values to new challenges.²

This image of enduring values applied to new challenges, the derivative of which is generational change, but within the context of the institutions and culture of one nation is one of the most abiding myths³ of the Conservative Party. What at first appears as an oxymoron is found to be paradoxically central to Conservative Party politics. What the Conservative opponent views as the political maneuvers of an opportunistic and unprincipled party are, for the Conservative, the necessary actions to be taken on behalf of the entire nation. The use of the term One Nation clearly matters for Conservative Party politics; for nigh on 200 years, an impression has been disseminated that only the Conservative Party puts “Nation” before any sectional interest and that, only the Conservative Party, as *the* national party, has the ability to assuage and balance the plurality of competing interests on behalf of the whole nation. Thus, the power and longevity of such a concept as One Nation is crucial to any understanding of the success of the Conservative Party, and as we shall see it is because of this long and successful utilization of the term One Nation that so many within the party are so keen to lay claim to it.

This book examines such competing claims to One Nation Conservatism while emphasizing the centrality of One Nation to any fundamental understanding of Conservative Party politics. In so doing, it analyzes both the conceptual

use of the term and, with the formation of the One Nation group of Conservative MPs in 1950, its incarnation. This dual analytical approach delivers the theoretical insights and the empirical focus that facilitates an exposition of how and why a party that makes such emphatic claims to enduring values has such a proclivity to generational change.

The Chapters and the Thesis

Students of Conservative Party politics are no doubt well aware of Lord Kilmuir's (David Maxwell-Fyfe) dictum of loyalty being the "secret weapon" of the Conservative Party.⁴ Indeed, Andrew Gamble in the 1970s could state that "the Conservative party is renowned for its unity and cohesion, the absence of factions in its ranks and loyalty to its leaders."⁵ Gamble made this assertion with regard to his explanatory thesis of Conservative Party politics, namely, how the politics of support is successfully converted to the politics of power. Although Gamble was well aware of the differing ideological positions within the party—"this babel of conflicting voices"—he emphasized the construction of a party organization, which could successfully compete in the political market; in reality, this meant maintaining the support of the party in Parliament and in the country while marketing itself to the mass electorate. Gamble correctly identifies Conservative success with the "need to develop a politics of the nation," the process by which the Conservative leadership's electoral policy not only reflects the politics of the *Conservative Nation* but ensures that this politics of the nation becomes coterminous with the politics of the state, that is, ensures success for the party in the mass electorate.⁶ Of course, after three electoral defeats since 1997 and "factional" infighting over the issue of Europe, the above objects of renown are now rather questionable. However, it may well be that this absence of factions and loyalty to the leader per se were never the party's "secret weapon." It is the claim of this book that this is to be found elsewhere, and that it is through the examination of the politics of One Nation Conservatism that we identify where the real "secret weapon" of the party lies.

R. J. White in his book, *The Conservative Tradition*, examines the thoughts of Conservatives in relation to the centuries-old discussion "which has ranged over the whole field of political thought and experience . . . the relation of the State to the individual."⁷ But crucially, with this age-old discussion in mind, students of Conservative Party politics should be aware of R. J. White's maxim that "parties are forever in need of refreshment at the springs of doctrine."⁸ Focusing on the conceptual use of One Nation and the One Nation group of Conservative MPs as a microcosm of postwar Conservative Party politics allows us not only the opportunity to rule out the assertion that loyalty was ever the secret weapon of the party but to identify the real secret weapon in the manner in which the party refreshes itself at such springs of doctrine. We shall see in the following pages that the Conservative Party is more of a doctrinal party

than is commonly thought and through examining the composition and actions of the One Nation group we see how a “creative tension” over doctrine leads the party to perpetually consider that very refreshment of which White spoke. This claim for doctrine challenges the self-proclaimed image of the party as non-ideological. Indeed, in the “Built to Last” document, we find the abiding shibboleth that “Conservatives are not ideologues.” But, however much the ideological approach is to eschew the notion of ideology itself, in the chapters that follow, we appreciate just how widespread the debate and tension over doctrine is within the party and over that age-old question in particular—the optimal level of state intervention? Thus, the real secret weapon of the party is revealed in the way it utilizes One Nation as an ethos and the way in which competing debates over doctrinal trajectories are facilitated within such an ethos. And, it is groups like One Nation who help promote and enable these debates on change: cognizant, of course, of those enduring values as affirmed by David Cameron.

