



The Conservative Party and British Politics 1902-1951

Stuart Ball



SEMINAR STUDIES IN HISTORY

General Editor: Roger Lockyer

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Stuart Ball

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Seminar Studies in History

Introduction

Seminar Studies in History offer clearly written, authoritative and stimulating introductions to important topics. They cover major themes in British and European history.

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Throughout the book references are made to the Bibliography, to the relevant document within the Documents section (Part 4), and to definitions in the Glossary. These are indicated as follows:

- **Bibliography** – a bold number in round brackets (**6**) in the text refers to the corresponding entry in the Bibliography
- **Document** – a bold number in square brackets, preceded by 'doc.' [**doc. 4**] refers to the document in

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the Documents section which relates to/illuminates the passage/idea

Roger Lockyer

The General Editor

Roger Lockyer, Emeritus Reader in History at the University of London, is the author of a number of books on Tudor and Stuart history including *Buckingham*, a political biography of George Villiers, first Duke of Buckingham, 1592–1628, and *The Early Stuarts: A Political History of England, 1603–1642*. He has also written two widely used general surveys – *Tudor and Stuart Britain* and *Habsburg and Bourbon Europe*.

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Foreword

The Conservative Party has been the dominant force in British politics during the last hundred years: either alone or as the main element in a coalition, it has governed for almost seventy of them. Since 1900 its opponents have been able to depend upon a secure majority in only three parliaments: the Liberals in 1906–10, Labour in 1945–50 and 1966–70. On the other hand, no Conservative ministry has lacked a working majority in the House of Commons, even if in 1951 and 1992 it was only a narrow one. Despite this remarkable record of success, the Conservatives were for many years the Cinderella of British political history. The familiar and the constant are apt to be overlooked, and, like the poor, the Conservative Party seems always to have been with us. From the early 1950s to the late 1970s the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberals attracted much greater interest, due partly to the drama involved in the convulsion on the left and partly to the sympathies and assumptions of the day. The expansion of higher education and the opening of many modern archives coincided with the one period during which Labour could credibly be regarded as the natural party of government, the decade and a half from 1964 to 1979. A final factor contributed to the general neglect: whilst few still subscribed uncritically to the jibe that the Conservatives were the ‘stupid’ party, there was and still is an unspoken assumption that they are the simple party. In fact, in doctrine, ethos and methods of business they are the most complex and subtle of the main political groups. Assumptions which are based upon taking the particular forms of the left-of-centre parties as the only proper norm are especially inappropriate: much more is going on within the Conservative Party than is often apparent on the surface, and the unwritten rules are more important than the written ones (7).

Biographies have been a particular feature of historical writing on the modern history of the Conservative Party. The most important are those of the party leaders Bonar Law (20) and Baldwin (45), which appeared in 1955 and 1969 respectively; in between, studies of other key figures such as Joseph Chamberlain (19),

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Derby (26) and Milner (33) filled out the picture and printed many private documents. Broader questions began to be addressed in the 1970s with the publication of several general surveys (2, 3, 8). The most elegant of these appeared at the beginning of the decade with the first edition of Lord Blake's wide-ranging Ford Lectures, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (1); the most authoritative appeared at the end in the form of John Ramsden's lucid *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902–40* (6).

Since the mid-1970s an increasing stream of more detailed studies in monograph and particularly in article form has augmented the steady flow of biographies. This heightened level of interest was encouraged by two parallel developments. The first of these was the range of primary sources which became available during the 1970s, culminating in the opening of the Conservative Party Archive at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Secondly, the party's controversial period in office under Margaret Thatcher from 1979 to 1990 and its continued electoral success stimulated questions about the nature and history of the most adaptable, enduring and effective right-of-centre party in the world. As a result, since 1979 the history of Conservatism has attracted increasing attention from younger scholars. However, the history of the Conservative Party since 1900 has not been covered in any consistent depth. It is revealing that the period of faction and failure in the Edwardian years has attracted by far the most attention, principally focused upon the strife caused by tariff reform and the constitutional crises of 1909–14. Apart from the events surrounding the fall of the Lloyd George coalition in 1922, the long period of Conservative success between the wars has been less fully explored. The even greater dearth on the years after 1940 is partly due to the fact that the key sources are only now becoming accessible; apart from the authorised biographies (34, 35, 38), there is only an early though perceptive study of the recovery in opposition in 1945–51 (161) and a handful of recent articles.

Although unevenly, the boundaries of understanding and analysis have advanced considerably since the last general histories of the party were published in the 1970s. This has led to a new synthesis, *Conservative Century* (7), which investigates key themes in its history from 1900 to the early 1990s. Seminar Studies can only follow the wider trend. Although the volume on the rise of Labour was published in 1972 and that on the decline of the Liberals in 1981, only now can the picture be completed with a parallel assessment of the role of the Conservatives in our recent political history.

