

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Conservative Nation

Andrew Gamble



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Since the 1880s, the Conservative Party has been an important political force in Britain. In this study of Conservative ideology since the end of Second World War, first published in 1974, Andrew Gamble considers the nature of Conservative Party opinion, and the factors that have accounted for its success. The adaptation of the Party post-1945 is discussed, as well as the ascendancy of the Right progressives in the leadership, and the challenge of the Whigs and Imperialists. Finally, the book includes a discussion of the fluctuations within the Conservative Government between 1970 and 1974, with an account of what Gamble believes to have been ultimately a failure. A rigorous and comprehensive analysis of Conservative thought and policy, this study will be of particular value to those with an interest in the history of British Conservative politics and government.

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Preface

This book is a study of opinion in the Conservative party since 1945. It is not a study of how particular decisions were taken, nor does it describe in any detail how party policy developed. Similarly, there is no attempt to provide a full-scale analysis of either the structure of power or the social composition of the party. Instead, I have tried to focus attention on the manner in which leading Conservatives perceived and adjusted to political reality.

Political reality in the modern political system has several dimensions, marked out by the constraints imposed on political practice by the necessary involvement of politicians in both electoral politics and government. At various stages in the book, notably in the first and final chapters, I sketch out the nature of these constraints. The purpose of this theoretical analysis, however, is not to establish any causal relationships between the structure of the political system and the patterns of ideological response described in this book, but rather to provide a framework for interpreting the ideology and practice of the British Conservative party in recent times. All histories are fictions, reconstructions of the past, never the past itself. The quality of the fiction depends on how it is constructed—the methods and the framework of interpretation that are employed. It is a mistake to suppose that the necessity of choosing between frameworks can ever be dispensed with, and some standard of objective truth and objective method enthroned to guide research. Too much academic rigour in this direction leads to rigor mortis in the social sciences. Though there are good grounds for choosing between theoretical frameworks, there are no absolute objective ones.

This book is concerned with very recent events, and the difficulties and biases of writing such history are sufficiently well known. The crucial limitation is the absence of many documents, such as Cabinet

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papers, that later become available. That is why I have avoided a detailed chronological account of events and policies, which could only be incomplete, and tried instead to analyse and interpret the changing role of the Conservative party in British politics. The material I have drawn upon is predominantly the public utterances and reflections of Conservatives, and it is selected and presented against a background of developments in the political market and the organization of the state.

This book does not claim therefore to be in any sense exhaustive. It merely supplies one interpretation from a particular perspective of the political practice of the British Tories and the ideological difficulties they have encountered during the post-war period. The first two chapters give a theoretical and historical account of the Conservative party and the British political system. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 analyse the electoral perspective of the leadership in the period 1945-70 and the opposition to it within the party. Chapters 6 and 7 look in more detail at two areas central to this electoral perspective, which were the subject of major debates in the party. Chapter 8 recapitulates the historical and theoretical argument of the book and adds a postscript on the Conservative Government of 1970-4.

I would like to thank Professor Philip Abrams, who first interested me in the Conservative party as a subject for research, and Professor John Barnes, for much friendly advice, criticism, and encouragement. I am also indebted to Mrs Crisp and Mr G. D. M. Block of the Conservative Research Department for permission to use the Library there, and to the Library staff at the London School of Economics.

Much of the research and writing for this book was done while I was teaching remedial kids at Thomas Calton School in Peckham and living in Brixton. These surroundings provided many welcome and often bizarre diversions from the peculiar and solitary routines of academic research, and I would like to thank staff and pupils at Thomas Calton and my friends in Brixton, particularly the toilers in the Brixton Food Co-op.

Friendship with Paul Walton over the last five years, and the work we have done together, (particularly our book, *From Alienation to Surplus Value*, Sheed & Ward, London 1972), has been a constant source of new understanding, inspiration, and mental exhaustion. It has greatly altered and developed my thinking on many subjects, and has shaped many of the methodological and theoretical assumptions that underlie this present work.

I am also very grateful for discussions with friends and colleagues in the Politics Department at Sheffield University, especially Patrick Seyd, who read through and commented on an early draft of the manuscript. His own book on the Conservative party is due to be published shortly.

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Finally, I have to thank Mary Beckinsale, Chris Flavin, Paul Ginsborg, and Pat Slowe, for their conversation, cooking, political commitment, and improbable stories; Miss A. M. Lyall, for typing the manuscript with such care; Sorrel for sitting under the lamp; and Chris for her unwavering scepticism.

A.G.

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| CAP | Common Agricultural Policy |
| CBI | Confederation of British Industry |
| CPC | Conservative Political Centre |
| CPC SC | Conservative Political Centre—Summer School |
| CRD | Conservative Research Department |
| CUCO | Conservative and Unionist Central Office |
| EEC | European Economic Community |
| FBI | Federation of British Industries |
| FCS | Federation of Conservative Students |
| FUCUA | Federation of University Conservative and Unionist Associations |
| GATT | General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade |
| IEA | Institute of Economic Affairs |
| IRC | Industrial Reorganization Corporation |
| NAC | National Advisory Committee |
| NEDC | National Economic Development Council |
| NIC | National Incomes Commission |
| NOP | National Opinion Polls |
| NUCUA | National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations |
| OECD | Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| ORC | Opinion Research Centre |
| SET | Selective Employment Tax |
| TUC | Trade Union Congress |
| UNO | United Nations Organization |
| VAT | Value Added Tax |
| YC | Young Conservatives |

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION. THE CONSERVATIVE UNIVERSE: THE POLITICAL MARKET AND THE STATE

For practical politicians, as practical politicians well know, can do little more in politics than give the names to what is happening anyway and smooth the path of the inevitable by persuading people to vote for it.