The remainder of this chapter sets out the historical use of the One Nation term and the enduring claim of the party to be truly the party of the Nation. It also introduces the reader to the, now almost as “mythical,” backbench group of MPs, which formed under the label of One Nation in 1950. The history of the group and its composition is analyzed, stressing its diverse membership in terms of Gamble’s “babel of conflicting voices,” and an assessment is made of its “influence” within the party and, more importantly, of its contribution to policy debates and to the idea of “adaptation to new challenges.” Chapter 2 examines One Nation in the context of ethos and doctrine in the Conservative Party. Building on the ideological tension and diversity found in this chapter, it places such “debate” in the historical and ideological context of Conservatism. The dual nature of Conservative Party politics is examined, and the resultant tension from such doctrinal positions is analyzed to show that this need not be detrimental to the electoral success of the party. Indeed, it is argued that this “tension” is the essence of that Conservative Party success, but it can (and usually spectacularly when it does) malfunction, with a commensurate adverse effect on electoral performance.

With the dual nature of Conservative Party politics in mind, Chapter 3 analyzes the work of the One Nation group in greater depth utilizing the methodological approach of the Manifesto Research Group (MRG), now based at the Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin (WZB), on computerized analysis of political texts. The significance of this approach is that it allows us to establish if the publications from the One Nation group can be classified as “extended state or limited state” Conservatism and more importantly, when the manifestos are used as a “comparative base,” whether we can ascertain the relative policy proximity of these One Nation publications to Conservative policy per se throughout the postwar years until the 1990s. This is important as Chapter 4 focuses on and challenges a certain portrayal of One Nation as a group exclusively on the left of the party, because in any effective exposure of the great myths of British politics, it is important to demonstrate just how distorted and pervasive such a view has become. Chapter 5 then looks at the role of the One Nation

dining group relative to other party groups and offers a reinterpretation of the “factions and tendencies” approach to explaining Conservative Party politics.

Chapters 1 to 5 will leave us with the realization that there is indeed a paucity of consensus to be found within the ranks of the Conservative Party on doctrine. But, we find in Chapters 6 and 7 that there is a similar lack of consensus on the increasingly important issues of territorial politics, race, and Europe. Although the One Nation group never produced a formal policy document on devolution or race relations, we find in Chapter 6 that its members were deeply involved in those debates, leaving us with a conundrum to address: “One Nation, but which?” And then, in Chapter 7, we see that such debate and tension is not confined to the domestic realm. Thus, in “One Europe or no nation?” the One Nation members play a significant role in the prevailing debate about Britain’s place in the world, especially concerning its relationship with Europe and the global market place; in addition, it allows for that other pervasive myth to be comprehensively exposed: One Nation is equivalent to “One Europe.” With David Cameron “elected” to One Nation membership relatively recently, Chapter 8 explores the future trajectory of Conservative Party policy and the extent to which we can discern and accept such generational change in line with those enduring values: in light, of course, of what we have learned by that stage from this study of One Nation. In short, this book offers the first book length in depth study of One Nation Conservatism⁹ and shows us how such an examination of the One Nation group is an invaluable exercise in any analysis of the politics of the British Conservative Party, but we now begin by a brief but necessary summary on the origins of the “One Nation myth” itself.

Mythical Origins: Disraeli on England

Conservatives have a certain predilection for establishing for themselves a line of party ancestry, hardly surprising one might think in a party, which eulogizes a “partnership” between “those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”¹⁰ One of the foremost of those ancestral lines is that of Disraeli, “it has been the habit of Conservatives to go to Disraeli as to a sacred flame.”¹¹ And Disraeli is commonly held to be the source of the One Nation theme.¹² He incorporated the rhetorical flourishes of the Young England movement into his romantic novels in the first half of the nineteenth century and later in his famous Manchester and Crystal Palace speeches of April and June 1872, respectively. In these works, Disraeli outlined his trio of objectives, which would enable the party to transcend the divisive sectional interests in society by appealing to the electorate as *the* party of the nation.

Gentlemen, the Tory party, unless it is a national party, is nothing. It is not a confederacy of nobles, it is not a democratic multitude; it is party formed

from all the numerous classes in the realm—classes alike and equal before the law, but whose different conditions and different aims give vigour and variety to our national life.¹³

In a conjunction between the defense of established institutions and a eulogy to the British Empire, Disraeli espoused as his third great object, the elevation of the condition of the people.

