SIR EDWARD HEATH
1916–2005
John Barnes, Ronald Porter and Helen Szamuely
examine the legacy of a controversial Conservative leader

HARSHAN KUMARASINGHAM
“HOME SWEET HOME”: THE PROBLEMATIC LEADERSHIP OF ALEC DOUGLAS-HOME

SCOTT KELLY
‘THE GHOST OF NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN’
GUILTY MEN AND THE 1945 ELECTION

IAN PENDLINGHAM
“PUT UP OR SHUT UP”: THE 1995 LEADERSHIP CONTEST

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As the Conservative Party gathers for a Conference in the aftermath of another electoral defeat and in the throes of another leadership election, this issue looks at past precedents.

We look at the career of Edward Heath, who died earlier this year, through three very different contributions. Central to Mr Heath’s political views was his overwhelming conviction that Britain had to be part of a united European state (as he acknowledged belatedly during the arguments about the euro). Conservative Prime Ministers have had to deal with the issue of Europe ever since, none more so than John Major, whose surprise resignation and expected re-election is chronicled by Ian Pendlington.

This issue of the Journal is, thus, devoted largely to the subject of Conservative Prime Ministers, successful and, mostly, unsuccessful. Harshan Kumarasingham writes about Sir Alec Douglas Home, Edward Heath’s predecessor and a much underrated politician and Stuart Kelly provides a fascinating insight into the 1945 election, another great defeat for the Conservative Party from which it recovered remarkably quickly. The article details an interesting early example of Labour Party “spin” in its usage of the “guilty men” theme, assigning nothing but guilt to the pre-war Conservative Party. It also shows an early example of Conservative reluctance to fight against that spin by refusing to discuss the Labour Party’s own less than glorious record on the subject of re-armament.

Our book reviews look at one would-be Prime Minister, Reginald Maudling, as well as the arguments about that great shibboleth of the twentieth century, the welfare state and the diaries of Giles Radice, Labour politician, peer of the realm but, in reality, a Social-Democrat rather than a Socialist. This is our first departure from strictly Conservative politics with the aim of taking a look at some political debates from the outside.

As ever, we remain grateful to our contributors and even more grateful to our patient readers. We are hoping to focus the next issue on Conservative foreign policy, widening the theme to include eighteenth and nineteenth century politics. And, guess what? We are looking for contributions.

The Conservative History Group

As the Conservative Party regroups after three general election defeats, learning from history is perhaps more vital than ever. We formed the Conservative History Group in the Autumn of 2002 to promote the discussion and debate of all aspects of Conservative history. We have organised a wide-ranging programme of speaker meetings in our first year and with the bi-annual publication of the Conservative History Journal, we hope to provide a forum for serious and indepth articles on Conservative history, biographies of leading and more obscure Conservative figures, as well as book reviews and profiles. For an annual subscription of only £15 you will receive invites to all our events as well as complimentary copies of the Conservative History Journal twice a year. We very much hope you will want to join us and become part of one of the Conservative Party’s most vibrant discussion groups.

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John Charmley is the Professor of Modern History at the University of East Anglia, where he is building up a school of history, whose work, according to him, will change our perception of Conservative foreign policy in the nineteenth century and its tradition that has remained in the party, parallel to the better known Churchillian one. He is also an active member of the Conservative Party. Here John Charmley gives his views on the study of history and how it affects our perception of politics, adding a few trenchant comments on both, to Helen Szamuely.

HS: John, thank you very much for agreeing to give this interview to the Conservative History Journal. It is not the first interview, but you are still by way of being a guinea pig. With this series of interviews we are trying to explore the idea of what it is to be a conservative historian and whether there is such a thing as conservative history. Now you are, of course, an historian, with many publications to your name and an active member of the Conservative Party. But would you consider yourself to be a conservative historian?

JC: Yes, I think I would, in two senses: the obvious one that you have just listed, that I am a Conservative who writes history and, while I think that any historian worth his salt, tries to recognize his own biases and to overcome them, but the biases that I have to fight with are conservative biases. But I am a conservative historian in a different sense as well, in the sense that the type of history I write is very traditional history. I am not much concerned with theories of discourse, masculinities, feminism, or any of the other modish things that have come along in the last twenty-five years with the vocabulary of the building site, the deconstruction, reconstruction – mystification most of it is. I write, I hope, reasonably clear, old-fashioned diplomatic and political history. So in that sense, I think that I am probably a very conservative sort of historian.

HS: That is very interesting. Going on from there, is that how you would define conservative history? In fact, would you say there is such a thing as whig history?

JC: Yes, I think there is in certain assumptions that underlie what one is writing. In my case, one of my deepest beliefs as an historian is in the importance of the contingent. I don’t see things as moving down tramlines towards some predetermined future. All those trends of the 1940s and...
1950s that were all leading us in one direction, have, oddly enough, petered out. The last remnant of this kind of teleology in our history is the EU; the one road down which we are still being led is the EU and it will be interesting to see in fifty years’ time whether those tramlines will have to be redefined. So yes, I think conservative historians believe in the importance of the contingent and the accidental. They don’t ignore deep underlying forces but nor do they, I think, fetishize them; they don’t necessarily believe that they are there for some ideological reason.

The other thing is that they believe in the importance of the personal. People make a difference and, therefore, in the history I write there is a concentration on people. I don’t think it is just big things like “would it have made a difference if Churchill had not existed in May 1940”. I think any fool can see that it would have made an enormous difference if Winston Churchill had not existed in May 1940. I think all the way along the line, what people do, the way they behave makes an enormous difference on history. So, I think, those are things conservative historians have in common.

There is also an attention to detail, which means eschewing broad-brush generalizations: the government thought, the Labour party thought. It actually means getting your hands grubby, going into archives, doing some serious work and actually trying to get behind the generalizations – I suppose if one wanted to be modest one could call it deconstruction. It is one of the wonderful things about post-modernism that what is new in it is not interesting and what is interesting in it, is not new.

HS: If one looks at the conservative historical tradition, there are presumably people whom you would be able to fit into that tradition. Every conservative historian has a different list of conservative historians. Who would be your choice?

JC: The conservative historian I most admire is probably Maurice Cowling, whose work, I think, shows us what can be done by very serious attention to detail and, of course, that vital thing that all conservative historians have – all historians ought to have it, but I think conservative ones do in a larger measure – and that is scepticism. And, if you like, a nose for humbug, and Maurice’s nose for humbug is, I think, one of the best there is. So, I think, if I had to say which conservative historian I admire most, it would be Maurice Cowling.

“I think all the way along the line, what people do, the way they behave makes an enormous difference on history . . . I think, those are things conservative historians have in common.”

HS: I shall not ask about the present ones. Going on to another subject: one of the things that anyone who has studied and written history would have been asked why do you do it; why does it matter, it all happened a long time ago. And I assume there was a time when you were asked this question by various people. What is it that made you decide, no, I still want to look at what people did who are now dead and gone though it was all a long time ago?

JC: I think of all the main great disciplines, history is the one that encompasses most of what it is to be human. We’re all, whatever we think is going to happen to us next, we’re all passing through here and the only indicators we have as to the road ahead, is actually what people did in the past. And I think that history ought to be compulsory study for politicians because one of the things it really does warn you against is the consequences of utopianism. Whatever else you could say about conservative political systems – and you could, no doubt, say a lot of unpleasant things about them as about any political system – it has never been in the name of conservative vatism that millions of people have been slaughtered. It’s always been in the name of some grand utopian ideal, the paradise of the workers, whatever. There’s always been some wonderful rhetoric, which even some of those espousing it believed. So, I think, on the whole, one of the lessons I’ve drawn from history and one of the reasons I think politicians ought to study it, is that it teaches them the limits of what politics can actually do, which is very little good but it can do a great deal of harm. And, as I say, it just strikes me that the twentieth century, which I think, on the whole, ought really to have put a total halt to the idea of progress – well, one can believe in progress in dentistry and medicine, perhaps, although some people would have their doubts about that – but how you can believe in progress in political ways, looking at the twentieth century, I cannot understand. But you know, from Hitler to Stalin, to Mao Tse-tung, to Pol Pot, these were all visionaries and I think the most dangerous politician is the politician with a vision.

HS: You have written a lot about the twentieth century, but now work on the nineteenth. Was there a reason for the change or was it a natural progression?

JC: I think it was a natural progression, although I think in a way a lot of the ideas in my more controversial books, I thought needed more explanation. And the explanations do lie in the nineteenth century. I think it is not possible – and this is a very good conservative thought, I guess – I don’t think it is possible to understand fully where Chamberlain and Churchill come from in 1938 and 1939 without actually knowing something about the longer conservative traditions in British foreign policy. In some of my earlier books like Chamberlain and the Lost Peace, published in 1989, there are little bits of this sticking up above the surface, which, on the whole, the reviewers missed, as reviewers will. They sim-
ply thought that in the first Churchill book, *Churchill and the End of Glory*, that I was simply provocative for the sake of it.

There was, however, a much larger body of work that it all rested on but much of it had not been written up. So, I decided I had to go back into the nineteenth century and the more I have spent back there, the clearer it has become to me, that trends in history over the last thirty years have, I think, had a deleterious effect on our understanding of the nineteenth century. There has been more work done, for example, on British railway workers in the nineteenth century than has been on the foreign policy of most of the Conservative governments of the twentieth century. It’s simply that historical trends have moved away from what some of my colleagues would regard as old-fashioned political and diplomatic history.

I think, we’ve tended to concentrate on the domestic. Also I think one of the consequences of our decline from power has been this belief that you can leave things to supranational bodies, the United Nations or, latterly, the EU. It’s as though we no longer have a major role to play. And also I think one of the problems with post-1945 liberal consensus is that you’re supposed to define your nation’s aims in all the grandiose but vague terms. And, of course, one of the great things about foreign policy, particularly the conservative view on foreign policy, is that actually asks some hard questions: what are your real interests?

**HS:** Another problem is that we have a rather ambivalent attitude to history at the moment. On the one hand there seems ever less teaching of history in schools, which, inevitably impacts on the universities. And when they do teach history, it’s all in bits and pieces. I hear people say “I don’t find history interesting because we did a course on industrial reform and another course on something else and then it doesn’t hang together and it’s not very interesting”. On the other hand, history in the shape of books and, even television programmes, is immensely popular. Are these two related in any way and is one the consequence of the other?

**JC:** I am sure they are. I think there is an innate desire in most of us to know more about those who trod this earth before we did. It’s the only thing we can really know. I think there is a spiritual hunger in everyone and one way of satisfying that is to know more about the people who were here before we were. Except in really strange communist societies we don’t actually believe that we are the first people. I know it is a delusion of western liberal theory that we are smarter than anyone who came before us, but even western liberalism recognizes that we are not the first ones here, we may just be the cockiest ones here. And I think that’s one of the reasons that, despite what happens in schools, I think there is a lot of catch-up work done in universities. Here we try very hard. In their first year students actually have to do the whole of British and European history. It doesn’t count towards their degree because it’s catching up time. We do make sure, at the very least, if they really do insist on specializing in the Third Reich in their second and third years, they will know what the first two reichs were.