Christopher Hollis¹

1 THE TORY TRADITION

British Conservatism has many roots. Some historians trace Conservative ideas and the conservative disposition in a lengthy chain as far back as Charles I and King Canute. Professor Hearnshaw even discovered Conservatism at work in the Garden of Eden:²

In that visionary abode of bliss Adam was the person who represented the qualities of contentment and stability. Eve was the innovator, eager for novelty, ready for reckless experiment, liable to be led away by any such seductive slogan as 'Eat More Fruit' or 'Free Figleaves for all'.

Conservatism's future adversary, Karl Marx, cast in the supporting role of the serpent, made a brief first appearance on the stage of history, sowing discord and discontent among the unwary.

Much modern academic discussion of the Conservative party still concentrates, although not normally in so extravagant a fashion, on the abstract ideas and principles that are held to underly the practice of Conservatives. Conservatism is thus presented as one of the great Ideas that stride across History, pushing men and nations before it, and only pausing when confronted by another of the great Ideas, such as Liberalism or Socialism, storming along in the other direction. This is certainly one way of picturing history and the evolution of societies, but it is hardly very fruitful. It requires that the historian always seeks the origin and significance of the beliefs and actions of those he studies in the general principles that are assumed to underlie and inspire them.

It is very difficult, however, even to connect the ideas and actions of Conservative politicians with beliefs in original sin or the organic nature of society, still harder to show that they are directly inspired by them.³ Philosophical reflection on politics should not be confused with the

INTRODUCTION. THE CONSERVATIVE UNIVERSE

practice of politics, and it is in vain that armies of researchers set out to discover whether Conservative practice reflects a coherent 'philosophy'. Michael Oakeshott, one of the more independent of modern Conservative thinkers, has indeed poured scorn on such a quest. 'Reputable political behaviour,' he writes,⁴ 'is not dependent upon sound philosophy. . . . In general, constitutional tradition is a good substitute for philosophy.' Oakeshott argues that to be Conservative in politics does not mean that one has to believe in the existence of a natural law, or a providential order that reflects divine purpose in nature and history, or the organic composition of society, or the absolute value of individual personality, or original sin. It is not logically connected with any particular beliefs about the universe, the world in general, or the nature of man, but only with beliefs about the activity of governing and the instruments of government.

This must be the starting point for any study of the modern British Conservative party, particularly as it is the attitude of many Conservatives themselves. Rationalist Conservatism in the grand continental manner has never flourished in the ranks of the English Tories, who have generally preferred scepticism and philistine common sense. One of the more intellectual of their leaders, Lord Salisbury, once remarked⁵ that a gram of experience was worth a ton of theory and professed to distrust the 'German mania for barren metaphysics'. British Conservatives in general have not normally bothered to justify their beliefs in private property and social hierarchy by appealing to natural law and revealed truth.

The Tory tradition, therefore is not best understood as a tradition of 'ideas'.⁶ It is primarily a tradition of political practice, and ideas are only important in so far as they are part of that practice. To understand a political practice we must understand the political system in which it takes place. In Britain since the nineteenth century the political system has been radically transformed by the introduction of universal suffrage, and there is little meaningful continuity across this divide.

The new system was not heralded by any great symbolic event. No Constitution or Bastille inaugurated it. The change occurred gradually, in stages. Politicians began to learn the realities and the requirements of their new situation. Many ideas, attitudes and practices belonging to earlier times survived for a while, but gradually they have faded away. The different rationality imposed by the new politics has taken over.

In this system political practice has two main aims: to carry on the government and to win the right to office in a competitive election. The practice of politics has always required a mediation between the source of power to which the politician owes his appointment and the execution of policy. What is desired by the 'sovereign' and what proves possible to achieve may diverge to the point where the politician disappears in the chasm he meant to straddle. What is novel about

universal suffrage and mass democracy is the extent of the wedge which has been driven between the two. It becomes legitimate to speak of two kinds of politics—a politics of power and a politics of support.

Mass democracy has weakened the direct control of the 'sovereign' over policy, and at the same time has greatly increased uncertainty about the nature and desires of this new 'sovereign', and therefore about what the politician has to do to win power. The conventional notion of the sovereign electorate implies that the politician is helpless before the demands and pressures of the electors. His only function is to translate the popular will into effect by legislation and administration. The real position is more nearly the reverse of this. The politician acts in the name of the people and the nation, but the very institutions of mass democracy ensure that he is no mere spokesman or delegate for his electors. He is a spokesman for his party. That is a very different matter.

At the same time, even if the politician strove to be simply the spokesman of those who elected him he could not guarantee to carry out their wishes. For while political leaders may control and direct the parties, they cannot control the state in the same way. They are elected to form a government, and the world of government is the world of organized interests, of realities and necessities, of checks and balances. The policy of any government is tightly circumscribed and constrained by relationships and forces that are not of its own making. The modern state is not a neutral agency to be fought for and occupied by the stronger party after an election, then used as an instrument for whatever purposes it sees fit. Politicians find certain policies and priorities imposed on them regardless of their 'mandates' and the size of their electoral majorities.