It must be obvious to all who consider the condition of the multitude with a desire to improve and elevate it, that no important step can be gained unless you can effect some reduction of their hours of labour and humanise their toil.¹⁴

But, crucially, Disraeli offers an immediate qualifying sentence, “[t]he great problem is to be able to achieve such results without violating those principles of economic truth upon which the prosperity of States depends.”¹⁵ In these two sentences, we find then an encapsulation and an anticipation of the postwar debates concerning affordable social services. These were, of course, predicated upon a much wider parallel debate within the party between the protagonists of the extended state and the limited state on the best way to actually achieve the goal of elevating the condition of the people. But, economic reality was never allowed to get in the way of the rhetorical benefits of myth and for Southgate Disraeli in his 1845 novel *Sybil*, subtitled *The Two Nations*, “coined a phrase that will live for ever and was immediately arresting” when describing the early-nineteenth-century relations between the rich and the poor: “Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy”¹⁶ The solution, of course, lay with “the Young England conviction that there could be an alliance between the ‘nobs and snobs.’”¹⁷ This symbolic union takes place in *Sybil* in the marriage of the aristocratic young hero with the beautiful but penniless heroine.¹⁸ In reality, Disraeli then never used the term One Nation (however much he echoed the romantic sentiments of Young England). Furthermore, Smith stresses that the “gulf between the ‘two nations’ was not bridged” when Disraeli was in power or later in the *Tory Democracy* of Lord Randolph Churchill, who pursued supposedly the Disraelian tradition but in reality merely presented “a collection of postures and slogans, rather than policy”¹⁹ This interpretation is echoed by O’Sullivan believing Disraeli to have “invented” a new political myth, as early as 1835 and that this “one nation idea” revealed:

above all, great polemical ingenuity . . . [and that the] crucial distinction in the myth was obviously that between class and nation, with the Whigs being branded as a class, and the Tory party being elevated to the true representative of the nation as a whole.²⁰

O'Sullivan had Disraeli looking back himself for similar inspiration to the eighteenth century Tory, Bolingbroke, "whom Disraeli regarded as the principal defender of the ideal of 'one nation' during the eighteenth century."²¹ Such an opinion we see delineated also in the work of Geoffrey Butler on *The Tory Tradition*:

Bolingbroke saw that while the game was Hanoverian against Jacobite, the latter could not hope to win. So long as the Tories were wedded to a fad, they could not make a fight against the Whigs. Only by becoming a national party, not the party of a clique, had they any chance of playing their due part in English political life.²²

Thus, through the work of Disraeli, both in his novels of the early nineteenth century and in his famous speeches of the last quarter of that century, we have sketched out for us an outline of the One Nation myth. However, we should also note with interest here that Peel, the object of Disraeli's and Young England's merciless criticism,²³ echoed similar sentiments in the early nineteenth century to those found subsequently in Disraeli's Manchester and Crystal Palace speeches. Indeed, in Chapter 2, we look in greater detail at this long-standing contention about "Conservative principles" and, more importantly, how such disputes on future doctrinal policy can be resolved, as this is crucial to any understanding of the secret weapon in the Conservative armory. But, for now, we should note that Peel, at the Merchant Taylor's Hall in 1838, speaking on "Conservative principles," gave a similar outline to that found in Disraeli's trio of objectives above:

... the duty prescribed by our principles—is the maintenance of the ancient institutions of the country . . . that society, and those habits and manners which have contributed to mould and form the character of Englishmen, and enabled this country, in her contests and the fearful rivalry of war, to extort the admiration of the world, and in the useful emulation of peaceful industry, commercial enterprise, and social improvement, have endeared the name of England and Englishmen in every country in the world . . .²⁴

This example of Peel and Disraeli highlights the extent to which there is a tendency to exaggerate the scale of difference rather than continuity in the core Conservative message, and such an emphasis upon "the great divide" is examined further in Chapter 4. Crucially, this is an early example of the outcome of intraparty tension when it malfunctions spectacularly, as mirrored in the Conservative Party's electoral fortunes after 1846. In Chapters 2 and 4, we shall examine the trigger for such a malfunction, namely, when one or both elements that make up the dual nature of the Conservative Party either endeavors to distance itself from or to exclude the other from the One Nation ethos

of the party. However, the first Conservative to exploit the mythical term of One Nation in any explicit and systematic contemporary way was Stanley Baldwin when appealing for unity, as opposed to the sectional interests of Labour, in the intemperate political climate of the 1920s and 1930s. Baldwin in this period, as well as Chamberlain, advocated a course of action that utilized policies of the extended state to ameliorate the lot of the worker and to have as a goal:

the sense that we stand for the union of those two nations of which Disraeli spoke two generations ago; union among our own people to make one nation of our own people at home which, if secured, nothing else matters in the world.²⁵