Note on Nomenclature

From 1886 until after the First World War the key issue in politics was the Irish question, and in recognition of both their stance on this issue and their alliance with the Liberal Unionists, the Conservative Party was known as the 'Unionist Party' or 'the Unionists' from the 1890s to the early 1920s. The contemporary usage is followed in this book, and the label 'Unionist' is used as well as 'Conservative' in the period before 1922.

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Part One: Conservatives and Conservatism

1 The Evolution of the Conservative Party

From Tory to Conservative

Historians have sought the origins of the modern Conservative Party in a variety of periods from the 1660s to the 1860s. Bolingbroke, the Younger Pitt, Burke, Liverpool, Peel and Disraeli have all been claimed as its founding spirit. At the earliest, the lineage of a 'Tory' faction can be traced as far back as the Restoration court of King Charles II, although the 'rage of party' and the division between opposed Tory and Whig groups became most visible after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Led by Harley and Bolingbroke, the Tories triumphed in the last period of Queen Anne's reign in 1710–14. However, after Anne's death and the arrival of the Hanoverian dynasty they were excluded from power. The connections of some Tories with the exiled Stuart pretenders to the throne and their implication in the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 tarnished the party with treason and drove the name underground. Politics between the 1720s and the 1770s were dominated by the Whigs, whose exclusive hold upon office led to competition amongst themselves and to their subdivision into cliques and factions. After his accession in 1760 King George III was anxious to recover the royal independence which he believed the long ascendancy of Walpole in particular had eroded. In this quest he had only partial success until in December 1783 he turned to William Pitt (known as the Younger Pitt to avoid confusion with his father).

British government from 1783 to 1830 was the almost exclusive preserve of Pitt and his followers. After the French Revolution in 1789 the energies of the ministry were focused upon the threat from a resurgent France and the fear of domestic unrest. The danger posed by revolutionary France also led to powerful denunciations by the Whig intellectual Edmund Burke, from the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* published in 1790 onwards. Burke's articulate and passionate writings gave a moral focus to the instinctive forces of resistance to change. Those concerned to

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defend property and authority became grouped under Pitt's banner during the 1790s, clarifying the divide in British politics by excluding the Foxites and radicals who called for peace and reform. Pitt never used the term 'Tory' to describe himself, but as supporters of the crown and of social stability and as the staunch opponents of radicals and reformers, Pitt's followers and successors gradually became known as the Tory party. In both attitudes and personnel this body has often been identified as the origin of modern British Conservatism (2, 10).

Since 1789 the history of Conservatism has been marked by periods of division and dispute. The first such crisis occurred during the decade which followed the fall of Pitt's ministry in 1801. Some of the Whiggish elements returned to opposition at this point, and later fused with the Foxites. After a short, uneasy peace, war with France resumed and Pitt returned to office in 1804, but his early death in 1806 threw matters back into confusion. The succeeding 'Ministry of all the Talents' foundered upon the issue of religious liberalism in 1807; it was followed by two decades of recognisably Tory administrations under Portland (1807–9), Perceval (1809–12) and Liverpool (1812–27). The latter ministry held together during the period of difficulty and even panic in 1815–22 caused by the strains imposed by the end of the long war, the economic consequences of industrialisation and a run of bad harvests. After the suicide of Castlereagh in 1822, and with fears of revolution from below receding, a strand of 'Liberal Toryism' associated with the rising figure of Canning emerged. Stresses within the ministry were, however, contained until a stroke forced Liverpool's retirement in 1827. Canning succeeded him, but he was a controversial figure whose responsiveness to commercial and urban interests, liberal foreign policy and commitment to redress of Catholic grievances made him unacceptable to hard-line Tories. After his sudden death only four months later, Wellington returned in 1828 to head a divided Tory ministry which depended almost entirely upon Peel to lead in the House of Commons. It was this ministry which faced the problem of Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

Crown and Church were the 'pillars of the constitution' which guaranteed the propriety in the secure enjoyment of their position. The monarchy symbolised hierarchy and order, and loyalty to the symbol of the crown was synonymous with patriotism. The identity of Toryism with the privileges of the established Church of England had become still closer after 1800 under

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Sidmouth and Wellington, as the Church came under threat from the spread of Dissent, from the demand for Catholic Emancipation, and from radical secularism and atheism. Resistance to the claims of the Roman Catholics exerted a powerful influence amongst the backbone of Tory support in Parliament and in the country. A dangerous rift opened between them and leading ministers, some of whom were committed to Catholic redress after the undertakings implied by Pitt when the Act of Union was passed in 1800. More acutely, Wellington and Peel had to face the problems of governing Ireland under the pressure of O'Connell's agitation, and their decision to concede emancipation was one of pragmatism rather than principle. Nevertheless, this betrayal outraged the 'Ultra' Protestant Tories in Parliament and much Tory feeling in the country, leaving a deep and lasting scar. Within a few months the passions aroused led to the collapse of the Wellington ministry in 1830.