2 THE POLITICS OF POWER

The modern political system is thus founded on the separation of the state and the nation. But what is the state? From one standpoint it comprises certain major institutions—the state system or state apparatus. This is the machinery that discharges the functions of the state. The state system must be distinguished from the political system on the one hand, and the government on the other. The government is only one part of it. The state system also includes the civil service, the judiciary, the police and the army, and the various organs of local government.⁷ The government is at the apex of both the state system and the political system, and occupies the point where they overlap.

The modern state is furthermore a nation-state. Nationality is the basis of sovereignty, and the political nation that is thus formed, is founded on the equality of all its members before the law. This has eventually produced equal representation in a political market. All citizens have the right to vote and all votes are intended to carry equal

INTRODUCTION. THE CONSERVATIVE UNIVERSE

weight. State and nation combine in the nation-state, a state whose government is in principle representative of the nation because it is accountable to it through democratic institutions.⁸

Presiding over the state, however, and winning the support of the nation are two separate activities in the modern political system. This is because the state does not consist merely of the machinery of the state system. The idea of the state also covers the general social, economic and political arrangements that are found in a community and which the state system exists to uphold. Any given state, therefore, expresses the particular priorities of the prevailing politics of power. It is essential to grasp that the state at any one time is not just a set of institutions but a set of priorities, and that these priorities do not reflect primarily the 'will' of the nation in the political market, but rather the organization of the 'nation' in the economic market and the situation of the 'nation' in the world market. The state, through the government and the rest of the state system, expresses and maintains the relationships of economic power and social class that comprise the social relationships of production in the national economy. The interests thus represented in the state set limits to the foreign policy of governments, which is aimed at fortifying the strength and safeguarding the security of the nation-state abroad.

The concept of a politics of power therefore implies that there are at any one time certain realities and constraints which all governments must accept. Ultimately, any politics of power is founded on the ruling mode of production, the manner in which economic activity is socially organized. This gives rise to a particular form of property, and through it a particular class structure which determines the distribution of both income and of economic power. A mode of production cannot be legislated away by the government. It is the objective structure on which the state rests, and which the state exists to uphold.

The constraints, however, which a mode of production imposes on the politics of power are general and unspecific. The state obviously has to ensure the continued existence of the social relationships that constitute the mode of production. To call a society feudal or capitalist implies that the politics of power cannot infringe the 'fundamental interests' of the ruling feudal or capitalist class without a revolutionary transformation of that society. But a ruling class, the class that has economic power, is not the same as the government. Indeed a ruling class never governs directly. Government always falls to other groups which may be more or less representative of the ruling class. So, beyond the physical preservation of its property, it is rarely clear what the 'fundamental interests' of a ruling class may be in any concrete situation, partly because any such class is likely to be split into many groups with different immediate interests, and partly because of the uncertainty and lack of information inherent in practical affairs, and brought about in

this case largely by the existence of other classes. Such factors make an objective, scientific assessment of political reality by governments impossible. Instead, it must always be interpreted and explored, through ideologies and by political parties.

Some modes of production last for centuries without changing very much. Capitalism is unique for the scale and speed of the changes which it generates in all societies throughout the world. One result is that capitalism as a world system passes through definite epochs and periods, in which each individual nation-state faces new problems and new opportunities. In every period, the prevailing politics of power is always concerned with the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production and the class structure. But this concern has to be expressed in terms of a particular set of strategic priorities, assumptions and goals of government. The maintenance of free trade, economy, and the gold standard, objects of British government for so long, comprised such a set of priorities. Frequently they constitute a consensus, which all parties adhere to when in office. At bottom such a consensus reflects a compromise between the interests of capital in accumulation and its interests in political stability. The former are bound up essentially with profitability, the rate of return on capital and the place of the national economy in the world economy. The latter means that concessions may sometimes have to be made in response to pressure from other classes, and to solve problems that private capital cannot solve for itself. Such pressure in Britain has largely been channelled through electoral institutions and the political market. It is through the prevailing priorities of government that the balance of interests and classes in the state can be assessed. The state, in the wider sense in which I am using it here, is thus the sphere of the politics of power, whilst the nation is the arena for the politics of support.

In general, the politics of support are concerned with how support can be won for political parties that intend to stick to 'practical' politics, and accept the 'realities' and the constraints of the prevailing politics of power. The limits within which an effective British economic policy or foreign policy is discussed are laid down by social and international relationships, normally outside the control of politicians. For a politician or a political party to go beyond these limits and break with the 'consensus' in a radical way requires either an indifference to gaining the spoils of office, or a revolutionary movement to transform society. Only if the balance of power between social classes is altered can a new politics of power be created.

Without such a radical transformation, a split opens between the politics of power and the politics of support, and the party that breaks with the consensus no longer appears as an alternative national government, but only as the mouthpiece of one section of the electorate. Reformist and left-wing parties that do win elections generally achieve

less in office than is expected, because they usually conceive their task in terms of the politics of support rather than the politics of power. They tend to believe that control of the government through victory at the polls gives them the power to implement the policies on which they were elected. When the realities of government present themselves, such parties frequently succumb to prevailing orthodoxies even faster than their political opponents.