**The success of people like David Starkey, I think, clearly shows that there is a wider lay hunger to know about what happened in the past and I think academic historians who get very snobbish about this are very, very foolish**

They don’t mind that. They come here knowing that they don’t know much history but having an interest in finding out more. The success of people like David Starkey, I think, clearly shows that there is a wider lay hunger to know about what happened in the past and I think academic historians who get very snobbish about this are very, very foolish. I think the idea that the only form of historical discourse that is worth analyzing is that conducted in obscure learned articles is dreadful arrogance. Of course, it is one form of historical discussion that is worth having. But let’s face it, if you look around the country, there are an awful lot of historians sitting where I am sitting, being paid salaries by the state, to do what? Well, one of the things we are doing, I hope, is inculcating an interest in history amongst the young and teaching the young some history. But the other thing we are also trying to do is to write the history of whatever we are an expert in. And I think the very least we can do is to try and write that history in a manner that makes it accessible to the widest number of people. This is very unconservative but one of the things that doesn’t make me a total pessimist about the future is that people are genuinely interested. As Mrs Thatcher said, you can’t buck the market. Nobody is forcing anybody to buy these history books. Nobody is forcing students to come to university to read history. And yet, students continue to come in large numbers to spend quite a large sum of their money or their parents’ money on doing history. And when they leave, they carry on buying books and watching TV programmes. I think it is all rather encouraging that, despite the best efforts on the part of the media, people actually insist on knowing something about the past.

**HS:** As a matter of interest, does a conservative historian have to be pessimistic?

**JC:** I don’t know. I have always thought that, on the whole, certainly the type of conservatism I espouse is probably rather pessimistic, but only in the sense that I don’t believe in progress. I think progress is an illusion. I don’t see that mankind has progressed spiritually very much in the twentieth century. I’ll be prepared
to entertain the idea that mankind on the whole has regressed in the twentieth century.

**HS:** Probably more people are worse off than they were.

**JC:** I think so, I think so. And I think again that the only judgement, the only calculator of whether people are well off is a material one is another sad indicator of the way in which we, as a society, have lost our bearings. Yes, of course, if you are starving in the gutter it’s rather difficult to concentrate on your soul, no doubt. But that’s a false antithesis. The fact is that in the society we are in, we are immensely rich materially but I am not sure we are all that rich spiritually. That’s where I find my cause for pessimism. Which is why it cheers me up to see that people are rather interested in finding out what happened in the past because that’s an indication that people still have a hunger, even if the established church in this country appears to be quite incapable of administering to it.

“**One of the things we can see is that the processes required to study history at university level do seem to be rather useful in turning out people who can run things**”

**HS:** Well, this is not unusual, historically.

**JC:** In a sense, as an Anglican, that is what depresses me most. I don’t, on the whole, share the current mode for dismissing the current Archbishop of Canterbury but, my goodness, he has a mountain and a half to climb. And I think the transformation of the Church of England into a sort of branch of the social work services has been, on the whole, deleterious both for the social work services and the Church of England.

**HS:** Let us fantasise for a moment and let us imagine that the next government is a Conservative one.

**JC:** Ah, deep fantasy.

**HS:** Well, yes. And let us say a week or so after he has been to see the Queen, the Prime Minister comes to you and says Professor Charmley or John, we really need to do something about education. Give me three good reasons why history must be made compulsory in schools.

**JC:** Well, I think the first reason is that if we want an educated population, they need a memory and history is, in effect, society’s memory. And I think that from an historian’s point of view one of the great things about history in our society is that it is a free market. It is not simply the case of a few state-employed historians trotting out a line. One of the wonderful things about Britain and America is that you just can’t get away with that. The market is so big, so many people read history, that yes, you can write a left-leaning history of the European Union but it is not going to be enshrined on tablets of stone because someone else will write a very different view.

I think the second reason for studying history is again a non-utilitarian one. It is not just that we would have a better educated population, better able to make judgements, I think we would have a more rounded population. If we want to to live in a civilized, tolerant society, I think that a knowledge of what has happened in the past is a vital aid towards that. It’s a vital tool for individuals to grasp the idea that there are forces bigger than they are. We are simply part of a continuing story and one of the natural tendencies of the human being is towards hubris. And I think one of the things a study of history does is it helps at least to counteract that. Nothing will stop it but I think anything that helps to counteract that tendency is a good thing.

And I think the third reason is that in terms of why history should be taught in universities, one of the things we can see is that the processes required to study history at university level do seem to be rather useful in turning out people who can run things. One of the things we desperately need in this country is people who can run things. In that sense it seems to me to serve a function not unanalogous to that the Classics served in the nineteenth century.

**HS:** That’s what I was told by my father when I went to study history. He was an historian, too. As an historian who specializes to a great extent in foreign policy, you must have been rather thrilled when, so to speak, the twentieth century was wrapped up and put aside, and, of course, it started in Sarajevo and ended in Sarajevo, and suddenly we had headlines about places we thought would never rise again, like Bosnia-Herzegovina. I do remember going home one day in early 2002 and seeing a huge headline in the Standard, which I actually bought because I loved the headline: “KABUL FALLS”. And to those of us who studied the nineteenth century – and I wrote my thesis on British attitudes to Russia – the idea that there should be a headline in the twenty-first century of “Kabul falls” is absolutely wonderful. This must have cheered your soul.

**JC:** Oh very much so. Very much so. I can remember twenty-five years ago, when I first started lecturing on the Eastern Question, you not only had to spell Bosnia-Herzegovina on the blackboard to students, you had to bring in maps to show exactly where it was and they still couldn’t grasp the point anyway. Again, back to this point of history being a wonderful controller of hubris, there we all were, or there were a lot of people, anyway, thinking that all this nineteenth century stuff, nationalism and all these little nationalities, it was all being superseded. We had Yugoslavia now. Wonderful. You didn’t need to worry about Balkan nationalism. Tito and Communism had solved it. Well, we know about Communism solving things.
HS: The peace of the graveyard.

JC: Absolutely. So, yes, it has been wonderful, because one of the things we now see quite clearly is so much of what is going on not just in the Middle East and the Far East can actually now be only explained by historians. There is no point in being an IR analyst from the Brookings Institute, who knows everything about Kremlinology. Now there is a dead subject if ever there was one.

HS: Although it has now become a word to use about many other things.

JC: I can remember one of my colleagues, a professor in International Relations, giving her inaugural lecture, and the way good academics do when they are lecturing, although she had a script, her mind was asking interesting questions. One of the questions that came out was “You might well ask if you want to be critical of the discipline of International Relations, what is the point of it if none of its practitioners prophesied the fall of the Soviet Union.”. And the problem was that clearly this idea had just come to her and she did not have an answer.

“I am very conscious as an historian that, inevitably, we sanitize and we tidy up. I think what one can do is to try and bear in mind and try to get one’s reader to bear in mind the messiness”

HS: I remember reading Marc Bloch’s *The Historian’s Craft*, (obviously not a conservative historian but still an interesting one) in which he writes about the way the past helps us to understand the present but he then has a chapter about the way the present helps us to understand the past. And the example he gives is of himself understanding certain events in mediaeval history a great deal better after he had been part of the colossal debacle of the French army falling apart in 1940. Do you find that you can look at certain events in the nineteenth century and what people write and say: “no, I know from my own experience that things are not quite like that”.

JC: I think that of all the things that is constantly driven home to one is simply the fact that the past isn’t as neatly parcelled as politicians and historians would like us to believe. The thing that no-one has quite recreated probably because it would be monumentally boring to do it, but nevertheless we need to have it in mind is that when, say, the Marquess of Salisbury is dealing with British foreign policy (and I take Salisbury because he really is doing it in his study at Hatfield so, in that sense, he is the closest you are going to get to an intellectual approach to foreign policy) but he doesn’t have the luxury of simply sitting down and looking at a bunch of position papers, deciding that this is what we are going to do and doing it. All the time he is reading whatever is before him, other stuff is constantly coming in. At the same time he has, if you like, his day job as a landowner and leader of the Conservative party to do and stuff is coming in there. So, what hits me as an historian is the messiness of the past. And I am very conscious as an historian that, inevitably, we sanitize and we tidy up. I think what one can do is to try and bear in mind and try to get one’s reader to bear in mind the messiness. Again, that’s what is interesting but hardly new in post-modernism is that we tidy up, of course, we tidy up. Any sort of writing about the past is tidying up a mess. And the idea that there is some ineffable virtue in writing history from the bottom up rather than from the top down, I think, is simply inverted snobbery.

HS: John, one last question. Which of your books did you enjoy writing most?

JC: Probably, the very first if my books, which was a biography of Duff Cooper, which I enjoyed writing hugely.

HS: Is that because you enjoyed Duff Cooper’s personality?

JC: Duff and Diana and John Julius Norwich had a lot to do with it. They were absolutely wonderful. You couldn’t, as a tyro historian, have better subjects to deal with. One of the big problems every biographer has to deal with is the “widow”, which doesn’t just include the actual widow or widower but includes the children, all looking over your shoulder and wanting a hagiographical version of papa’s or mama’s life in which they are portrayed as a plaster saint. Both of them were absolutely no interference at all. Diana Cooper was marvellously discreet. Absolutely no attempt to hide the fact that Duff was a serial womanizer and a serial drinker. What that enabled one to do is to put all that stuff into perspective. As a very young historian on his first book, it would have been very easy, if they had wished to conceal this, to think that this really mattered, the fact that he was spending a good deal of time chasing women and drinking. Well, of course, in one sense it did matter but not for the reasons that the prurient public would think but because it enabled some of his less gifted contemporaries to write him off as a lightweight, which always happens, particularly in British politics. Palmerston, I think, is one of the very few, along with Lloyd George, top class lechers to get away with having a prolonged career in British politics. So it did enable one to concentrate on other aspects of Duff Cooper’s character and to concentrate on his achievements. And I think I enjoyed that one the most even if it, in some ways, posed less of a challenge than some of my later books.

HS: Well, it’s a very enjoyable book. John, thank you very much for sparing the time.
Well, at least he did not outlive his “nemesis”, whom he had managed outsit in the House, Margaret Thatcher. She, in her inimitable way, produced a “eulogy” that was about as backhanded as it can be:

Ted Heath was a political giant. He was also, in every sense, the first modern Conservative leader – by his humble background, his grammar school education and by the fact of his democratic election.

As prime minister, he was confrontied by the enormous problems of post-war Britain.

If those problems eventually defeat-ed him, he had shown in the 1970 manifesto how they, in turn, would eventually be defeated.

For that, and much else besides, we are all in his debt.

The reason, I venture to suggest, why there is so much description and analysis of other aspects of his policy, not the Common Market, is because it was all the rest that was important at the time.

The obituary in the Daily Telegraph summed up the problem of Edward Heath and his failure well:

…the “Grocer” was pilloried as a heartless automaton, contemptuous of the poor and unemployed. In reality, his administration twisted and turned because the kind of Conservatism which Heath espoused – and which appealed to his instincts far more than did the prescriptions of the market-place – was corporatist rather than political, dirigiste rather than democratic.

Clearly, a man with that sort of outlook would rather approve of the concepts outlined by Monnet and Schumann, concepts that he actually understood better than almost anyone in Britain. But the idea that managerialism rather than messy politics is the answer was the mantra of the sixties and seventies.

Indeed, it has not disappeared from public life. This government, in particular, is adept at setting up various groups of “experts” to tackle problems that ought to be the province of democratically elected and accountable politicians.

One can probably isolate several formative influences. First and fore-most there was the fact, noted by Thatcher, that he was the son of a manual worker (a carpenter), who made it to Oxford, became an officer in the socially exclusive Honourable Royal Artillery Company and rose in the Conservative Party at a time, when family background mattered a great deal.

He was, thus, something of an outsider who had made good through his own remarkable but somewhat pedestrian talents.

However, and this is important, he was not really outstanding. He was not a star, or, at least not one of the first magnitude. (One might say that this reflects in his music-making – always scrupulous and pernickety but with no heart or feeling. He is supposed to have conducted like a metronome.)