The leaders of Tory administrations between 1783 and 1830 had not thought of themselves as forming a 'party', for that term denoted faction and irresponsible opposition, and they made no attempt to organise their following. The support of Parliament, where 'independence' was still prized, could never be assumed: this had made the position of the ministry frequently insecure. Pitt, Liverpool, Wellington and Peel saw themselves as 'governing men', owing loyalty to the crown as the King's ministers, and not as mere party figures. However, the loss of the support of William IV in 1830-34 and of Queen Victoria in 1837-41 sent the Tories into the uncharted waters of opposition from which they emerged with a distinct and partisan identity. It could be said that Pitt shaped Toryism itself (despite never using the name), that Peel shaped the Conservatives as a parliamentary party (despite deep personal ambivalence towards the very concept), and that Disraeli added a permanent organisational structure (despite a similarly mixed degree of commitment).

The settlement of the Catholic question and the entry into office of the Whigs under Grey meant that the issue of parliamentary reform now came to the top of the agenda. The struggle over the Reform Bill did not reunite the Tories but further divided them over tactics, policy and leadership. The 'Ultras' remained unreconciled, whilst more moderate Tories were concerned that the lack of representation in Parliament of the populous and prosperous new towns and cities was alienating too much property and influence from the constitution. Even so, Wellington and other Tories were

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taken aback at the scope of Grey's Bill and determined to resist it. But they lost ground in the 1831 general election, and the House of Lords was forced to pass it by popular pressure and the King's promise to the Whigs to create peers if required. After the general election on the new franchise which followed in 1832 the Tories were left with only 180 MPs to face 480 Reformers, the party's worst result until 1906. The term 'Conservative' had begun to be used by the party's leaders and supporters after 1830, and by 1835 this had replaced 'Tory' as the common party name. 'Tory' has continued to be employed as a more colloquial expression by supporters and opponents alike to this day, although it tends to imply a more instinctive and uncompromising brand of Conservatism.

The age of Peel

In the wake of reform the Conservative Party was divided and defeated, its leaders unpopular and discredited. Yet within a decade the party was restored in vigour, and it recovered a parliamentary majority in the general election of 1841. This rapid reversal of fortune had several causes. There was disillusion amongst middle-class and working-class radicals, for they had expected more from the Reform Act and were demoralised by the weakness and disunity of the Whig ministry after 1834. Nevertheless, the reforms of the 1830s redressed the grievances of the more prosperous and influential sections of the urban middle class, and for many a wish to avoid upheaval displaced their desire for further change. Anglican opinion was alarmed by Whig concessions to radical and Irish pressure over the position of the Church of Ireland, whilst proposals to confiscate the latter's 'surplus' revenue concerned the owners of property everywhere. At the same time the agitation against the new Poor Law, industrial unrest and the rise of Chartism made Conservatism an attractive option. During the 1830s there was a steady 'replacement of reforming enthusiasm by propertied influence' (9). But it was the role of Peel and his emergence as the undisputed leader of Conservative opinion which was crucial in building upon these trends. Peel had remained detached during the struggles over reform, but with Wellington in eclipse he was the only possible alternative Prime Minister when William IV dismissed the Whig government in November 1834. Despite royal favour, Peel's ministry could not survive in office in the face of a hostile

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Commons majority, but its few months of life marked a crucial stage in the evolution of the Conservative Party. First, it established Peel at the head of the party with unique authority. Second, it brought about the general election of 1835 which marked the start of Conservative electoral recovery. Finally, the need to redefine what the Conservatives stood for and to communicate this clearly to the public led Peel at the start of that election to issue the Tamworth Manifesto. In this he accepted the Reform Act as the final settlement and offered a moderate and constructive Conservatism which both traditional Tories and moderate Whigs could respectably support. It was 'designed to broaden the base of the Conservative Party' (15), and was successful at both the highest and lowest levels. These factors contributed to the steady advance of Conservative support in 1837 and to their victory in 1841.