3 THE POLITICS OF SUPPORT

The politics of support in the modern political system takes place in three main arenas—Parliament, the party organization, and the mass electorate. The last is organized as a market. Like most markets, however, the political market does not function as some had intended and others had feared. Advocates of democracy used to imagine a democratic state to be one in which all citizens participated actively and continuously in the running of their community. Democracy was meant to develop and educate all men as citizens, in addition to providing peaceful means of satisfying their particular interests and grievances. The main components of the modern political market are three; the existence of a mass electorate; competition between two or more parties for the votes of this electorate; and a set of rules governing this competition. The old democratic ideal of the political market was the marketplace of ideas and opinions, where every man could have his say, and at the end of the discussion the citizens would vote for what they considered to be the best policy that had been proposed. But such ‘perfect competition’ has rarely existed, least of all in national democracies. In practice, democracy has been transformed from a political goal into a political method by the centralization of political power and decision making in the government; by the growing domination of legislatures by executives; and by the rise of political parties. It has become an ‘institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.’⁹

The actual working of mass democracy has divided the political market into two camps. There are those that compete for office and those that vote. Like the producers and consumers in economic markets it is a mistake to believe that these two functions are of equal importance. One is active, creative and continuous; the other is passive, receptive and intermittent.¹⁰ Equal representation in the political system grafted on to a class society, in which economic and political power are concentrated in a few hands, has perpetuated, not abolished, inequality. In such a society, mass democracy serves to limit participation rather than to secure it.

The political market also lays down a standard of rational behav-

our.¹¹ The goal of parties and politicians that compete in it is not arbitrary or a matter of choice. It is inherent in the way their roles are defined by the market. They must win election, which carries with it the right to office. 'Rational' behaviour is behaviour most likely to gain this end, and must therefore seek the most effective means of achieving it. The politician faces the mass electorate across the political market. His task is so to express it, mould it, lead it, frighten it, deceive it, dazzle it and persuade it, that it, or at least a sufficient part of it, confers on him and his party enough votes to win election.

The politician of course does not have a free hand. The way in which he competes for office is limited by the rules and procedures of electoral competition that are in force,¹² and by the character of the electorate. The rise of a political market does not mean that there is a sudden disappearance of ideologies, pressure groups and classes. These are the raw material with which the politician must work.

From the politician's point of view, a major aim of the politics of support is to build an organization that will enable his party to compete successfully in the political market, and that will reduce the uncertainty that universal suffrage brings to politics. But to realize that aim, important constraints are placed on the politician's freedom. For he must keep the support of his party in Parliament, and of his party in the country, whilst he is wooing a majority of the mass electorate. To some extent, therefore, every politician in Britain is a prisoner of his party and its traditions. In addition, they are all prisoners of the structure of the mass democracy. In Britain, a unified national electorate requires that parties to be successful must become national parties and pursue national politics.

The only way, therefore, to understand the role that general principles play in the political practice of Conservatives is to see them in relation to the politics of the nation which the party has found itself obliged to develop. Conservative ideas and principles at any one point in the history of the party will be found to be a ragbag drawn from almost every conceivable intellectual tradition. This is not surprising, however, and these differences in philosophy are not a good guide to how Conservatives will divide on particular issues. The party sometimes appears a huge coalition, a giant museum of the political movements of the past. Angus Maude has argued that¹³ 'The Conservative party . . . still contains within itself, perfectly preserved and visible like the contents of archaeological strata, specimens from all its historical stages and of all its acquisitions from the Liberals.' He detected landed gentry, Anglican believers in the union of Church and State, Grand Whigs, Young England romantics, Tory Democrats, businessmen, municipal social reformers, and imperialists.

Despite this babel of conflicting voices, however, the Conservative party is renowned for its unity and cohesion, the absence of factions in

its ranks and loyalty to its leaders. But this is no paradox, for, overriding the particular ideologies of different sections of the party, has been its need to develop a politics of the nation. Rarely have the politics of support been the only concern of Conservative politicians. The Conservatives have always prided themselves on being a party of government. This has made electoral ideologies subordinate to the electoral perspective of the leadership.

Electoral perspectives are the ideology of the leadership. Through them the leadership attempts to reconcile the conflicting demands of the politics of power and the politics of support, the state and the nation. But they do not seek to strike an equal balance. In an electoral perspective, political questions are always viewed from the standpoint of the state and the requirements of the politics of power. The task of this kind of political perspective is to reconcile such requirements with winning support in the political market.

Electoral perspectives, like the politics of support itself, have several dimensions. Two are of crucial importance—how to win support in the mass party and in the mass electorate. The first dimension means involvement in electoral ideologies, for these are what bind party organizations together. Electoral ideologies are used, fostered, and developed by political leaders, but they cannot be controlled by them. Indeed, they can be used by groups or aspiring leaders within the party against the incumbent leadership, and sometimes such challenges are successful either in toppling the leaders, or in making them alter their policies. The situation is always complex because political leaders themselves see the world through the ideologies of their party, and therefore themselves share conceptions of the Conservative Nation. But their task as political leaders is to subordinate their idea of the nation to their knowledge of the state. Their followers naturally feel no such constraint. They typically seek to shape and transform the prevailing politics of power to fit their conception of the Conservative Nation.

These perspectives and ideologies are termed 'electoral' because their form and content is conditioned by the existence of the political market. Each, however, has a different emphasis. The electoral perspective of the party leaders seeks the best way of securing support for the party in the mass electorate, and sees the party organization as an indispensable means for achieving this. By contrast, the electoral ideologies of the rank and file in the party strive to build a party that is ideologically and not just organizationally strong. From such a base, programmes for government that can secure the endorsement of the electorate can be launched.

Electoral ideologies express the nation; electoral perspectives reflect the state. To party leaders in such a political system, there appears a constant tension between the claims of party and the claims of the mass electorate. The latter, being unorganized, passive, and inarticulate, can

be much more easily harnessed to the business of government. Yet leaders cannot harness this support, cannot in fact expect to compete effectively at all in the political market without their mass party organization. The central task of party management becomes striking a compromise between the two, and thus determining whether the state should be subordinate to the nation, or the nation to the state.