Getting to a good school and Oxford from his background was...
Edward Heath

admirable but he did not get that coveted scholarship (though, eventually, he got an Organ Scholarship). He left with a Second Class degree – very respectable, indeed, in those days but hardly brilliant.

He was a good administrator, a reasonable Whiz but never a good, let alone great politician. That must have hurt, particularly as his hated successor became such a shining star.

The other formative influences were his precocious understanding of the reality and threat of Nazi Germany and his view of Europe at the end of the War. At Oxford Heath was an anti-appeaser and campaigned for A.D.Lindsay against the official Conservative candidate, Quintin Hogg, who supported Munich.

He visited Franco’s Spain and Hitler’s Germany. Astonishingly, for a young man in his early twenties he grasped the significance of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and immediately started to make his way back to England, returning before the declaration of war.

He had what used to be called “a good war”, saw a good deal of active service, was mentioned in dispatches and given a wartime MBE. Again, that meant something in 1946. As his regiment rolled across Europe in 1944-5 he witnessed what had become of the places he had visited in 1939. Many of those who saw the same thing accepted the need for European unification to avoid such a catastrophe again.

His other great belief, also the result of his essentially managerial attitude to politics, was in size. Units had to be big to survive and thrive. Again, this was a mantra of those years.

Size was one of the arguments used in favour of the comprehensivization of English and Scottish education, a process that was started under Wilson and continued relentlessly under Heath.

Size was the reason for the destruction of the old counties and London boroughs. Local government had to be conducted in large units.

Size was the reason for the similar destruction of the old police forces.

It was not till well into the eighties much, was beginning to fray some-
Heath should have got a life and never hung around the green room

Ronald Porter

Ronald Porter is a man of letters and a frequent contributor to the Conservative History Journal

Macmillan’s advice to retired statesman was that, after leaving office, they should abandon any attempt to return to the political stage or maintain close links with the world they have left. ‘Old actors,’ he once famously quipped, ‘should never hang around the Green Room.’ It is a pity that Heath ignored this good advice. His trouble was that he never really mapped out precisely what he was going to do after being defeated by Maggie in the leadership contest of 1975. He allowed his public life to end effectively in 1975 but he still hung around the Green Room of British politics, doing very little, until he died earlier this year.

What he should have done was this. Instead of crying and sulking in his tent, he should have sat down with a pen and a piece of paper and sketched out some sort of new career for himself. He should have done a bit of stock taking. He could have rebranded himself as an Elder Statesman Not Yet Retired. There were plenty of obvious examples to hand. Alec Douglas-Home still bravely continued in public life when he gave up the leadership in 1965. There is the earlier and excellent example of Arthur Balfour, an ex-Tory leader and Prime Minister, who went on to become Foreign Secretary.

Heath should have swallowed his pride – there was quite a lot of it – and taken up the offer from Maggie of some sort of front bench role. When the Tories won in 1979, the Foreign Office would have been his for the taking. Alternatively, he should have accepted Maggie’s offer of the British Embassy in Washington. That job would have suited him and could have been his for many years. He would have played a crucial role in the Falklands Crisis. He could have had a decisive role in shaping Anglo-American relations and have helped prevent the Tories veering towards Euro-Scepticism. Halifax, from 1940–45, proved the point that there can be a Useful Life after political Death, as did Richard Nixon.

Instead, Heath decided to continue to be the Proud Member for Bexley. And he hung around the Green Room so much that he became a bit of a pest and a bore. He busied himself with trifling matters. He was well known for attending, at the top hotels in London, all the generous National Day Receptions of most of the Arab countries. He would indulge himself in buying pictures with the help of Roy Miles and always made a point of attending Roy’s wonderfully lavish and generous Mayfair parties. He was a frequent user of the Berkeley Hotel, even though he lived close by. And he was a regular attender and speaker at Foyles Literary Luncheons.

He spent an enormous amount of time and energy in supervising the doing – up of his Georgian house, Arundells, opposite the Cathedral, in the Square, at Salisbury. A beautiful house, albeit rather too obviously done up by interior decorators. And his autograph collection of signed pictures of Heads of State was almost, but not quite, as good as my own. But none of this really amount-
ed to a row of beans. Yes, Churchill built walls at Chartwell, fed goldfish and painted some good pictures. But if you asked him what he would rather be doing, the answer would always be ‘holding an important Office of State, and preferably the Premiership’. The same is true of Heath.

Of course, there would be the occasional, bitchy speeches in the House, running down his own side and praising Labour. And there would be visits abroad to countries like China where he was treated, in true Charlie Chan style, as ‘Honourable Guest Number One’. And there were grumpy appearances on the Today programme and Breakfast with Frost; his annual jaunt to the Salzburg Music Festival, where he had the near fatal heart attack about two years ago; occasional chats with his financial advisors, to see how well his investment portfolio had grown, and how rich he was despite being a Member of Lloyds. But that was about it, really. A complete and utter waste of the last thirty years of his life. He was like one of those old, retired actors at the Garrick who listen to directors or producers brag about their latest film or play and then secretly hope – without asking [Pride Comes Before A Fall] – ‘oh, is there a part for me here?’.

Perhaps things would have been different if Heath had married or had ‘a partner’ of some sort. But here again, Heath appeared to be close to nobody, male or female. About 35 years ago, in the days of contested divorces, he was cited by the wife of a husband, who she alleged was spending so much time on his yacht Morning Cloud, that it gravely weakened her marriage. The writ was later withdrawn. Many years later, when the able journalist Bob Hamilton referred to the writ in an article in Punch, Heath threatened to sue and put pressure on Punch to apologise. One wonders whether, as he surveyed the view from Arundalls, Heath ever thought of these lines by another misogynist, A. E. Housman:

\[\ldots\] Little is the luck I’ve had
And oh tis comfort small,
To think that many another lad
Has had no luck at all . . .
When the Conservative party was in opposition between 1964 and 1970, I was involved in two of the policy groups that formed part of his major policy exercise and I also was part of a small group led by Airey Neave working on parliamentary reform. My meetings with Heath were occasional but memorable. You could never be certain just how he was going to greet you. On occasion it was, ‘Here comes the Professor’ with a great chuckle and much heaving of shoulders, but at other moments, he was curt, almost as if he had never met you before. Briefing him was surprisingly difficult because he would sit impassively, never offering any comment or interjection or indeed a reaction of any kind. I only once saw him angry and that was at a policy weekend at Swinton where a number of us were arguing over a drink in the bar that the time had come when it would be right to float the pound. Ted got very red in the face and exploded that it would mean devaluation and he was having nothing of it. We quickly changed the subject. Edward Boyle told me, however, that he was incandescent about Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech.

Gone forever, or so it seemed, was the much more relaxed figure, who had charmed many of us as we discussed the current state of politics with him in the bar at High Leigh at Conservative student conferences in the early 1960s and who inspired us with his patent enthusiasm for a united Europe.

Ted could speak with real and unscripted eloquence, usually without notes, as he did at Tim Bligh’s memorial service and again when speaking at the dinner to celebrate Baldwin’s centenary. Bligh was a close friend, but the tribute to Baldwin was more unexpected and surprisingly moving as a result. And he generously came to launch the biography of Baldwin that Keith Middlemas and I had written, at the 1969 Party Conference. It was a short speech, but one marked with real insight. But for the most part in the bigger set piece speeches Heath was wooden, although we cheered them to the echo at Conference, sometimes for seven or eight minutes, hoping to buoy him up and to convey to the public something of the real quality of the man.

In enforced retirement, he relaxed and the speeches became more memorable. I can remember that when he came to speak to the students at LSE, he was genuinely funny and had his audience almost literally rolling in the aisles.

Ted was stubborn and a proud man. In an attempt to kick start his long-awaited memoirs, Anthony Seldon persuaded him with great difficulty to speak about his Government at an ICBH Conference, I think at the People’s Palace hard by Queen Mary College. There were few revelations, but an uncompromising defence of his Government’s record. It fell to me afterwards to escort him across the main road to the pub where he insisted he wanted to have a drink. Seemingly oblivious to the traffic, he crossed halfway and then completed a perilous journey, almost as if defying the cars to take him on. In the pub over a pint he was relaxed, friendly, good with the young – but not with his self-appointed biographer, John Campbell, whom he cut dead. There was perhaps a half apology subsequently in his memoirs when he mentioned Campbell as helpful in rebutting the charges made by the Referendum campaign in 1997 that he had misled the country over the nature of the European project.

It was not in his nature to do so, and paradoxically his own opponent in that campaign, Brian Reading,
Edward Heath

rebutted the charge. He had, of course, worked for Heath in No 10. Both in public as well as in private Heath had always made it clear that European union was a political project and he expressly said in 1971 that economic and monetary union was a cause which Britain would support. Heath’s reputation for statesmanship and foresight will be inextricably linked to the continuing story of European union and Britain’s part in it. But, whatever the future, the successful negotiation of Britain’s entry into the European Community will remain his greatest achievement and one which has made an indelible impact on the country over the past three decades.

“It is often said that the policy programme that he masterminded in opposition came to nothing: the Government’s policy legacy was swept aside or reversed by its Labour successor. This is only partly true.”

It is often said that the policy programme that he masterminded in opposition came to nothing: the Government’s policy legacy was swept aside or reversed by its Labour successor. This is only partly true. When I joined a Regional Health Authority in 1983, the structure was recognisably that put in place by the Heath Government, although one tier of management had gone. The planning and budgeting process dated to the early ’70s and the managerial emphasis that Keith Joseph had sought to instil was about to be reinforced by the Griffiths report.

Similarly the local government structure, although considerably modified, owes much to the 1972 Act. At the centre the creation of the Department of the Environment was far sighted and the ‘giant’ departments tend to be re-instated if broken up. If the policy analysis and review machinery withered on the vine, the CPRS did not disappear until 1983 and arguably has been much missed. But the more significant point to note is the extent to which the Government’s measures advanced an agenda that was to be much revisited subsequently.

The trade union reforms with which he was particularly associated were clearly flawed (although the story might have been different had the unions not stumbled upon non-registration as the weapon to render them ineffective), but the debate which they provoked and the way in which the unions compelled the Wilson government to obliterate them contributed greatly to the climate in which Mrs Thatcher was able to pursue her own programme; and once the law had been invoked, it would no longer be possible to treat industrial relations as an area beyond the law. The Sunningdale agreement, although rapidly undermined, signalled the only way forward in Northern Ireland. Similarly subsidising the tenant rather than the house later became the norm and the steps the Heath Government took to push the sale of council houses were the forerunner to one of Mrs Thatcher’s central policies. Selectivity in relation to social security, the legitimation of occupational pensions, and the attempt to weld together the tax and benefit system are further examples of the way in which the Heath Government set the longer-term agenda in terms both of problems and possible solutions.

“As always with Heath it came back to Europe, the one major policy about which he spoke with real conviction, and the need to ready his country for entry into a community that by the end of the decade would, if Heath had his way, have in place economic and monetary union.”

Insofar as the postwar consensus existed (and 1 would argue that it was essentially the creation of Eden, Macmillan and Wilson rather than Butler and Gaitskell) it first came under strong challenge at the hands of Heath and Macleod. Today we tend to recall Heath’s government for its u-turns on industrial and regional policy and for the return to compulsory prices and incomes policy that it was pledged to eschew. It is tempting, but mistaken, to put this down to a loss of nerve on Heath’s part. Others see it as a pragmatic response to an unacceptable rise in unemployment, an explanation to which Heath’s memoirs lend some credence. But the most plausible explanation is the disappointment of the Prime Minister at the failure of British industry to invest despite the incentives offered them in terms of the reconstruction of the tax system and the perceived need for British industry to be put in order before entry into the EEC.