Immediately on becoming Prime Minister, Peel gave his backbenchers a clear warning that he would follow whichever course he judged to be correct, irrespective of party feeling or interest. In the course of the next four years he proceeded to stretch the loyalty and endurance of his followers beyond the breaking point. After his experience of 1828–32 Peel was inclined to tackle dangerous issues before they became unmanageable: the problem was that this also tended to be before the rest of his party, from their less exalted viewpoint, were convinced of the need to make concessions. As through so much of the history of the Conservative Party, protection and Ireland were the crucial issues. The threat of the ministry's resignation was used to coerce increasingly resentful MPs over several measures, including reductions in tariffs which left the Corn Laws exposed. Peel's attempt to build bridges to the Irish Catholic bishops through extending the public grant to the seminary for priests at Maynooth was especially divisive, and 162 Conservative MPs voted against it. But it was the decision to repeal the protection for agriculture enshrined in the Corn Laws in favour of free trade which finally tore the Conservative Party apart in 1846. The industrial depression of the 1840s and the growth of the urban population had convinced Peel that cheap food was essential and repeal only a matter of time; the 1845 famine in Ireland was not the cause of the decision but provided the spur to action. Once again Peel was riding roughshod over his followers' cherished beliefs, in an apparent gross betrayal of Conservative principles and pledges. Peel's authority ensured that Stanley was the only minister of importance who refused to support him, but the allegiance of the backbenchers had been eroded, and in the

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crucial division only 112 Conservative MPs supported repeal whilst 231 voted against.

The split in the Conservative Party in 1846 was bitter and permanent. The leading figures around Peel remained detached, and after their mentor's death in 1850 the 'Peelites' coalesced with the Whigs and formed one of the founding elements of the Liberal Party in the 1860s. The year 1846 was 'a watershed' since which 'the history of the Conservative Party proceeds to the present without a break' (17). The Protectionist rump at first lacked leadership and organisation, but it was clear that although headless it represented the body and soul of Conservatism, and within a few years there was no dispute over its right to the Conservative name. From 1846 to 1868 the party was led by Stanley, who had gone up to the House of Lords in 1844 and became the 14th Earl of Derby in 1851 (8). After some confusion the hitherto disregarded Disraeli emerged as the most powerful debater in the Commons, and by 1852 was the sole leader there. The party which remained after the crisis of 1846 had been driven back into its bastions of the county constituencies and the landed agricultural interest, and its appeal to the urban and industrial sections of society had largely evaporated. Economically and politically this was too narrow a ground, and it locked the Conservatives into the position of permanent opposition for nearly three decades. By the early 1850s it was clear to Disraeli at least that so long as the party remained protectionist it could never appeal to town or industry and could never form a majority government. The Conservatives were only able to take office as a vulnerable minority administration when the Whig, Liberal and radical alliance fell out amongst themselves, as in 1852, 1858–59 and 1866–68. As the one defining feature of those who had repudiated Peel was protection, the emotional and political commitment to this was far from easy to shed and the process was a protracted one. Between 1857 and 1865 Palmerston's combination of a cautious Whig domestic policy and a popular and often pugnacious foreign policy dominated British politics. The Conservative opposition under Derby could find little by way of a distinctive position, and in Parliament their role was often limited to helping the Whig Prime Minister thwart his own radical wing (17).

Disraeli and Salisbury

The death of Palmerston in 1865 broke up this mid-Victorian equipoise. It brought more radical figures, Russell and Gladstone,

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to the leadership of the Liberals. The latter were committed to further parliamentary reform, but the Bill which they proposed in 1866 divided their supporters and led to a further minority Conservative government. Disraeli did not succeed the ageing Derby as Prime Minister until February 1868, but as Commons leader his role was crucial in keeping the ministry afloat. He understood that the Conservatives dared not duck the reform question now that it had been raised, and that by successfully resolving this major issue they could re-establish their credibility as a party of government. Disraeli's settlement of the reform issue increased his and the party's prestige, whilst protecting Conservative electoral interests in the counties. The events of 1867 also launched the powerful if insubstantial myth of 'Tory Democracy'. The parliamentary balance had required Disraeli to accept a greatly extended franchise in the boroughs, but he also had hopes of locating a pool of support lower down the social scale which might be hostile to the traditional Liberalism of most factory owners (16). In practice, 'Tory Democracy' amounted to little in the way of a coherent programme, and it was always in tension with the more realistic aim of securing greater support from the middle, professional and business classes in the urban areas. To break ground in this territory, Disraeli encouraged the creation of the main elements of the present-day party organisation: the National Union, founded in 1867, and the Central Office, established in 1870 (12). With improved organisation and a greater number of candidates, in 1874 the Conservatives won their first overall majority since Peel's victory of 1841, and it was clear that the Conservative Party was becoming a genuinely national party with an appeal to all communities.

During the twenty years after 1865 the Conservatives completed the long climb back from the status of permanent minority. There were several causes of this, of which the most important was the rise of middle-class 'Villa Toryism' in the towns and the growing suburbs. The ambitious reform programme of Gladstone's ministry in 1868-74 unsettled sections of Whiggish middle-class and professional opinion, especially in London and the Home Counties, whilst success over the Irish Church in 1868 revived the threat of Anglican disestablishment. By the late-nineteenth century the second or third generation of many industrial dynasties had been educated at public school and university, had abandoned Nonconformity for the Church of England, and had purchased country estates on which to follow the lifestyle of the