The Conservative party has been organized to ensure the latter, but that does not mean it has always been successful. The main channel by which leaders address the mass electorate is the party organizations. They must accordingly employ the electoral ideologies that command most support in their own party to recommend themselves to the electorate. More recently, politicians have sought ways of bypassing their party organizations to some extent and reaching the electorate directly, using market research, opinion polls, and new media like television, in an attempt to reduce their dependence on their parties.¹⁴

Since the politics of power has always come first for Conservatives, the politics of support is generally interpreted in terms of its requirements. This accounts for many well attested features of the party, especially the emphasis on strong leadership,¹⁵ the rare emergence of factions,¹⁶ and the lack of a coherent doctrine and philosophy.¹⁷ Division into solid right and left wing factions is characteristic of parties more devoted to the politics of support than the politics of power. So too are very elaborate and coherent ideological doctrines. Conservatives are content to draw their arguments for particular policies from many different sources and political traditions.

Factions,¹⁸ in the sense of close-knit groups organized to replace either the leadership or the policies of the party over a period of time on a whole range of issues, have existed within the Tory party but not very often. Since 1940 the two best examples of factions have been the Tory Reform Committee and the Monday Club. Alliances between MPs to fight over particular issues, such as Suez, Rhodesia, immigration, or resale price maintenance, have been more common. They dissolve when the issue is settled, and the members of such alliances do not usually act together on subsequent issues. These alliances and factions do not arise in a vacuum, but, like electoral ideologies, out of broad tendencies of opinion.¹⁹ In the postwar party there have been three main tendencies—the right progressive, the diehard, (which had two wings—whig and imperialist) and the new right. They are marked out by different attitudes to the postwar settlement and the politics of power it established.

Such tendencies are rarely given an organizational form, and it is not surprising that Conservatives are so loud in celebrating the unity of their party and the absence of enduring splits.²⁰ The substance of these tendencies can be studied in the activities of the factions and alliances they inspire, and more generally in debates at party conferences. The

existence of such tendencies often gives rise to conflict between the electoral perspective of the leadership and electoral ideologies in the party that seek to replace or modify it. The party may not often split, but that does not mean that Conservative leaders can escape the politics of support, or that there are no major controversies in the party.²¹ The leadership has to explain and justify its policies, and this often proves difficult when the requirements of the politics of power and the demands of the politics of support in the party diverge. In general, electoral ideologies carry most weight when the party is in opposition; a weak leadership can be propelled by forces within its own party and by the need to separate their programme from that of their electoral opponents into accepting policies that conflict with the realities of government.

This is not necessarily disastrous, however, for the prevailing politics of power is not fixed and immutable. Policies that can advance both the dominant interests of property and maintain political stability have to be forged. They do not drop from the skies. Nothing is ever finally settled in politics. For this reason, even in the Conservative party, individual leaders and groups sometimes choose to leave the ground of the politics of power for the politics of support, and challenge the established leadership. Although they are generally unsuccessful over the issues on which they fight, such a move can pave the way for their eventual leadership of the party.

The Conservatives have developed such a strong identity as the party of government because they have generally been the party in government. Out of the 18 general elections since manhood suffrage was established in 1885, the Conservatives have won 12, and have ruled either alone or in coalition for 60 of those 88 years. Much ingenuity has been devoted to explaining this remarkable performance, but it should not be overrated. It is largely accounted for by the accidents of electoral politics.²² For a large part of this period the party owed its success to the splits among its opponents and the electoral advantage of such a situation in a system resting on single member constituencies. Between 1886 and 1906, the Liberals were split over Home Rule for Ireland, and the Conservatives, as a direct result, were almost continually in office. Between 1918 and 1945, the rise of the Labour party and the decline of the Liberals meant that there was no single dominant party in opposition to the Conservatives, who again, as a result, virtually monopolized the government, usually with a substantial minority vote.

In the post-war period, when Labour was at last firmly established on an equal electoral footing with the Conservatives, the Conservatives were still thought of as the natural party of government, especially after their third successive election victory in 1959. But if we take the twenty-five years from 1945 to 1970, we find the Conservatives in office in thirteen of them, and Labour in office in twelve. Both had won four elections, if the 1970 result is included. Since the war, therefore, the

Conservatives have not had a monopoly of government, and have had to compete on almost equal terms with their electoral opponents.²³ This is one reason for the new strength of the politics of support within the party, and the growing importance of the party organization.

4 THE PARTY CONFERENCE

As the suffrage was widened, the political parties were faced with a quite new electoral task. No longer was it feasible to win election through bribery and patronage. Instead the parties were obliged to cast around for some means of organizing bodies of support within the electorate in order to shape and control the votes of as many electors as possible. The response of both major parties after 1867 was to form mass organizations, to appoint national agents, and to create a professional party secretariat. In this way a separate sphere was created for the politics of support outside Parliament as a bridge to the new mass electorate. It acquired its own institutions and procedures.