For Williamson, Baldwin was a figure of the highest importance for the modern British Conservative Party as he was, in reality, “the first Conservative Prime Minister to preside over a full mass democracy,” and he quotes Ramsay MacDonald’s opinion that Baldwin had “turned ‘Disraelianism’ . . . from ‘a sham . . . into an honest sentiment of pleasing odour.’”²⁶ Although, Williamson believed that Baldwin placed as much emphasis on the benefits of “independent sturdy individualism” as to policies of extended state intervention:

At the *doctrinal* level it is indeed obvious that Baldwin deployed almost as much Gladstonianism as Disraelianism . . . Baldwin was in truth a skilful eclectic, who from the more promising and flexible elements in Victorian politics created in quite different conditions a highly effective Conservative position . . .²⁷

This then was the “ancestral mythology,” which the One Nation group of MPs utilized in their first pamphlet in 1950 when they traced a lineage from Disraeli through to Winston Churchill of the Conservatives who displayed a concern with a One Nation approach to social problems.²⁸ However, just four years later in 1954, one member of the group was of the opinion that the “hereditary line” should reach back even further than Peel, let alone Disraeli, all the way to Lord Liverpool: the arch mediocrity himself, as found in *Coningsby*.²⁹ In a letter from Jack Simon to Angus Maude, Simon offers an extract from the House of Lords to advance the case for Liverpool being included in the group’s 1954 booklet³⁰:

On 23rd November, 1819, in the House of Lords, Lord Liverpool said:

“The legislature of no other country whatever has shown so vigilant and constant a solicitude for the welfare of the poorer classes; no other has so generally abstained from interference with the details and operations of trade; and it is almost equally demonstrable that the pre-eminent prosperity of our trading classes of every kind as been caused, or at least very quickly aided and promoted, by that judicious abstinence.”³¹

To reiterate, this note to Maude neatly illustrates a crucial aspect of this book—the underlying tension within the One Nation group, which reflects that found, within the Conservative Party itself, on the amount of governmental intervention or judicious abstinence needed to address that solicitude for the welfare of the poorer classes. In the next section, we see such “tension” embodied in the actual membership of the One Nation group of MPs.

The Myth Incarnate

The power of such a conceptual myth is matched by the mythical legacy of the group of MPs who combined in 1950 and became known collectively as One Nation. Indeed, as late as 1996, the group, while irritated at the quite puerile “definitions” of One Nation Conservatism from political enemies and ill-intentioned friends alike, were cognizant of its “powerful brand-name attractions, which PR-conscious politicians want to grab.”³² But, such definitions of One Nation Conservatism are, in reality, fuelled by the “ideological divergence” in the Conservative Party: mirrored within the membership of the One Nation group itself. From its outset in 1950, the group’s membership has exhibited the full range of the Conservative ideological continuum. As we shall see, the views of the free market, limited state Conservatives were espoused just as much, or even more so, as the views of Conservatives adhering to *dirigiste* policies of an extended state. Table 1.1 lists the membership of One Nation from its inception in 1950 to 2006, and reveals this divergence in its ideological makeup. A cursory glance finds limited state Conservatives like Angus Maude and Enoch Powell in contrast to those who favor extended state solutions such as Cuthbert Alport and Iain Macleod and later Keith Joseph in comparison with Ian Gilmour, or David Heathcoat-Amory relative to Ken Clarke, respectively. Intuitively, one may think that such divergence could only constrain debate, limit forthright views and lead to equivocation, but we shall also see that although there may have been times when the “public face” of the “Nation” was so curtailed, in the sense of publications, this was not the case in private where group deliberations were to facilitate the candid debate so necessary for that doctrinal refreshment in the Conservative Party.

The 1950 intake of Conservative MPs acquired and maintained a formidable reputation for ability and achievement. As early as 1954, the *Economist*, in reference to this “class of 1950,” added that: “. . . it is fair to say that the 1950 vintage (and notably its *premier cru* the ‘One Nation’ group) has made a unique contribution to the revival of Conservatism after the 1945 disaster.” And, as late as 1976, this label was still in use to depict this exceptional cohort of MPs.³³ Just one month after the 1950 General Election, we have evidence of an appeal from this 1950 intake for some sort of recognition of their presence in Parliament, as the Chief Whip Patrick Buchanan-Hepburn, in a reply to an internal memo