As always with Heath it came back to Europe, the one major policy about which he spoke with real conviction, and the need to ready his country for entry into a community that by the end of the decade would, if Heath had his way, have in place economic and monetary union. Hence the Industry Act and the renewed dash for economic growth, a repeat in vastly changed circumstances of the policies pursued by the Macmillan Government a decade earlier. They were to be tested to destruction by a Prime Minister who had no trust in any alternative ideology to Keynesianism and who would have found few allies, intellectual or political, if he had sought an alternative.

It can be argued that Heath was unlucky, that the times were out of joint for such policies to succeed; and it is clear that neither the Labour Government which preceded his administration nor the Labour Government which followed, fared any better. The tides of history had turned against the Keynesians and it was Heath’s misfortune that, albeit unconsciously, he was cast in the mythical role of King Canute.
When Macmillan retired in October 1963 the Economist proclaimed that the ‘Time for a change in Conservative leadership had come’. The Conservative Party needed a new leader capable of ‘imbuing the public with a vision of the Conservatives’ missionary zeal for the new age’ that could ‘steal Mr Wilson’s battle pennants from him’. The unlikely figure that was charged with this formidable mandate was Alexander Frederick Douglas-Home, fourteenth Earl of Home, Knight of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle. Lord Home had “emerged” after very customary processes as leader of the Conservative Party. Blackpool proved to be more redolent of Juvenal’s Satires than the normally sycophantic and disciplined Conservative Party conferences. The gladiatorial joust for power had discredited the Conservatives and the leadership selection process. This rather flawed procedure gave Home the problematic commission of modernising and uniting the Conservatives of the 1960s after the ashes of Blackpool. Though the selection details of Home’s emergence over the other contenders are not part of the focus of this article, since the focal point is on his leadership, the effects on the Conservatives from Blackpool are highly relevant to Home’s resulting leadership of the Conservative Party.

Home, like his two immediate predecessors was an Etonian and was famously described by a contemporary as a kind of ‘sleepy boy who is showered with favours and crowned with all the laurels, who is liked by the masters and admired by the boys without any apparent exertion on his part… In the eighteenth century he would have become prime minister before he was thirty; as it was, he appeared honourably ineligible for the struggle of life’. And yet the ‘unexpected leader’, once the melancholic Butler agreed to serve in Home’s Cabinet, accepted the Queen’s commission to become the first peer to be Prime Minister since the venerable 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, who had served under another Queen at the end of the nineteenth century. The left-wing Labour MP Tony Benn (heir to the Viscountcy of Stansgate) had unwittingly helped Home become Prime Minister by spearheading a law change in 1963 that allowed hereditary peers to renounce their titles and stand for the Commons. This fundamental change enabled Home to surrender his coronet to allow his candidacy for the Conservative leadership.

Home was hoped to be a third and uniting candidate like Bonar Law to Hailsham’s Walter Long and Butler’s Austen Chamberlain. Yet the circumstances were rather different over fifty years on, as were the effects. The 1960s, even for the Conservatives, were not a time where it was happily accepted that a dignified cabal was allowed to select the leader, especially when that leader was not even from the Commons. However high the credentials of this respected and unelected peer, the fact that he was chosen made it look like no member of the elected Commons was considered fit to lead, which handicapped his ability to unite the Party and immediately put his leadership into question.

Two tribunes of the progressive wing of the Party, Enoch Powell and Iain Macleod refused to serve under Home, and others remained only at Butler’s insistence to avoid the cardinal sin of splitting their great Conservative Party. However, Butler’s selfless heroics for the sake of unity on being passed for premiership once again were not enough to mitigate conclusively the distaste within and towards the Conservatives. Macleod, now editor of the Spectator and himself contender...
Alec Douglas-Home

for the succession, wrote a devastating polemic in January 1964 calling the events of October 1963 manipulations of a ‘magic circle of old Etonians’ that had not only marred the Party’s electoral prospects but obliterated its image of modernisation. The ‘Magic Circle’ joined the Conservative lexicon as a term of derision that was a deeply damaging and memorable phrase, which continued to haunt the entire life of Home’s ministry. Home was portrayed as a relatively unknown Scottish peer, Old Etonian, Oxonian, tweedy, castle-owning aristocrat who had spent his government time almost completely away from domestic and economic affairs and who enjoyed the pleasantries of the grouse moors. This hardly engendered a progressive accessible image for the 1960s or the Party.

The appointment of Home, the lithe Scottish aristocrat, opened the floodgates for satirists. Butler believed a peer ‘spoil the image of modernisation’ while Private Eye published an obituary notice on the 18th October of the Conservative Party which had been ‘suffering from severe Macmillan for the last seven years and although this has finally cleared up, its condition was so debilitated as a result that a sudden attack of Lord Home caused its immediate demise’. Many Conservatives found it difficult to party successfully Wilson’s jibe that ‘after a century of democratic advance, the whole process has ground to a halt with a four-part advance, the whole process caused its immediate demise’.

Home faced the daunting and imperative task of not only reviving Conservative confidence and unity, as Macmillan did after Suez, but also competing successfully with the Wilson phenomenon. The discontent and damage to the Party had been done since the contest.

Anonymous articles were written in The Times attacking the Government and its leadership, and a Gallup poll in January 1964, reported that 48 per cent of electors thought the Conservatives were more divided than Labour, and only 22 per cent saw Labour as more divided. This was a significant perception that dissipated the usual Conservative boasts of loyalty and unity.

Douglas-Home entered the Premiership already handicapped, as there was considerable resentment amongst senior Cabinet colleagues like Butler, Hailsham, Heath and Maudling over not achieving the leadership. Since he was far from being the likely leader, he was dependent on his Cabinet colleagues to an inordinate degree for a Conservative leader, and did not have the capability or charisma to dominate his festering equals.

Comments were circulated like Hailsham’s during Blackpool that ‘if Alec takes the job it will be a disaster’ or Butler telling a journalist that the Prime Minister was ‘an amiable enough creature [but] I’m afraid he doesn’t, you know, understand economics or even education at all’. This obvious lack of Conservative traditional public deference exposed the leader’s reliance on Butler and also the youthful domestic duumvirate of Maudling and Heath.

Douglas-Home, the ‘amiable Lord’, as Attlee once described him, had inherited a poisoned chalice that meant the odds were against him, especially when his 363 day administration was really a twelve month election campaign to convince the British public that a modern Conservative Party should be re-elected for the fourth consecutive time. Maudling pointed out, accurately, that Douglas-Home ‘inspired an extraordinary affection among the rank and file of the Tory Party who regarded him as the sort of man they would like to be themselves: a good athlete, not brilliant but intelligent; a man of charm, integrity and balance’. However, it would not be enough to convert the converted. Behind the genuine respect for Sir Alec’s courtesy and charm among Conservatives lay the harsh political realisation of possible defeat that was personified by the looming spectre of Harold Wilson.

Wilson battled the Conservative “Edwardian establishment mentality” personified by the grouse-moor owning Douglas-Home with relish. Wilson was a consummate politician who was dominating the electoral vista while Douglas-Home appeared amateurish and ill at ease with the media and the all-important television made him look cadaverous and uncomfortable. Unlike Macmillan and Wilson, Douglas-Home privately exclaimed that ‘I fear that I could not conceal my distaste for the conception that the political leader had also to be an actor on the screen’. Douglas-Home’s preference for tours, though impressive to those that he met, was not enough for the media conscious sixties.

Ridiculed as “Dull Alec” against “Smart Alec”, Douglas-Home could do little to inspire the confidence of Conservative MPs in the Commons against the mental acracy and wit of Wilson. The experienced political commentator and American Ambassador, David Bruce, noted that Douglas-Home’s Commons performance was ‘subjected to loud and long heckling by Labour Backbenchers, producing a “strained” delivery and ‘giving impression of not being thoroughly at home in domestic section’, comparing ‘poorly’ with Wilson’s ‘command of subject, polish and fluency’.

Importantly as Peter Clarke remarks the ‘twelve month premiership of Sir Alec Douglas-Home in 1963-64 was dominated by Harold Wilson. No previous Leader of the Opposition, without the authority of being an ex-Prime Minister himself, has enjoyed such ascendancy’. The polls showed that the Prime Minister though attracting affection was well behind Wilson, while the Party was behind Labour always though often close. Wilson ridiculed Douglas-Home as the ‘Matchsticks Premier’ due to his impotence and unpreparedness at the House of Commons and America Cabinet colleague, David Wilson. Home did not conceal his distaste for the conception that the political leader had also to be an actor on the screen’. Douglas-Home’s preference for tours, though impressive to those that he met, was not enough for the media conscious sixties.

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The election brought an end to the Conservative hegemony, but was an extremely close contest giving Labour only a majority of four that would fall further. So close according to one study, that if four hundred votes were cor-
rectly redistributed in the Conservatives’ favour in certain marginal seats, the Conservative Government would have returned to power. Yet such indulgent counterfactuals in psephology could not change the result. Slogans like “Thirteen Wasted Years” and “Time for Change” proved hard to combat. Despite being so close the Conservatives had lost safe seats and were unable to gain new voters. Naturally the suitability of the leadership was questioned in the event of defeat. The Conservatives had lost more than 1.7 million voters and despite Douglas-Home’s genuine effort and decency the election defeat was pertinent evidence of deeper problems for the Conservatives that were beyond the leader’s ability to remedy. The Party’s post-mortem believed that there was not enough adversarial politics conducted and sought to rectify the policy sterility and upper class image. Constituency associations were now vetoing considerable dissatisfaction. Lichfield and Tamworth felt that Sir Alec Douglas-Home had not reflected the modern age as well as Mr. Harold Wilson’. After years of power the Conservatives and Sir Alec had the unenviable task of being in Opposition.

Opposition required an unwelcome psychological and obvious change for a party long used to the patronage and power of office. Leadership of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition required Douglas-Home to take on an adversarial platform and to annoy and disrupt the young Labour Government with its slim majority. At a time when Labour had hardly had a honeymoon, the Party demanded these aggressive characteristics from its leader. In Heath and Maudling were ready leaders that would happily relieve the Opposition demands from their reluctant leader. Denied the emollient of patronage and too proud to lobby, the Conservative leader could not facilitate a following that would enable his continuance. In this environment Heath had constantly to deny rumours that he was mounting a coup, and such speculation only further eroded the precarious position of a leader who was widely seen as merely a stop-gap.

Douglas-Home bowed to pressure from Conservative MPs, like Humphrey Berkley, in February 1965 to end the fissiparous and chaotic era of “emergence” with a new formalised leadership procedure that would give the Parliamentary Party power to elect the next leader. The adoption of these modern procedures inevitably hastened further speculation about when Douglas-Home’s leadership would be tested. Competition between Heath and Maudling took on the appearance of a badly concealed electoral campaign. Unlike his leader, Heath as Shadow Chancellor gave Conservative MPs something to cheer as he harassed and impeded Jim Callaghan’s Budget. Heath as Shadow Chancellor gave Conservative MPs something to cheer as he harassed and impeded Jim Callaghan’s Budget. Heath as Shadow Chancellor gave Conservative MPs something to cheer as he harassed and impeded Jim Callaghan’s Budget. Unfortunately, this was at the Party’s cost, vitriolic attacks in the press. Simultaneously, Heath as Shadow Chancellor gave Conservative MPs something to cheer as he harassed and impeded Jim Callaghan’s Budget. 

Perhaps due to the respect that Douglas-Home was held, the campaign against him was even more covert than in most other comparable circumstances, but nonetheless active. Nevertheless, serious questions were raised in the Party after David Steel, future leader of the Liberal Party, won the formerly safe Conservative seat of Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles, right at Douglas-Home’s political centre in the Scottish borders. In an attempt to quell disquiet, the Conservative leader announced in June that there would be no leadership election in 1965. However, the statement was soon devalued once Wilson had stated that an election would not be held in 1965. The Conservatives could move more cozenly towards espousing discontent without fear of a leadership fight, which Wilson could capitalise on during an election campaign. The media now centred in on the impermanence of Douglas-Home’s position. The Sunday Express reported in late June that around one hundred MPs, hinted as Heath supporters, were involved in a ‘bid to oust Sir Alec’. The former Prime Minister was not accustomed to lobbying for support and was not capable or ruthless enough to stymie his potential successors’ claims. On July 5 the 1922 Committee passed a resolution that twenty-five backbenchers had signed requesting a debate on the leadership and it was only because the chairman, Sir William Anstruther-Gray, insisted that he report the disquiet personally to Douglas-Home that a potentially embarrassing vote did not occur.

Douglas-Home, though wanting to carry on, decided with the mounting criticism from within the Party, vitriolic attacks in the press, low opinion polls and no core support, to step down at 30 years of service. A drawn Douglas-Home, with clear restraint, stated immediately after resigning at a 1922 Committee meeting in July that ‘no one suggested to me that I should go. But I know that there are those who, perfectly properly, felt that a change of leadership might be right’. The Times reported that ‘the attempted putsch…inside the Executive Committee of the 1922 Committee clinched Sir Alec’s decision to stay no longer at the top. Sir Alec appears to have been shocked and surprised by the weight of feeling in favour of a new man that had been revealed inside the Executive Committee and, by implication, within the parliamentary rank and file’. So even Douglas-Home like all Conservative leaders was ‘surprised’ at the movement against him, but he at least realised early the futility in fighting against it without the means. An exhausted and proud Douglas-Home did not have the strength, the confidence or the sufficient support to fight for his leadership, which he had so messily inherited.

Douglas-Home was a decent, honest statesman who gained respect and admiration rather than seeking to be dominant and controlling. Yet it could not displace the fact that he was incapable of ‘modernising’ the image of the Party, nor could he succeed in the arduous task of maintaining Tory rule after thirteen years with an electorate that had grown tired of the Conservatives. The Party had shown that despite its high regard for Douglas-Home’s service and decency they had little hesitation in engineering his removal. As Alan Clark notes, after the leader had announced his resignation a ‘small and embarrassed group gathered round to say how sorry they were, including and unsurprisingly, those who had been conspiring to bring this about’. Douglas-Home’s departure marked an end of an era when patricians had long led the Conservatives. Yet for all his hierarchical credentials this brief leader of the Party was to bequeath a significant democratic renovation on the leader’s relationship to the Party. Douglas-Home assented and assisted in the implementation of the ‘Douglas-Home Rules’, which established a leadership election so that the haunting process of ‘emergence’ could not happen again. His rules and his leadership would forever have portents for the Conservative Party and its leader.
Back in the days when Conservative Party leadership contests were still relatively infrequent events, John Major promised, just as he had taken the political establishment by surprise through his succession as leader of the Conservative Party, so he would also take the political world by surprise through his resignation. Major kept his word on this point and, in the summer of 1995, attempted to “lance a boil” that was disfiguring the Party and undermining his authority as leader.

Returned to power in April 1992 with a modest majority, the Conservative Party’s fourth consecutive term in government saw it beset by financial and personal scandals and worn down by sheer longevity of office. But it was Europe that would ultimately eclipse Major’s premiership. An open wound that had irritated the party for years, Europe threatened disaster and, in the words of Norman Lamont in his memoirs, “managed to attract every oddball in the Cabinet.

By Sunday, all the Cabinet had expressed support for the Prime Minister, save for one. John Redwood had seemingly gone to ground and was refusing to return calls to confirm his support. Then there were the forty telephone lines installed at Portillo’s office in readiness for an anticipated challenge; “the speed at which these matters can be done is a tribute to privatisation,” Major retorted when teased about this at Prime Minister’s Questions. Although Redwood did back Major, it was a reluctant endorsement from a candidate in waiting.

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Two hours after Prime Minister's Questions, with no hint of the drama that was to follow, the Prime Minister announced he was resigning to a hastily assembled media congregation and confirmed he would be a candidate in the forthcoming contest.”

Standing against Major but came to the conclusion that only a “real candidate” could unseat him and such a candidate would only be found in Cabinet. Lamont recalls he telephoned Michael Portillo in an attempt to persuade him to challenge Major. Portillo declined, but Major noted in his memoirs that Portillo did not immediately return calls to confirm his support. Then there were the forty telephone lines installed at Portillo’s office in readiness for an anticipated challenge; “the speed at which these matters can be done is a tribute to privatisation.” Major retorted when teased about this at Prime Minister’s Questions. Although Portillo did back Major, it was a reluctant endorsement from a candidate in waiting.

By Sunday, all the Cabinet had expressed support for the Prime Minister, save for one. John Redwood had seemingly gone to ground and was refusing to return calls to Major’s campaign team. It seemed Redwood felt offended at being the last to know about Major’s plans and being told by a colleague rather than Major himself.

His silence over the weekend was ominous and on Monday morning Redwood briefly spoke to Major to confirm his resignation from Cabinet and intention to stand for the leadership. However, his campaign launch that afternoon was a publicity disaster and, in the words of Major in his memoirs, “managed to attract every oddball in the
Party”. Awkwardly positioned between Theresa Gorman’s bosom and Tony Marlow’s striped summer jacket, Redwood said he was “devastated” by Major’s resignation and the party required firm “but understand-ing” leadership. The campaign launch was widely derided and Tim Collins came up with the memorable phrase “the barny army” to describe Redwood’s supporters. The policies Redwood proposed were a curious mixture of uncosted tax cuts combined with annual cuts in public expenditure, a firm opt-out from the single currency and even a commitment to save the Royal Yacht Britannia.

However, Redwood’s campaign did not gather significant momentum, possibly due to its disastrous launch and vague policies. Although Redwood possessed one of the fiercest intellects in the party he lacked the character, gravitas and common touch that had been successful for Major. Redwood was unable to secure the support of significant figures in the Commons and as the date of the election drew closer, it became clear a Redwood attack was never in danger of killing the Major premiership, although it retained potential to mortally wound it.

Voting took place throughout the day on July 4th in Committee Room 12 of the Commons. Whispers of Machiavellian plots abounded, mainly concerning Michael Heseltine, who had spent a large portion of the morning in discussions with the Prime Minister leading to speculation he was negotiating a more senior role in return for his support and that of his supporters. Major and Heseltine consistently deny any deals were struck and, when he went to cast his vote, to demonstrate his loyalty Heseltine felt obliged to hold his vote aloft to prove his cross had gone against the Prime Minister’s name.

There was little doubt Major would secure more votes than Redwood, the main question turned to how many votes would be enough. Although the election under the old leadership rules required a clear majority plus fifteen per cent of the total vote, Major revealed in his memoirs that he wrote “215” on a scrap of paper and sealed it in an envelope. This was the minimum number of votes he set himself for victory, anything less and he would resign as Prime Minister.

At 5.15 in the afternoon, Sir Marcus Fox, Chairman of the 1922 Backbench Committee, telephoned the candidates with the results. Redwood had secured 89 votes and Major had received 218, three more than the benchmark he had set himself. However, 22 MPs, over one third of the Parliamentary Party had abstained or spoilt their ballot paper – stark evidence that whilst the battle for the leadership was over, the war for the direction of the Party was still raging. Major commented in his memoirs that the result was, “Not enough really, but three votes too many to allow me to walk away”.

Major’s re-election had implications for the careers of two of the Party’s most noteworthy ministers. It saw the end of Michael Heseltine’s long standing prospects of becoming Prime Minister and the stranguulation of Michael Portillo’s promising one. Heseltine and Portillo were likely beneficiaries had Major fallen, but Portillo’s hesitation at the crucial moment allowed Redwood to leapfrog him as the ideological leader of the Right. As Portillo became the most notable casualty of the 1997 election, Redwood successfully raised his own profile to the extent that he was confident enough to run again for leader after the 1997 election, securing more votes than his ideological soul mates, Michael Howard and Peter Lilley. Meanwhile, Heseltine accepted, with the leadership issue settled until the election, his last chance of becoming Prime Minister had passed by. He contented himself with the post of Deputy Prime Minister in Major’s reshuffle, which saw Lang promoted to President of the Board of Trade, Cranborne appointed Leader of the Lords. In one of politics curious ironies, Redwood’s successor at the Welsh Office was William Hague, who would succeed Major as leader two years later.

A decade on, how can we judge Major’s doughty act? His re-election achieved its goal of removing the imminent threat of a leadership challenge, enabling Major to lead the Party into the general election. However, it did nothing to stifle critics on both sides of a European debate that had caused a division too deep within the party to be resolved with a change of leader. Nor did it remove the stain of defeat, division, and crisis management that had covered the party over the years. Ultimately, it was a hollow victory which could do nothing to stave off the party’s worst election result for a century. As Major returned to work following his re-election, he may have contemplated the words of the Duke of Wellington, next to a battle lost, the greatest misery is a battle gained.

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coalition government ushered in a new age of political consensus based around a managed economy and an expanded welfare state.2

What both sides in the debate about the post 1945 inheritance have in common is a belief that Labour was elected on a wave of popular radicalism. However this contention has been challenged by more recent contributions to the historiography of the period.3

Fielding argues that disillusionment with the Conservatives was a major factor in explaining Labour’s victory in 1945, he contends that this was primarily the result of the Conservatives prevarication over the Beveridge report. Fielding downplays the importance of other issues, in particular he concludes that foreign policy ‘never generated much interest’ during the election campaign: ‘the identity of the ‘guilty men’ was never much of an issue.’4

In fact, the foreign policy record of the pre-war Government was an issue during the 1945 election. More significantly, the perceived failures of the Government had been a key factor in shaping public opinion in the period immediately following the retreat from Dunkirk. A version of events was quickly established that was to prove disastrous for the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party. At the heart of this process was a highly influential, left wing denouncement of the pre-war Government published under the title Guilty Men. The book’s cen-
tral argument, that a Government of the ‘old guard’ had led an ill equipped country to the brink of disaster, became the established view. That Winston Churchill, the main critic of appeasement, became Prime Minister on May 10 1940, paradoxically, only helped to reinforce this view.

Given the damage the ‘Guilty Men’ thesis did to the Conservative Party it is not surprising that Churchill was to prove the Party’s main political asset during the 1945 election campaign. Rather than harming the Party’s electoral prospects during the campaign, as is often argued, Churchill’s entry in to the political fray revived Conservative fortunes. The ‘guilty men’ issue was a useful way for the Labour Party to counter Churchill’s popularity. Conservatives could not fully respond, a detailed defence of the party’s pre-war foreign policy record being impossible as long as Churchill was party leader.

Emphasising the ‘guilty men’ issue also helped Labour to ensure that popular support for Churchill did not necessarily translate into an intention to vote Conservative. In fact, it was widely believed that Churchill would remain Prime Minister whichever party won the election. The Conservatives had little time to convince the electorate that this was not the case. Given a longer campaign, opinion poll trends suggest that the Conservatives may well have been returned to power. However, an election held so soon after the end of hostilities ensured that the Conservatives were still identified with the pre-war administration. Thus the ghost of Neville Chamberlain continued to haunt the Conservative Party long after his body had been laid to rest.

II.

The birth of the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ and a new sense of social solidarity are usually considered to have been the main political consequences of the retreat from Dunkirk. However, the immediate impact of the retreat was to generate an atmosphere of recrimination that turned the public against the pre-war Government and swung the electoral pendulum decisively against the Conservative Party. The press quickly picked up on the retreating army’s sense of betrayal, which centred on the lack of RAF cover. Ministers who had been part of the pre-war administration were held responsible. The News Chronicle carried an editorial on June 5, which urged Churchill to ‘drop the failures. Every B.E.F. solider returned from Flanders... complains bitterly of one thing - lack of aeroplanes to support him and tackle the Nazi bomber. As this criticism spreads among his relatives and friends anger is rising against the former Government whose sloth and muddle put the British Army under this unfair strain.’ Other newspapers contained similar criticism, the Daily Mirror pleaded with Churchill to ‘please kick them out’.

### As Lord President, Chamberlain remained a key Minister in Churchill’s new administration. However, the press campaign against him destroyed what was left of his popularity. A survey conducted by Mass-Observation found that 56% of people wanted Chamberlain out of the Cabinet.

The vociferousness of the campaign against members of the pre-war administration may well have been intensified by a belief that action against them was imminent. Leo Amery wrote in his diary on June 5 that he felt Clement Davis must have inspired some of the pressure from the press. On June 6 the News Chronicle carried a story on its front page under the headline ‘resignations of Ministers are expected.’ The papers political correspondent went on to report that he had met ‘many MPs - they used to support Mr Chamberlain’s Administration through thick and thin - who confess now that it must have been guilty either of culpable negligence or a complete misunderstanding of Germany’s strength and intentions both before and since the war began. Either fault, they say, should be punished.’

As Lord President, Chamberlain remained a key Minister in Churchill’s new administration. However, the press campaign against him destroyed what was left of his popularity. A survey conducted by Mass-Observation found that 56% of people wanted Chamberlain out of the Cabinet. Chamberlain’s tormentors blamed Conservative MPs for protecting him and ensuring that he remained in the Government. In Tribune Aneurin Bevan argued that Chamberlain remained in Government because ‘as long as he is in the Government large numbers of sulky Tories will give grudging support to Mr Churchill’s Administration, and that if he and his old colleagues are removed they will break out into open revolt.’ In the New Statesman it was stated, on July 6, that ‘Mr. Churchill is clearly determined to resist all demands for Cabinet changes, and he can argue that if Mr. Chamberlain has become a symbol of disaster for the Left and in the U.S.A., he is equally a symbol of national unity for the Conservative Party.’ Such an opinion was not unfounded, the majority of Conservative backbenchers continued to support Chamberlain. 180 Conservative backbenchers packed an all-party meeting, assembled on July 3 to discuss changes in Government personnel, and expressed support for Chamberlain in no uncertain terms.

It was in this atmosphere of reprisal that the polemic Guilty Men came to be written. It was the work of three Beaverbrook journalists, Peter Howard, Michael Foot and Frank Owen, who published it anonymously under the name ‘Cato’. Foot later recalled that the
idea came when the three discussed the first batches of reports coming from the returning troops.\textsuperscript{10} They decided to co-author a short polemical book designed to drive the Chamberlainites from the new Cabinet.

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Although Howard, Foot and Owen were responding to the anger of the troops retreating from Dunkirk, they were also responsible for articulating a version of events which ensured that this anger was directed solely against the Conservative Party and the pre-war Government. The second chapter of the book began by stating: “This war broke out in 1939, but the genesis of our military misfortune must be dated at 1929.”\textsuperscript{11} Then followed the story of appeasement and the failure to rearm. The principal guilty men identified were Chamberlain, Baldwin and Macdonald. Halifax, Sir Samuel Hoare, Sir John Simon and Sir Kingsley Wood were also prominently featured. The effect of the book was almost instantaneous and the public mood became even more set against Chamberlain. In July 1940 Mass Observation found that 62% now wanted Chamberlain sacked from the Government while a B.I.P.O. survey found that 77% thought he should go.\textsuperscript{12}

The circumstances surrounding Guilty Men’s publication ensured that it achieved greater prominence than most left-wing polemics. It was originally banned by the main London wholesalers and Victor Gollancz was forced to distribute it ‘on sale or return’ a practice which the firm would have normally never agreed to. As a result, ‘people saw something unprecedented in the history of publishing - a book being sold at street-kerbs throughout London and the provinces’.\textsuperscript{13} The question of the book’s authorship also aroused interest. When he was asked how he survived on a Minister’s salary, Beaverbrook replied: ‘Ah, but I’ve always got my royalties from Guilty Men.’\textsuperscript{14} All this extra publicity added to the popularity of the book, it quickly sold 200,000 copies and was reprinted at least seven times in July 1940, its first month in print.\textsuperscript{15}

III.

Rather than being quickly forgotten after Dunkirk, the attack on pre-war Conservative foreign and defence policy continued unabated throughout the war. Guilty Men was only the first of a series of books published by Victor Gollancz as part of the ‘Victory’ series. Michael Foot, writing as ‘Cassius’, contributed The Trial of Mussolini in 1943. Foot argued that the appeasers shared Mussolini’s guilt. The book sold almost 150,000 copies and was dramatised for political groups and dramatic societies to stage.\textsuperscript{16} Another successful addition to the series was Tom Wintringham’s Your MP, a ferocious attack on the appeasement voting record of Conservative and National Liberal members of Parliament. The book caused the greatest furor since Guilty Men itself and sold over 200,000 within a few weeks of its publication.\textsuperscript{17} One of the MPs mentioned made an angry attack against it at a constituency meeting, as a member of a public reported to Gollancz, ‘he said it was a pack of lies, half truths, misstatements, and could prove so by Hansards (sic.), and he also called Mr Victor Gollancz a traitor and a jail bird, and would like to know where he gets all the paper to print his books’.\textsuperscript{18}

The Gollancz books certainly achieved their desired effect. In 1944 Tom Harrison wrote in a post-script to an article in the Political Quarterly entitled: ‘Who’ll Win?’ that: ‘if any Tory wants a shaking go and see the new Ronnie Waldman film “Guess What”, and hear what happens when Baldwin appears in the Coronation procession.’\textsuperscript{19}

The only counter to the Gollancz books was provided by Quintin Hogg in his own polemic The Left Was Never Right, published in June 1945. Hogg later wrote that he took the view that the Gollancz books were ‘morally wicked, unpatriotic and factually incorrect. The Left Was Never Right was an attempt to set the record straight and to establish that unpreparedness before the war was largely the consequence of the policies of the parties of the Left.’\textsuperscript{20}

In his polemic Hogg argued that the ‘Victory’ series had an explicit party political agenda: “If there be such a thing as a High Command among the Left, it is evident that the order has gone forth that the word ‘Munich’ should become a legend, a battlecry, or scalping knife for Tories, anything but a subject for sober reflection… If the people do not want Socialism they must be misled into voting Socialist by a side issue - and the side issue selected is the series of events which had their culmination in the last days of September and he first days of October 1938… To be a member of the party of Churchill and Eden is to be a Man of Munich, and to be a Man of Munich is to commit political suicide.”\textsuperscript{21}

Although, as Hogg later recalled, The Left Was Never Right was ‘a success’, he concluded that: “it was too little too late to counteract the impression made by the earlier Gollancz publications.”\textsuperscript{22} The Conservative MP and Evening Standard critic Beverly Baxter, in a review of Hogg’s book, expressed the same view at the time. Baxter had himself been the subject of the Gollancz book Brendan and Beverly. In his review, Baxter also revealed the reluctance of Conservatives to provide a defence of the Party’s pre-war foreign and
defence policy record: ‘Quintin Hogg did not want to write this book. On more than one occasion a number of us discussed the necessity of a reply to the Gollancz series and each felt disinclined. In the end a reply had to be made and Quintin took on the task.’

IV.

Accounts of the 1945 election have downplayed the importance of the ‘Guilty Men’ charge during the campaign. However, an analysis of the press, party literature and that of individual candidates reveals that the Conservative pre-war foreign and defence policy was actually a major issue.

The collapse of the wartime coalition and the formation of Churchill’s caretaker Government gave fresh impetus to the ‘Guilty Men’ attack as many of the ‘old guard’ were brought back into Government. Tribune did not have any difficulty in finding new members of the Government whose record was open to ridicule. ‘The War Office’ it mused ‘provides the starry-eyed wonder of the new administration. Sir James Grigg remains as out of touch as ever with the popular mood and the needs of modern armies. He is assisted by Lord Croft, friend of Franco… and by Major Petherick, another of Chamberlain’s “friends” who stood by him and voted for Munich and against the formation of the National Government under Churchill in the crisis of 1940… Another revealing appointment is that of the Lord Dunglass as Under-Secretary to Mr Eden… Dunglass was Chamberlain’s Parliamentary Private Secretary during the Munich appeasement period and the subsequent period of “wait and see” which came to an abrupt end in 1940. Dunglass voted for his chief with touching loyalty.’

Press attacks were not confined to Labour supporting papers. The News Chronicle, a Liberal paper, also attacked the Conservative Party’s pre-war record. On Election Day itself the paper’s editorial sought to demonstrate that a vote for the Conservative Party was still a vote for Chamberlain

“Tribune was not alone on picking up on the record of new members of the administration. In the pages of the Daily Herald Michael Foot also attacked the new members of the Government including Leslie Hore-Belisha, the new Minister for National Insurance and Foot’s opponent in the constituency of Plymouth Davenport. Foot argued that those who had nearly led Britain to disaster now ‘emerge waving Chamberlain’s banner of “Business as Usual”… Mr Hore-Belisha with his medal from Mussolini pinned to his breast; Mr Ernest Brown who voted for every infamy from Munken to Munich; Sir John Anderson, Chamberlain’s choice; Simon, Hirohito’s apologist; these and all the others.’

Press attacks were not confined to Labour supporting papers. The News Chronicle, a Liberal paper, also attacked the Conservative Party’s pre-war record. On Election Day itself the paper’s editorial sought to demonstrate that a vote for the Conservative Party was still a vote for Chamberlain. ‘The bulk of the Government consists of men who loyally supported the disastrous policies of the Chamberlain Government right up to the very end. They included men who were notorious in their opposition to Mr Churchill himself when he was
striving to arouse the country to its mortal peril.’

Throughout the war the Labour leadership avoided the ‘Guilty Men’ issue. During a Commons debate in July 1941 Ernest Bevin stated that ‘I do not think it is any good crying about the past or blaming anybody. For instance, if anybody asks me who was responsible for the British

In some cases candidates directly accused the Conservatives of being pro-fascist before the war. In Bradford-North the Labour candidate, Mrs M.E. Nichol’s Address argued that ‘leading Conservatives found it convenient to be most friendly to the Fascist Governments of Germany, Italy and Spain’

policy leading up to the war, I will, as a Labour man myself, make a confession as say “all of us.”’24 However, once the Wartime coalition was dismantled Bevin changed his tune. Mass-Observation reports from the election campaign show that the Labour leadership had jumped on the ‘Guilty Men’ bandwagon. In a speech at Fulham Town Hall on June 19, Bevin had much to say about the Conservatives pre-war record. An observer noted Bevin’s argument that ‘we waited till Germany was in a position to rearm and defy the whole lot of us. We gave Hitler better terms than we ever gave to the Weimar Republic - an unforgivable thing. We held Russia at bay for more than twenty years. Raided Arcos and did everything to make that great county suspicious. We sent a Foreign Secretary to see Ribbentrop and a Foreign Office clerk to see Joseph Stalin! (cry of shame from all over hall.) (sic.) The same thing will happen again if the vested interests get back in power.’

During the campaign the Labour Party issued a pamphlet entitled The Guilty Party. It began by arguing that ‘the Tories are wriggling to evade the blame for the parlous state of our national defences before the war. They have guilty consciences. Their negligence left the country without adequate arms and without strong allies.’ The Conservatives responded with a pamphlet of their own entitled Guilty Men? It followed the same line as Quintin Hogg’s book in attacking Labour’s pre-war record and listed examples of Labour MP voting against rearmament measures culminating in Attlee’s opposition to the Conscription Bill of April 1939.

The Election Addresses issued by individual Labour candidates also indicate the importance of the ‘Guilty Men’ issue to the Labour Party during the election campaign. Although, candidates often used a common source for these addresses, they still varied enough to give a good idea of the importance individual candidates attached to issues. Given the fact that Election Addresses tend to concentrate on a party’s programme for office, it is even more surprising that such a high proportion of Labour addresses touch on the ‘Guilty Men’ issue.

In some cases candidates directly accused the Conservatives of being pro-fascist before the war. In Bradford-North the Labour candidate, Mrs M.E. Nichol’s Address argued that ‘leading Conservatives found it convenient to be most friendly to the Fascist Governments of Germany, Italy and Spain… Sir Thomas Moore (Tory MP for Aye Boroughs)... on April 25th 1934, signed a newspaper article entitled “The Blackshirts have what the Conservatives need.”’ In Warwick, the Labour Candidate Donald Chestworth made an even more direct attack. ‘Too many of the Conservative Party’, his Address stated, ‘made the annual pilgrimage to the Nazi Party Conference at Nuremberg, and encouraged the growth of Fascism.’

A common tactic of candidates was to quote Churchill against his own party. Many Addresses bore the same quotation from Churchill on the back page: ‘the responsibility must rest with those who have the undisputed control of our political affairs. They neither prevented Germany from rearming not did they rearm themselves in time.’

Another common theme was for Labour candidates to point to their Conservative opponents’ support for Chamberlain’s Premiership. For example, in Hull North-East, R.W.G. Mackay’s Address stated that ‘by voting Conservative… you are not voting for Mr Churchill (he is the Tory candidate for Woodford); you are voting for the Conservative candidate, Sir Lambert Ward, who as a Conservative solidly supported Mr Chamberlain right up to May 1940, and was opposed to the policy of Mr Churchill during the years 1935 to 1939.’ Related to this point was the suggestion that the Conservatives might get rid of Churchill as soon as the election was won so the ‘old guard’ could gain control. For example, on the Isle of Wight, Colonel William James Miller’s Address argued that ‘the Tories have not changed. They exploit Churchill today; they will throw him overboard tomorrow.’

Of the 371 Election Address of Labour Candidates issued during the 1945 election campaign held in the Archive of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, 149 (40.2%) mention the failure of pre-war Conservative foreign and/or defence policy, compared to 222 (59.8%) which did not. However, most Addresses that do not mention the ‘Guilty Men’ issue were concerned solely with Labour’s programme for office. Candidates often dealt with other issues in other publications such as tabloid newspaper style newsletters, many of which mentioned ‘Guilty Men.’

Many historians have concluded that the negative tone Churchill adopted during the 1945 election campaign damaged the Conservative Party’s prospects. However, the evidence suggests that Churchill was the only real electoral asset that Party possessed and his
entry into the political fray had an immediate positive impact on their prospects. In his first election broadcast on June 4 Churchill used the arguments of F.A. Hayek’s book *The Road to Serfdom* as the basis of an attack on Labour’s programme. He declared that ‘a socialist policy is abhorrent to the British ideas of freedom. Although it is now put forward in the main by people who have a good grounding in the Liberalism and Radicalism of the early part of this century, there can be no doubt that Socialism is inseparably intertwined with Totalitarianism and the abject worship of the state. It is not alone that property, in all its forms, is struck at, but that liberty, in all its forms, is challenged by the fundamental conceptions of Socialism… No Socialist Government conducting the entire life and industry of the country could afford to allow free, sharp, or violently worded expressions of public discontent. They would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo.’  

Although there is evidence from Mass Observation that voters were shocked by Churchill’s argument, polls taken after the speech show a marked improvement in Conservative support. Before the broadcast, on May 26, a Gallup poll gave Labour a lead of 16%; on June 18 Gallup found this lead had been reduced to 9%. A Gallup poll on July 4 found Labour’s lead had been reduced to 6%. Mass Observation found loyalty to Churchill to be the most frequently stated reason for voting Conservative. Yet as Churchill had been the most consistent opponent of appeasement and had lead a coalition Government since becoming Prime Minister, he was not fully identified with the Conservative Party in the public mind. It is clear that the electorate was not yet ready for a return to normal peacetime party politics and that many believed Churchill would remain Prime Minister whatever the election result. The Conservatives felt it necessary to dedicate their final election broadcast to explaining that people had to vote Conservative is they wanted Churchill to continue as Prime Minister.

**Conclusion**

The result of the 1945 election came as a surprise to many, even in the Labour leadership. Both Attlee and Morrison thought the best the Party could do was reduce the Conservative majority to about 40 seats. In the event, Labour won a landslide victory, winning 393 seats, with 47.8% of the vote while the Conservatives won just 213 seats with 39.8% of the vote. In fact the Conservatives had done much better than pollsters were predicting only a couple of months before the election. Churchill’s entry into the political fray effectively saved the party from annihilation. In truth the Conservatives had lost the election as early as the summer of 1940. The retreat from Dunkirk was as disastrous to the reputation of the Conservative Party as the expulsion of the pound from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism was to prove 52 years later. The years that followed the publication of *Guilty Men* consolidated the view that the foreign and defence policy of the Chamberlain Government had led Britain to the brink of disaster.

**That Conservative support revived during the 1945 campaign itself suggests that identification of the party with Churchill was an important factor in restoring the party’s electoral fortunes**

How firmly this view of the Chamberlain Government had been embedded into the national consciousness can be seen by the way only simple allusions to it had to be made by 1945 in order to summon up a set view of the past. The Election Address of Sir William Jowitt, the MP for Ashton-Under-Lyne, only had to piece together a number of phrases in order to summon up a picture of the pre-war years: ‘recall the awful pre-war mess the Tories had made of things… Think of “Munich”; appeasement of Hitler; shortage of war weapons; hatred of Russia…’

That the Conservatives pre-war record remained a political issue throughout the war years is of significance beyond the part it played in the 1945 election result. If the vote in 1945 was more anti-Conservative than pro-Labour this may be a factor in explaining why Labour’s huge electoral majority was swept away in just six years. While many historians have argued that the Conservative Party had to reconcile itself with the ‘Attlee Settlement’ in order to return to government, others have increasingly questioned the view that Labour’s election in 1945 initiated a period of consensus on economic and social policy. That Conservative support revived during the 1945 campaign itself suggests that identification of the party with Churchill was an important factor in restoring the party’s electoral fortunes. The party’s electoral strategy after 1945 focused on winning over floating middle-class voters in the South and South-East by attacking the Labour Government policies on the grounds that they led to austerity, waste and government control. Internal party research suggested that the profile of these floating voters was very similar to Liberal ones. As E.H.H. Green has argued, this encouraged the Conservatives to attempt to reassemble the ‘anti-Socialist’ coalition that had been the basis of Baldwin’s pre-war electoral success. Indeed, the explicitly ideological content of Conservative rhetoric continued after the 1945 defeat and figured in the 1951 campaign that returned the Conservatives to power. As Green notes ‘it is essential to remember that the Conservative leitmotif in
1950-1 was “Set the People Free”, not the welfare state and the mixed economy are safe in our hands.”

That fundamental ideological divisions remained after 1945 and continued to form the basis of electoral competition may well be in part because the result of the 1945 election was not as conclusive as has been suggested. It was as much a defeat for the ghost of Neville Chamberlain as it was a victory for radical change.

1 Angus Calder: The People’s War: Britain 1939-45, 1971; see also Ralph Miliband: Parliamentary Socialism: A study in the politics of Labour, 1981.
2 Paul Addison: The Road to 1945: British politics and the Second World War, revised edition, 1994; see also, for example, Peter Hennessy: Never Again: Britain 1945-51, 1992.
4 Ibid.
7 The New Statesman and Nation, 13/7/1940.
8 Ibid., 6/7/1940.
9 Paul Addison: The Road to 1945.
12 Paul Addison: Op Cit.
16 Sheila Hodges: Op Cit.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Tom Harrison; ‘Who’ll Win’, Political Quarterly, 1944.
20 Lord Hailsham: A Sparrows Flight.
21 Quintin Hoog: The Left Was Never Right, 1945.
22 Lord Hailsham: Op Cit.
23 The Evening Standard, 1/6/1945.
24 House of Commons Debates, 29/7/1941, Vol. 373, col. 1362.
26 See, for example, Kevin Jefferys: The Churchill coalition and wartime politics, 1940-1945, 1990.
27 Quoted in The Times, 5/6/1945.
28 Paul Addison: Op Cit., p.266.
29 Kevin Jefferys: Op Cit.
This new book by a former Daily Mail leader writer offers a right-wing, polemical history of modern state-sponsored social services. Its overall conclusion is a simple one: ‘The welfare state has caused tens of thousands of people to live deprived and even depraved lives, and has undermined the very decency and kindness which first inspired it.’

There are chapters on all the main features of the modern welfare state, including the NHS, universal schooling and housing. Each argues that earlier private provision, especially during the nineteenth century, was better than is generally realised and that services today would be much better still – and the country as a whole much richer – had the state avoided the temptation to take over. The NHS is blamed for Britain’s falling position in international healthcare comparisons and the benefits system is blamed for the decline in traditional family structures and a rise in unemployment. Even the state pension does not escape: pensioners and society in general would, it is argued, ‘be better off today if the state pension had never been created’.

Keith Joseph used to criticise the ratchet effect in post-war politics. He said that real progress would come only when Conservative Governments stopped consolidating the welfare state and started to provide a genuine alternative to the post-war consensus. James Bartholomew’s book is based on a similar analysis, but it implies that the damage started long before Beveridge and that the ratchet has yet to be reversed in any meaningful way.

Among the most rewarding aspects of the book are the historical reminders on issues such as the past role of friendly societies, which undoubtedly kept closer tabs and were more responsive than a national, monolithic benefits system ever could be. The sections on the NHS and state education similarly stress the rapid, but all too forgotten, improvements in non-state services during the nineteenth century. And the chapter on taxation recalls the way in which large numbers of people on lower incomes, including those living below standard measurements of poverty, have been sucked relentlessly into paying income tax.

Historical information of this type usefully illustrates the way in which so many social policy debates are cyclical, rather than linear. Issues such as the effects of large-scale means testing, the impact on the labour market of in-work benefits and whether poverty is best defined in an absolute or a relative way are old ones and the balance of opinion shifts endlessly. For example, there is a clear connection between the Speenhamland system (a form of in-work benefit begun in the eighteenth century) and Gordon Brown’s tax credits, just as there is between the criticisms of Speenhamland in the 1834 report from the Royal Commission on the Poor Law and Bartholomew’s attack on modern tax credits.

It is also difficult to fault the contemporary evidence in the book, even if some of the sources are second-hand newspaper accounts. Few would doubt that healthcare is better in many other advanced countries than in Britain, that the state education system is currently overburdened with red tape and that family breakdown has served young people badly.

But there are problems with the accompanying analysis. In many respects, the text resembles a newspaper leader of the sort Bartholomew used to write: it is authoritative in tone, spirited and factually accurate, but also incomplete, unsatisfying and best taken with a pinch of salt. When reading the book, I was reminded of Viz magazine’s ironic take on people who think the grass was always greener in the past – they are said to have published a cover which claimed the magazine was ‘More expensive and not as funny as it used to be’. It could be that Bartholomew wholeheartedly believes every word that he has written, but many readers are likely to be left wondering whether the truth is really quite so black and white. There are three areas in particular where...
the means testing of private services which occurred before the Second World War is more acceptable than modern means testing by the state. Bartholomew writes approvingly of the way in which doctors often provided their services for free to poorer families and the way in which some schools charged more to richer families, but he is highly critical of more modern means tests. Such a position is not indefensible, but little attempt is made to explain it.

Thirdly, Bartholomew is silent on why even the most right-wing leading politicians of the latter half of the twentieth century willingly expanded the welfare state. Enoch Powell presided over a massive programme of building new NHS hospitals; Mrs Thatcher allowed more grammar schools to be turned into comprehensives during her time as Secretary of State for Education and Science than anyone else; and Keith Joseph established the world’s first modern in-work benefit, the Family Income Supplement. Even after the Conservative victory in 1979, no major aspect of the welfare state was completely reversed. A more convincing wholesale attack would explain why this was so.

The biggest flaw, however, is that it remains unclear how Britain could move from where it is to where Bartholomew wants it to be. Even though it is 360 pages long, the book sits rather uneasily between the sort of blue-sky thinking that characterises many think-tank pamphlets and the more detailed programmes that politicians need to win power.

The difficulty of reform is hinted at in the book’s final chapter but, to be truly persuasive, there needs to be more information on exactly how services could be privatised and how benefits could be slashed. It is one thing to say that the state pension should never have been invented, but quite another to say that the millions of people with accrued rights to state-funded contributory pension schemes should lose them. Similarly, it is easy to hold Hong Kong up as a paragon of virtue for keeping its public sector small, but they have not had to dismantle an enormous public sector established by successive democratic governments in order to get to where they are.

**The diaries of a social democrat**

**Mark Garnett**, a regular contributor to the *Conservative History Journal* reviews Giles Radice’s *Diaries 1980–2001: From Political Disaster to Election Triumph*.

The publication of a new political diary is usually a cause for celebration among historians. These books can provide a second draft of history – an intermediate stage between the partial information of journalists and the sacred testimony of official documents. With rare exceptions, they are much more useful than political memoirs. Even diarists who fell short of cabinet rank, like Clark, Currie and Brandreth, can infuse the recent past with life and colour. When an ‘insider’ like Richard Crossman spares time to record his daily activities, the memory of ministerial misdeeds is swept away in a rush of gratitude for his indiscretion.

Giles (now Lord) Radice was a front-bench Labour spokesman in the 1980s, and later a long-serving select committee Chairman. These formal roles made him at least a semi-insider. But his main contribution to political life in the period covered by the diaries was his role in the emergence of ‘New’ Labour. With justice, he can claim to have been a Blairite before Blair, having argued for ‘modernisation’ in his party ever since its disastrous 1983 defeat. While many observers recognised the early promise of Tony Blair, Radice was an important champion of the future leader, who was elected in 1983 for a neighbouring constituency.

These ingredients should have been enough to make this diary a crucial primary source for Labour’s transformation, even if Radice had not been an accomplished writer. But while the finished product is undoubtedly important, it does not belong in the first rank of its genre, either in content or style. There are very few memorable moments. The best passage is a personal reflection, on hearing of his father’s death. ‘I smell again the starch in my father’s shirt as he took me in his arms when I was a small boy in India’, Radice writes. But the prose hardly ever approaches this height. Indeed, the wonder is that such an agreeable man could have made himself appear so wooden. This effect is enhanced by his irritating habit of referring to himself in the third person, but it is also unfortunate that he adopts the present tense throughout. As a result, the style is that of a gossip-columnist trying to write a leading article for the Guardian.

The real value of Radice’s diary is almost certainly unintended by its author. Before he
leaves the Commons for the Lords at the 2001 general election, his misgivings about the ‘New’ Labour project are easily discerned. He even starts referring to his old friend as ‘Tony Blair’. This coded coldness was no more than the prime minister deserved at Radice’s hands. Like the Ashdown diary, this account underlines the extent to which Blair allows any delight in spontaneous human association to be smothered by brutal calculation. He quickly realised that he could count on Radice’s loyalty in the lobbies, even when casual promises of ministerial office were betrayed without a murmur of regret. With Blair, the desire to court enemies and take friends for granted is not an enforced tactical trait; the diaries of friends and foes alike show that it is an ingrained personal characteristic.

If Radice’s portrait of Blair is unconsciously repellent, his account of the ‘modernisation’ drive is no more appealing. Like Blair, Radice chose to join Labour rather than being born into the movement. Blair’s choice is difficult to understand, though initially his personal ambition was probably matched by a vague desire to make the world a better place. Radice has retained enough of his idealism to pass occasional comment on Blair’s empty rhetoric. But his own drive for modernisation was dominated by tribal considerations. Unlike his friend John Smith, he wanted Labour to get back into office regardless of the cost. He was an early champion of the focus group, believing that the party should devise policies to appease its natural enemies in the Home Counties. The impression that, at heart, Radice belongs with such people rather than with his former constituents in Durham is reinforced by his salivating accounts of dinner parties and official banquets. The claim that socialists should be self-denying is one of the cheapest of political jibes, but Radice’s regular helpings of haute cuisine almost give it new substance.

Of course, the word ‘socialist’ was never elastic enough to include someone like Giles Radice. He still regards himself as a social democratic follower of Anthony Crosland, and implies that he only rejected the SDP because of concern for his Thatcherite past. As a result, if the Conservative Party ever manages to overcome its unfortunate image, the first-hand accounts should be more animatced than the testimony of any Radice of the diary is difficult to distinguish in a meaningful way from a pro-European Conservative with vague ‘One Nation’ inclinations on domestic policy. Like Blair, his dislike of the Conservative Party is institutional, rather than ideological; their shared mission is not to destroy something called ‘Conservatism’, but to make that party irrelevant. The difference between the respective positions of Labour and the Conservatives today is that the former has made a deliberate choice to reject the whole of its history; the latter only has to reach back to its pre-Thatcherite past. As a result, if the Conservative Party ever manages to overcome its unfortunate image, the first-hand accounts should be more animatced than the testimony of any

The rise and fall of Reginald Maudling
Ronald Porter, reviews Reggie by Lewis Baston

Poor old Reggie. His political career, for most of the time, was a huge success. Both Churchill and Eden thought highly of him. On two occasions he nearly ended up Leader of the Conservative Party. He had a happy family life and an adoring, pushy and attractive wife. He was a very popular figure on all sides in the House. He had tremendous personal charm and very few political enemies. And yet .....Well, the Final Curtain, when it came down, was pitiful and painful to behold. He died in a Public Ward of a strike – beleaguered National Health Hospital, in relative poverty and obscurity at the early age of 61. He was a shaking, shambling, doubly incontinent, played out, worn out, chronic alcoholic of the first order, completely and utterly deserted by the Great and the Good and most of his so-called friends. As Lewis Baston makes clear in his excellent biography, Reggie, Our Hero conformed to the Shakespearean idea of tragedy as set out by the late Professor A.G. Bradley. It can be summed up as the rise of a man from obscurity to great heights, yet ultimately brought down by a serious fault in his own character. Unfortunately, in Reggie’s case, there was not one fault but several.

Lewis Baston is relatively young. He was not around when Maudling was a leading figure on the political stage in the fifties and sixties. He came across Maudling when doing research for his first book, appropriately entitled, because of the Maudling connection, Sleaze: The State of Britain. As that book deals admirably with political, financial and sexual corruption in public life in the latter part of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that Baston would, at some point, bump right into the tall and jovial figure of Reggie. After all, Sleaze and Maudling were very close allies for many years. And as Baston points out in his meticulously well-researched book on Maudling, Our Hero had been fiddling and diddling from an early age.

Of course, Baston gets a couple of things wrong with Maudling. But very few. The main thrust of his story is brilliantly told and fascinating to read. He goes into considerable detail in the public life of Reggie. He also peeps behind the curtains and brings us tasty morsels about Reggie’s personal and financial affairs. Nothing is left unexamined by our dazzling Detective Chief Superintendent, Lewis Baston.

Reginald Maudling [1917-1979] was born in London and
was the son of an actuary. He was DEFINITELY NOT, as Baston foolishly claims in the book, from an Upper Middle Class background. That is one of the few errors which Baston makes in the book. No, Maudling did not come from the grand and moneyed world of the Forsytes or the Macmillans. He was from the rung immediately below them, the professional middle class though not as low down as his lower – middle class arch enemy, Maggie Thatcher. But he was by no means from the top of the middle class, either. Maudling went to a very good public school, Merchant Taylors. But it was never looked on as a really ‘top’ Clarendon School like Eton, Harrow or Winchester. It seems an unlikely choice of school for a supposed Forsyte. And Stoke Newington was an equally odd choice, by Maudling Senior, for the matrimonial home.

From Merchant Taylors, Reggie went to Merton College, Oxford. He got a First in philosophy. It was about that time that he started on the slippery slopes of wrong-doing with the odd bit of fiddling with his grants and scholarships, both at Oxford and later on as a student at the Bar. Worse was to follow. In the latter part of the 1930s he met and fell in love with Beryl Laverick, a bit part actress and dancer. On reading Baston’s book, I am convinced she was the wrong sort of woman for Reggie. And I take comfort from the fact that his mother thought so, too. She never spoke to him again. Beryl The Peril was a snobbish, vain and grasping woman who spurred Reggie on to temporary wealth, fame and ultimately the scrap heap. Of all to temporary wealth, fame and the odd fortunes the entire bill. He was to foot the entire bill. He was to prove ‘a god-send’ when Reggie was hard up in Opposition a decade later. Poulsoun realised that Maudling had a thirst for money and booze. Maudling needed cash to finance his drinking and the high life with Beryl – both were James Bond fans. They would add lustre to Poulsoun’s enterprises by opening doors and clothing him in respectability.

During the war Maudling served in the RAF, at a number of important desk jobs because of poor eyesight. After the war he joined the Conservative Research Department and became a trusted and highly thought of friend to such luminaries as Enoch Powell, Rab Butler and Iain Macleod. He was a much sought after speech writer for Churchill and Eden. There seemed no stopping him.

A short while after entering Parliament, he became a minister. But then he also started taking a few wrong turns. His basic fault was that, as in the case of Beryl The Peril, he was a very poor judge of character. For instance, he chose Frederick Bennett as his Parliamentary Private Secretary. Normally, a PPS is a rising star in his own right. But this was never the case with Bennett. Yet because Bennett was from the Kleinwort – Benson merchant banking dynasty he had endless City contacts who were helpful to Maudling as he never had much in the way of cash. And Maudling loved City luncheons which his PPS provided in spades.

Worse was to follow when Maudling met Poulsoun at a political gathering in the 1950s. The Maudlings and the Poulsouns got on so well together that fatal night, that they all ended up at the Dorchester with Poulsoun footing the entire bill. He was to
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