There seemed a danger, much fastened upon by the opponents of democracy, that the old parliamentary parties might come to lose their independence and be dominated by the caucus that controlled the party organization.²⁴ The priorities of the politics of support would override the prevailing politics of power, and Parliament would dwindle in importance as the sphere of public speech, public action, and public decision. In fact, Parliament has indeed severely declined since the nineteenth century.²⁵ But although power has passed to party, it has not passed to the party organization, but to the party leadership. The rise of modern parties in Britain has been a history in which party leaders have used their mass organization to discipline and control their MPs, and have used their parliamentary supporters to preserve themselves from the demands of the party rank and file.²⁶

Once the electorate began to be enlarged, party affiliation and party labels became the main way of simplifying the choice before electors in the political market. The national image and national policy of the party grew to be more important than the personality and views of the individual MP. MPs therefore became primarily representatives of their parties. In return, those who controlled the parties demanded increasing conformity and loyalty from their MPs. Independents in Parliament began to disappear, party lines became more tightly drawn and the power of the whips increased. The electorate and not the House of Commons now 'chose' the government. Prime ministers began resigning immediately if they lost their parliamentary majority at a general election, without waiting to be defeated in the new Parliament.

In the meantime the mass organizations were also brought under the control of the party leaders. This was especially true of the Conservative party, whose mass organization, the National Union, was formed as an

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adjunct to the party in Parliament.²⁷ It never acquired, and hardly ever asserted, any rights to determine policy independently of the leadership's direction. The campaign launched by Lord Randolph Churchill and the Fourth Party to make the Tories more responsive to their new middle class constituency was short-lived. Conservative leaders often boasted of their independence from the party organization. Balfour even suggested that his valet would be a better adviser on policy than a Conservative party conference.

In dealing with their supporters in Parliament and in the country, the Conservative leaders were greatly strengthened by their control of the party's secretariat—Central Office. The most important positions in Central Office have always been filled through direct appointment by the leader of the party. In addition, the leader has the major responsibility for making policy in the party, so he appoints the committees that advise on policy and has to approve the research done by the Conservative Research Department. Central Office is accordingly oriented more towards the leadership than towards the National Union, the constituency associations, or the parliamentary party. It seeks to coordinate the work of the party by disseminating information, expertise, literature and speakers, and naturally tends to reflect the priorities of the leadership rather than those of any section of the membership. Central Office's chief aim has been to maintain the party organization as an effective electoral and competitive organization in the political market. The organizational tasks assume priority; how to win victory in elections, how to attack electoral opponents, how to improve administration, and how to keep up the morale of the party workers.

Yet it is quite wrong to imagine the mass organization as monolithic, tightly controlled from the top, breathing with one breath, and chanting in unison.²⁸ The party leaders need their party organizations. They could not otherwise win elections, and this imposes important constraints on their political practice. The value of a party organization is two-fold. On the one hand, it provides a committed body of support in every constituency, a way of raising funds, a means of distributing propaganda, and of canvassing the electorate; on the other it provides a crucial channel of communication between the leaders and the mass electorate. A great part of politicians' information about the electorate comes through their party organization. Recently the parties have tried to supplement this information by using new techniques of market research, partly in an effort to reach the mass electorate directly and gain a more 'objective' picture, partly to distance themselves from their party workers' embrace. But for all the sophistication of the new electoral techniques, the party organization cannot be dispensed with. A solid base of electoral support for the Conservatives, reflected in the morale and the number of party workers, is a necessity so long as the party seeks to remain electorally competitive. The party in the country,

like the party in Parliament, may rarely determine policy directly. Yet both impose major constraints on what policies can be put forward. The policy of the party must always be explained and justified by the leaders to their supporters. It must be sold twice over, first to the party and then to the mass electorate. For the party in the country this occurs above all at the party conference.

Conservative conferences are thus important because they are the most obvious arena in the party where the politics of support meet the politics of power. No-one doubts that the latter predominates. The conferences are not sovereign assemblies but party rallies, and the scales are weighted in favour of the leadership by the procedural rules that are in force. The leadership controls the agenda and thus chooses which resolution out of all the resolutions submitted on a topic to call for debate. Delegates can now vote in a ballot for two resolutions that they want debated in addition to the official programme, but often only one is actually called. The time allowed each speaker is short, the decision on whether to call amendments is in the hands of the Chairman of the conference, and a member of the party's front bench always winds up the debate, and has a much longer time in which to speak. The delegates do not instruct their leaders, they petition them.

Yet the Conservative conference has undoubtedly grown in importance since 1945. Each constituency association is allowed to send seven delegates, none of whom are formally elected or instructed to support particular policies. If all attended, the conference would be around 5,600. In fact it usually numbers 3,000. The system of selection of delegates means that the more enthusiastic of the rank and file are likely to be present at the conference. Before the war few MPs attended it. The Woolton reforms, however, by strengthening the party organization in the country, gave a new status to the conference. Since then the great majority of Conservative MPs have attended as a duty. The leader of the party continued to stay away, only arriving after all the debates were over to deliver a speech to the delegates. This was once intended to keep the party organization in its place, and to underline that the leader alone was responsible for party policy. It became anachronistic and unwise, however, for a modern party, and Heath began attending the whole of the conference after his election as leader in 1965.

It is still a widely held view that the conference is so deferential to the leaders that the debates are meaningless and never decide anything. Christopher Hollis described it thus:²⁹

A Conservative party conference is intended to be, and is, the dullest thing that ever happened . . . the delegates have not come to hear their rulers but to see them, and one is often tempted to wonder whether it would not be the best plan to cut out the speeches altogether.

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Taper, writing in the *Spectator* in 1958 was even more caustic:³⁰ 'At the slightest reference to Mr Macmillan the entire conference has a prolonged seizure; at the sight of Lord Hailsham, the air is thick with bursting blood vessels.'

But the real significance of the conference lies elsewhere. Its function is to enable the Conservative party in the country to become a support of government, to reconcile the politics of support to the politics of power. The debates are not in fact irrelevant.³¹ Conservative leaders have to win support at the conference for the policies they are pursuing, and that means they must justify them in terms of an ideology of the Conservative Nation that the conference will accept. A central purpose of this book is to examine how Conservative leaders negotiate the politics of support against a background of changing circumstances and realities in the world of power. Ideologies provide, amongst other things, maps of problematic reality,³² and so long as reality remains problematic, ideologies are indispensable to the politician in his bid to explore it and bridge the gulf between power and support, administration and legitimation. If ideology were at an end, so would politics be.

It could be objected that a study of opinion in the party as it is revealed in the debates at the annual conference reveals nothing at all, because there is a complete separation between ideology and administration.³³ According to this view, Conservative leaders make whatever ideological pronouncements they are called on to make at the conference, but disregard party ideology and party opinion when it comes to making policy. It is true that on only one occasion since the war has Conservative policy been modified by direct pressure from the conference. That was in 1950 when a pledge to build 300,000 houses a year was inserted in the party manifesto against the advice of the leaders.

It is a very superficial view of influence, however, that measures it only by such dramatic and relatively unimportant incidents. The Conservative conference is not after all a policy making body. What is of much greater significance is to assess how far opinion in the party, as reflected in the conference debates, has both initiated and inhibited new directions in policy. During the thirteen years of Tory rule examples of such influence include the bringing forward of legislation on immigration and the hindering of an earlier approach to the EEC. After 1964, when the party was in opposition, the politics of support naturally claimed still greater attention. Party policy on government intervention in the economy, incomes policy, selectivity in welfare, overseas defence spending, Rhodesia, law and order, immigration, and trade unions, were all either launched or revised in deference to the sustained pressure of the party rank and file. A sign of this growing importance of the mass organization, and the party conference in particular, was the permission that was granted in 1967 for ballots to be held after debates if a substantial minority of the conference desired it.

None of this should be exaggerated. The National Union is not about to make a bid to assume control over policy. The mass organization has been a constraint upon leaders ever since the politics of support and the political market became the context of political action. If its power has grown since 1945 that is because the party has been busy adapting itself more and more to the special requirements and techniques of the politics of support in a political market.

5 CONCLUSION

If then we are searching for the real Tory tradition, we shall not find it in long, profound meditations on the origin of evil and the principles of social order. It resides instead in the history of the Conservative party and its political practice in the modern era; its attempts to reconcile the politics of support and the politics of power, and to make the Conservative Nation a reality, by finding a majority in the nation to support the Conservatives' claim and evident desire to manage the affairs of the British state.

The political settlement in Britain after the end of the Second World War involved a major restructuring of the politics of power—the creation of a new consensus. The development of the implications of this new politics of power and the new state it created, and the attempts by Conservative leaders to harmonize it with their politics of support, is the subject of the rest of this book. Firstly, however, the development of the Conservative party and its political practice before 1945 will be briefly outlined.

Chapter 2

THE CHANGING TORIES: THE ROAD TO THE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

At that time we had not thoroughly learnt by experience, as we now have, that no reform, no innovation—experience almost justifies us in saying, no revolution—stinks so foully in the nostrils of an English Tory as to be absolutely irreconcilable to him. When taken in the refreshing waters of office any such pill can be swallowed.

Anthony Trollope¹

1 DISRAELI AND ONE NATION

The Conservative and Unionist party originated as one grouping in the unreformed House of Commons. The original Tories were a loose coalition of landed interests, attached to causes many of which failed to survive into modern times.² The purpose of the old constitution was to provide strong and stable government. Tories were more attached to this tradition than to reforming the House of Commons, because however unrepresentative Parliament might be, it did guarantee the continued supremacy of landed property. In the early nineteenth century the Tories were identified overwhelmingly with landed interests and opposition to reform of the franchise. Reform was, however, victorious in 1832, and brought the first step towards the political market.

The question of parliamentary reform involved not merely the extension of the franchise but the recognition by the state of the claims of industrial property. For the Tories, Peel accepted the new politics of support made necessary by the 1832 reform, and re-established his party in government. His implicit acceptance at the same time of the new strategic priorities of the politics of power and thus the new state that was required by the growing predominance of industrial over landed property, was confirmed most dramatically by the repeal of the corn laws in 1846.³ This destroyed Peel politically, however, for he could not carry the support of his party. Disraeli and Lord George Bentinck ably exploited the gap which Peel had allowed to open up between his policies in government and the interests of his immediate supporters. They toppled their lost leader, but at the price of making the party the mouthpiece only of landed interests. The narrowing of support in the new political nation that this implied proved no longer sufficient to win elections, and the party was condemned for almost thirty years to

be a party of opposition, and its politicians to be practitioners only of the politics of support. Whigs and Liberals ruled.

By the 1860s it had become clear to many that if the Tory party was ever to reestablish itself as an alternative party of government, then it needed to become more independent of the landed interest, and rid itself of the commitment to restore Protection. Any practical politician would have been forced to that conclusion. It has always been the special task of the politician to perceive and respond to the conditions for effective political action. Thus it is no surprise to find Disraeli, who had helped turn the party against Peel, leading the Tories away from their principles of 1846 and along the road which Peel had been exploring before him. A new kind of politics was necessary to prise the Tories loose from their dependence on the agricultural community and its special interests, in order to win a majority of the new political nation that was being created.

Disraeli's role in creating the new Conservative party has been much exaggerated.⁴ In most things he was pretty lethargic. But he did possess many insights into the future shape of the new politics. He saw that the gradual widening of the suffrage inevitably made electoral politics national politics. Parties were forced to compete for the votes of the whole nation, and not merely in a geographical sense. They had also to put forward 'national' policies and begin to act as brokers for many different groups and interests. Instead of politics being mainly a matter of coalitions between individual political leaders and their followers, who drew their support from distinct regional communities, a new pattern was beginning to emerge, the rise of party. In time the new national base of electioneering, which mass parties made possible, helped to separate the gathering of support from the business of government by preventing the parties from seeking any too close identification with particular groups of electors.

For Disraeli, the reasons for leading the Conservatives to embrace national politics were particularly compelling. In the 1870s, close to 70 per cent of their MPs were still directly connected with the land. Once their leaders had accepted the inevitability of further reform in the franchise, then the key strategic question for the Tories became how they could win sufficient support in the new mass electorate to become a party of government again. Many doubted that such a rebirth were possible, especially if the franchise were extended still further. It was Disraeli who, however much his immediate reasons for supporting reform in 1867 were governed by particular circumstances,⁵ also saw deeper, and realized that an enlarged electorate, properly handled, could in fact aid and not destroy the Tory party. The principles and the old politics of power to which the Tories had been committed he knew were lost whatever happened. The only question, therefore, was whether the Conservatives could seize their opportunity and become an

alternative government party again. Reforming the franchise appeared in this light to be not so much a further step in the progress of Liberalism, as a way of overturning the automatic domination of the political system which the Liberals had enjoyed since 1832. An injection of greater uncertainty into politics could aid the Tories and restore them to power.

One of Disraeli's key contributions was to develop the slogan and strategy of One Nation.⁶ No claim perhaps has been made more often by Conservatives, or disputed more hotly by their electoral competitors, than that they are a truly national party whose policies seek to create national unity, and to benefit all groups in the national community.⁷ This Conservative wish to base their appeal to the electorate on a national rather than on a class perspective is central to their whole electoral strategy. For, as the party of property, they could scarcely hope otherwise to secure the votes of the most industrialized, urbanized, and proletarian nation in Europe, which is without any major racial, regional, religious or ethnic division of its working class that a party of the right could exploit.⁸ Since 1885 the votes of propertyless manual workers have dominated the political market. The Conservatives have been obliged by this reality of the modern political system to adapt and become flexible, to learn how to combine what is necessary in government with what is necessary to win power. One Nation is thus not an ideological frill for Conservatives. It expresses one of the conditions for their survival as a political force.

The practice of politics for the Conservative means that he must continually take part at some level in the debate over the kind of national politics the Conservative party ought to pursue or, in other words, over what the Conservative Nation is. He must marry the nation to the state and identify, as circumstances change, the role the Conservative party is to play in national affairs—the institutions it should defend, the aims it should pursue, and the supporters it should seek to attract.

Disraeli's own solution to these problems was to proclaim the Conservatives the party of imperialism on the one hand, and the party of social reform on the other. It is a conception that has exercised enormous fascination for later Conservatives, not only for its particular content, but also for its attempt to combine a positive programme for government directly with winning electoral support. Disraeli's own efforts to weld this idea into a concrete programme proved not very vigorous. More important at this stage was his skill in drawing the party away from exclusive representation of the landed interests, making it appear more and more the party which stood for the defence of property interests in general. This image was to be consolidated by the sober and prudent administration of Lord Salisbury.

Disraeli was less original in his political practice than has sometimes

been imagined because circumstances "did not yet warrant sweeping changes. The inertia of traditional political practice proved strong, and the terrible catastrophe which many Conservatives, including Salisbury, had predicted would follow from the 1867 Reform Bill never arrived. The 1885 reform was to be a far greater step towards the modern political system. It is true that under Disraeli's leadership the National Union was formed, a party secretariat appointed, and efforts made to start constituency associations.⁹ But recent research has shown that many of these steps were tentative and made little impact at the time.¹⁰ Certainly they did not mark any sudden transformation of politics from the old to the new. A greater watershed in British politics came in the 1880s.

2 JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN AND TARIFF REFORM

The period after 1885 saw the real rise of the modern Conservative party and the real construction of the political market and the modern party system. Accidents played their part too. The Conservatives were in office almost continuously until 1906, not because they had found the best way of applying Disraeli's precepts, but because the Liberals split over Home Rule for Ireland in 1886, and the Liberal Unionists under Joseph Chamberlain deserted to form a coalition with the Conservatives. The Conservatives now found themselves unexpectedly dominating British politics, the natural party of government. Their complete conversion to the prevailing politics of power was shown by their resolute indifference to the decline of British agriculture in the 1880s and 1890s, despite the overwhelming support they now enjoyed from landed interests. Most of the remaining landowners in the Liberal party, like the Duke of Devonshire, allied with the Tories on the issue of keeping the kingdom united. Many representatives of industrial and commercial property remained with the Liberals, but the Conservatives were to show themselves competent stewards of the general interests of property. Lord Salisbury's ministries built on the foundation of Disraeli's, and there could be no doubt, as he himself declared, that the chief object of government in England—the protection of property—was not neglected when the Conservatives were in office.

It was at this time that the party began to build a solid base amongst the middle classes—professional men, clerks, teachers, shopkeepers, small manufacturers, farmers, lawyers, and stockbrokers. It was to such groups that the imperialist sentiment that raged in the 1880s and 1890s particularly appealed. The party became strongly identified with the Empire. The Conservative Nation almost from its very beginning was an imperial nation. National greatness became one of the distinctive themes of the party's image and ideology.¹¹

This identification was encouraged by Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial