

## CHAPTER I

*Conservative Party Crisis*  
*Tory Propaganda, Imagist Poetics*

**Conservative Party Crisis**

The Conservative Party, for many centuries the dominant force in British politics, fell into decline in the 1830s. The heavy defeat sustained in the elections of 1832 reduced the Tory representation in the Commons to fewer than 150 seats (out of a total 658). Under Robert Peel's leadership, therefore, the Tories were forced to reach out beyond traditional Conservative boundaries. The Carlton Club, set up just before the elections of 1832, became, from 1835 onwards, the home of the party's election committee. Its aim was to achieve organisational coherence, and in this it was helped by the growth of Conservative associations throughout the country.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, pressed into making political concessions, the Tories embraced change – but reluctantly so, and only insofar as this change was, as the party's most distinguished leader, Benjamin Disraeli, was to put it in 1867, 'in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, the traditions of the people', not 'in deference to abstract principles and general doctrines'.<sup>2</sup> Under Disraeli, who took over as Leader of the Conservatives in 1868, the party sought to forge a strong alliance between the Crown, the landed aristocracy, and the lower classes. John Gorst, formerly Secretary of Metropolitan London and Westminster Conservative Association, was made party principal agent and put in charge of the organisation of the party. 'Hints for Candidates' were issued and Conservative delegations toured the country making the Tory case to new voters. Gorst's planning worked, and in the elections of 1874 the Tories gained a majority of 50.

Meanwhile, the Liberals were organising themselves too, setting up, in 1877, the National Liberal Federation, which sought to copy the efficient organisation of Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham Caucus.<sup>3</sup> The Federation provided a forum for the party base to voice their opinions and encouraged the formation of new Liberal associations, while the

new phenomenon of caucuses introduced disciplined control of the mass electorate and the manipulation of votes.<sup>4</sup> When the Third Reform Act of 1884 extended the franchise even further than the 1832 Reform Act to now add nearly two million new voters to the existing register of three million, it looked as though the Liberal party – with its Radical caucus, urban base, and support from the increasingly influential trade unions – would profit.

The Tories, however, were successful in organising themselves. In the wake of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, which set limits to expenditure during election campaigns, the Conservative Party was quick to recognise that the Act did not impose any limits on party spending that was not related to particular constituencies, and to grasp the role that fundraising and central organisation would therefore play in the future. They were able to recruit volunteers in the Primrose League (a quasi-romantic club set up in 1883) and the National Union, which became the structure through which the leadership directed the party. The Conservative landslide victories of 1895 and 1900 appeared to prove that the party had adapted well to new political realities. It now had a strong leader, Salisbury, who had foreseen the importance of propaganda and organisation and who – despite his staunch conservatism and contempt for mass democracy – recognised that it was crucial to appeal to the suburban middle classes.

When Salisbury resigned in 1902, the Tories therefore seemed to be in a strong position. Yet Britain's massive debt, overstretched imperialism, and changing social conditions – as well as a widening rift in the party between Tariff Reformers and Free Traders – made them unexpectedly vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> It was precisely in this precarious position that Salisbury's successor, Balfour, found the party. Balfour had never been a favourite among Conservative hardliners, who found him distanced and detached, when not disdainful. He was aloof, the beneficiary of nepotism (Salisbury was his uncle), and came across as overly intellectual in his speeches: as Leopold Maxse of the *National Review* complained, 'People ask themselves what is the use of all this marvellous sword-play, and the unrivalled dialectics.'<sup>6</sup>

This reputation did not help when, soon after taking over as Conservative leader in July 1902, Balfour was squeezed into making unpopular decisions.<sup>7</sup> When he repealed duties, he infuriated Tariff Reform Conservatives, notably Chamberlain, who organised other Protectionists into forming the powerful Tariff Reform League. But he did not properly embrace free market economics either – or at least not

to the laissez-faire Tories' satisfaction. By failing to rally round Tariff Reform, the Conservatives were left flailing and faction-ridden, and by stopping short of embracing free trade, they made it difficult for themselves to win elections.<sup>8</sup> To add to Balfour's woes, there was the scandal of 'Chinese slavery', when details of the use and abuse of Chinese indentured servants in South Africa spilled into the public domain. Working-class resentment at the Government's restrictions on the right of trade unions to organise strikes became a rallying point for the Labour Representation Committee, which struck a deal with the Liberals. Nonconformists were outraged by Balfour's policy of putting Anglican schools on the rates.<sup>9</sup> And, finally, it was leaked that a plan for Irish Home Rule was being prepared, leading to vociferous accusations that Balfour was betraying the Union.<sup>10</sup>

The 'Conservative Party crisis', as the historian E. H. H. Green memorably described this tumultuous period in the history of the party, reached its climax in the months following its disastrous performance at the 1906 General Election, which had paved the way for the Liberals' ascent to power under Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The Unionists lost 245 seats; Labour won 30; and the new House of Commons ended up with only 157 Conservative members, out of a total of 670, its lowest-ever level.<sup>11</sup> The Tories appeared unable to cope with the Liberals' mobilisation of the mass electorate. More ominously, the party split between Chamberlain's supporters and Balfourites widened even more and, inevitably, this further affected its ability to communicate a coherent message to the electorate. The leadership retained control of Central Office, but lost all authority over the more significant National Union – and therefore over the party. Despite these deep divisions, however, the Tories fared much better in the two elections of 1910. At the January election, they won 116 seats (or two short of the Liberals); in December, the balance remained unchanged. Still, though, and perhaps more than ever before, the party was divided.<sup>12</sup>

Tory grass-root discontent with the party leadership was aggravated when the new Liberal Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, began pushing for broad social, fiscal, and constitutional reforms. This assault on the status quo was interpreted as causally connected to the weakness of the Conservative Party's leaders, and, specifically, to their inability to devise – and propagate – a coherent strategy. In comparison to Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal administration of 1906, which was largely moderate, Asquith's 1908 cabinet pursued a radical programme.<sup>13</sup> Alongside fellow 'New Liberals', such as David Lloyd George (who replaced Asquith as Chancellor of

the Exchequer), Winston Churchill, Herbert Samuel, and Charles Masterman, Asquith pressed for sweeping reforms. These included proposals for old age pensions, health and unemployment insurance, school meals, increases in income and excise duties, taxes on cars, petrol and land, and a super-tax on incomes over £5,000. Tories were particularly horrified by Lloyd George's 1909 'People's Budget', which proposed a hiking up of redistributive taxation in an attempt to ease the burden of old-age pensions on public finances. The budget proceeded on the principle of 'unearned increment', which, as Green explains, 'allowed the State, acting on behalf of society, to appropriate wealth which had been wholly or mainly created by social factors for redistribution for the benefit of society'. This socialist idea of 'unearned increment' explains why so many Conservative candidates and commentators referred to the budget as 'socialist' or 'radical', and why the Tories who objected to it saw little difference between the Liberal and the Labour positions.<sup>14</sup>

But of all the reforms, the most contentious was the 1910 Parliament Bill to limit the Lords' powers to veto legislation. The Bill (which finally passed by Parliament as an Act in 1911) was the Liberals' response to the Lords' rejection of Lloyd George's 'People's Budget'. This was the first time the House of Lords had vetoed a budget in two centuries and the Liberals were determined to prevent the recurrence of the budget problems. The budget was eventually passed following the January 1910 election, which confirmed the Liberals' mandate, but the government saw an opportunity to press for constitutional reform; for this was their chance to push through with the entire Liberal programme. Discussions over constitutional reform were briefly suspended when Edward VII died in May 1910, so as to ensure that the new king, George V, ascended to the throne without any undue pressure on his constitutional powers. During this truce, there were secret discussions between the British parties, but to no avail. King George called for a second election, in December 1910, following which the Liberals (who retained control) were able to finally pass a Parliament Act removing the Lords' power to veto money bills. They now had the power to veto other public bills, but only for a maximum of two years. For many Conservatives, curbing the power of the 'ancient Chamber' was an attack on the founding principles of the British political system. Balfour's tactical incompetence in the handling of the Lords' veto enraged Tory hardliners and caused the party to splinter. This was a war between entrenched Tories – diehards or 'ditchers' – and those who favoured abstention – the 'hedgers'.<sup>15</sup>

***The Commentator***

As the mainstream period Tory press demonstrates, dissatisfaction with Balfour's leadership was deep and widespread. The *Quarterly Review*, though comparatively moderate in its criticism of the Tory executive, bemoaned the lack of direction and lamented the absence of 'definite' Conservative policies. One commentator found that the problem was that the Conservative leaders were not Conservative enough: 'in order to obtain the confidence of the country', it was argued, 'Conservative leaders must have a genuine belief in Conservatism'.<sup>16</sup> Another thought that, having lost its Conservative convictions under Balfour, the party had 'gained a reputation for lack of seriousness'.<sup>17</sup> *The Spectator* agreed, asserting that Balfour's party was missing a 'certain hardness of temperament', while the hard-line *National Review* was more outspoken, waging a 'Balfour must go' campaign.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the crisis, the short-lived Tory newspaper *The Commentator* was founded in May 1910 by a group of diehard Conservatives, with the explicit purpose of propagating 'real' Tory principles. Its cover promised 'Old Principles in a New Paper', and its opening editorial proclaimed that its primary aims were 'the advocacy and propagation of Conservative principles' and the 'exhaustive enumeration and criticism [of] the many ... causes operating detrimentally to the interests of the nation'.<sup>19</sup> *The Commentator* was vociferous in its critique of the party executive. Repeatedly, it made the case that the existing leaders had betrayed the Conservative base, and it consistently lamented that, as one editorial put it, 'we have the official party pulling in one direction and the rank and file of the party pulling in another'.<sup>20</sup> Right up to its final issue in June 1913, it was reminding Conservative voters that the party could be rescued only by 'a bold and unswerving advocacy of true Conservative principles'.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, *The Commentator* stood on the side of what the historian G. R. Searle has described as the 'Radical Right': Conservatives who subscribed to traditional Tory causes – Tariff Reform, Army and Navy reform, 'constructive' social reform, and preservation of Empire – but who saw the official Party as having betrayed authentic Tory principles.<sup>22</sup>

The electoral losses of 1906 and 1910, the rise of the Radicals, Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' and the constitutional crisis that this precipitated stoked a number of anxieties in the Tory ranks, many of whom were radicalised and formed splinter groups. Chief among these were the circle around Leopold Maxse's *National Review*; the Halsbury Club; those

who, in the name of ‘National Efficiency’, pioneered a national government of ‘first-rate men’, the primary aim of which would be to preserve the Empire; and the ‘Reveille’ group, which included the diehard Tory peer Willoughby de Broke and the scaremongering, xenophobic journalist Arnold White.<sup>23</sup> What all these radical Tory factions had in common was that they objected to the perceived defeatism of the leadership and demanded a more combative Toryism.

This was precisely the stance of *The Commentator*, which appears to have been from its outset closely connected to de Broke’s ‘Reveille’ group.<sup>24</sup> ‘Please do not imagine that this paper is published in the interests of the Conservative party’, an early editorial claimed:

We wish to draw a decided distinction between the views held by the ordinary Conservative member of Parliament and those he is compelled to adopt by the order of his official leaders in London. That party, in our opinion, has entirely misunderstood the feelings of the working classes and absolutely underrated their intelligence.

Perhaps after reading our remarks some of you may consider that we are Tories. Well, we do not object to the name when we remember that in the days when Tory principles prevailed, all classes in the country were happier and far more prosperous than they are at present.<sup>25</sup>

Like the ‘Reveille’ and the rest of the party’s Right wing, *The Commentator* claimed to be representing real Tory principles, and, moreover, to be the voice of the disenfranchised real Conservatives.

According to Searle, one distinguishing feature of the Edwardian Right was its assumption that ‘there existed vast numbers of “silent voters” and “little people” who were exasperated with the conventional system of politics, which ignored their interests and point of view’.<sup>26</sup> As an organ of the Radical Right, *The Commentator* had faith that working-class Conservatives could be won over if the party empowered them, and if it also provided them with proper leadership. ‘We are thoroughly convinced’, *The Commentator* claimed,

that this country is equipped with a powerful and sufficient army of Conservative supporters; but we deny that the finest army in the world can be of any real service if its generals, instead of confronting the enemy in accordance with the rules of ordinary warfare, persist not only in fraternising with the enemy, but in losing their followers in the shoals and quicksands into which they are perpetually leading them.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that the Conservative Party was ‘fraternising’ with the opposition was another view prevalent in Edwardian Right circles. Accordingly, the paper berated the party’s alleged ‘old policy of surrender’, and Balfour

was accused of betrayal, opportunism, and collusion when he tried to confer with the Liberals about the Opposition's proposed reforms and the vexed issue of changes in the House of Lords. 'Does Mr. Balfour imagine', *The Commentator* asked, 'that the divergent views represented by the various sections can be made to harmonise in any conceivable way with the doctrines of Conservatism?'<sup>28</sup> This attack on Balfour and the party executive extended to a critique of a widespread corruption allegedly poisoning British political life.<sup>29</sup> The suggestion that the two front benches were colluding against the electorate was the subject of Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton's *The Party System* (1910), and was a view fully endorsed by *The Commentator*, which also had the suspicion – again common in Tory Right circles – that the Tory press was somehow controlled by the executive and biased against real Conservatism.<sup>30</sup>

One of the earliest objectives of *The Commentator* was to gather support against Liberal education policies, including Lloyd George's push to make school attendance compulsory beyond the age of twelve. This would lead directly to 'tyranny', it argued: 'the children of our working population have been prevented from learning their future business [for] it is perfectly obvious that the majority of the children of our working classes are destined to rely on manual labour'.<sup>31</sup> Lloyd George's progressive tax reforms, which would increase redistributive taxation, and his party's demands for reform in the House of Lords were seen by the paper as signalling 'the inauguration of the Socialist regime'.<sup>32</sup> Reaching out to disaffected Tory voters, the newspaper hailed the Upper Chamber as the 'only barrier existing between you and tyranny', and working conservatives were warned against the 'Radical-Socialist-Irish ... conspiracy against the Constitution'.<sup>33</sup> True to its Tory Right leanings, the paper was also against free trade and in favour of Tariff Reform: 'the outward and visible signs of the effects of Free Trade in England', it maintained, 'can be observed in the closing of our iron furnaces, and the loss of an infinite number of industries which previously flourished in this country'.<sup>34</sup> *The Commentator* was also imperialistic, part of its objection to Socialism being that it 'threatened the destruction of the best interests of our country and Empire', but there is no sign of the xenophobia and outright bigotry that mar the writings of some of the 'Reveillés' (for example, Arnold White's).<sup>35</sup>

For all its polemics, and despite its pointed stance towards the party leadership, *The Commentator* backed the Conservative Party, making it clear from the first number that, 'In spite of all we have said against the action of the official Conservative party, we can assure you that the only way to rid yourselves of Radical tyranny is to support Conservative

candidates.<sup>36</sup> When Balfour finally resigned, on 8 November 1911, *The Commentator* showed a new confidence in the party, in line with the Reveille group, which actually disbanded to mark its support of his successor, Andrew Bonar Law.<sup>37</sup>

As well as criticising the party leadership and demanding a ‘hardening’ of Tory principles, *The Commentator* stressed the importance of organisation, of devising a cohesive Conservative set of principles, and, crucially, of communicating these to the public via an improved propaganda strategy. This is how an early editorial put it:

There can be no doubt that the party machinery requires complete overhauling ... The leaders of the party should be in much closer touch with the organisation, and the work of the various committees and sub-committees should be something more than the mere formality it is at present; some co-ordination of effort among the various societies is absolutely essential. Above all things we want a clear and defined policy without evasion, and stripped of these vague and intangible subtleties so dear to the philosophic soul.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, this emphasis on organisation and propaganda was by no means unique to *The Commentator*. It was, for example, also the stance of the *Quarterly Review*, which called for ‘clear and definite’ party programmes, warned against ‘vagueness and vacillation’, and asserted the usefulness of posters and catchwords as a means of political persuasion.<sup>39</sup> In fact, in the wake of the election of December 1910, the party itself was taking notice, appointing the former Chief Whip Aretas Akers-Douglas to reorganise its structure and improve its communications department.<sup>40</sup> No newspaper, however, put more emphasis on the creation and dissemination of ideology, and on the value of an effective communication strategy, than *The Commentator*. From its first issue and throughout its three-year existence, the paper kept calling attention to ‘the disastrous laxity of Conservative organisation’, taking it in its own hands to rally voters by producing and disseminating propaganda pamphlets and ‘manuals’ for Conservatives that presented ‘plain facts, expressed in simple language’.<sup>41</sup> This emphasis on clear expression, ‘plain language’, and ‘straightforward talks’, intended to counter the obfuscating rhetoric of the official party office, is a dominant and recurring theme in its columns.

According to *Commentator* Conservatives, the party ought to present the electorate with a ‘clear and defined policy’ because, it was announced in the first issue,

To go before them with a hundred and one suggestions ... is simply to court defeat. Without ... a defined policy, it is impossible to enthuse

the electorate, and especially when it is perfectly obvious that the leaders are irretrievably mixing themselves up with the politics of the other side.<sup>42</sup>

By ‘other side’, *The Commentator* meant the Liberals, ‘Socialists’, or ‘Radicals’ – terms often conflated in the Edwardian years and used interchangeably by the paper’s contributors.<sup>43</sup> While remaining critical of the Conservative Party organisation, the paper recognised that the ‘Socialists’ had an advantage over the Conservatives, which was down to their ‘methods of training’ – a point also made in the *Quarterly Review*.<sup>44</sup> If the Conservative Party was to be successful at elections, it needed to match the propaganda techniques of its opponents:

Any political speaker will tell you that the requirements of public, and especially outdoor, speaking have undergone considerable changes ... If we are to be put in the abject position of being taught by Socialists, it would seem that the first lesson we should learn is their methods of training their adherents in the way of exposing the vulnerable points in an opponent’s arguments.<sup>45</sup>

From then onwards, and consistently throughout its three years of circulation, *The Commentator* sought to address what it perceived as the Conservative Party’s major shortcomings, beginning with its lack of clear propaganda strategy.

At the forefront of this campaign for a better propaganda strategy for the Conservatives stood Hulme and Storer, both of whom were at this time involved in experimenting with poetic forms. Already, in ‘A Lecture on Modern Poetry’ in 1908, Hulme had called for a new ‘introspective’ and ‘visual’ poetry composed in *vers libre*, and soon he was to deliver his famous lecture ‘Romanticism and Classicism’, which crystallised his ideas regarding the composition of modern poetry.<sup>46</sup> Storer, who began rallying against rhythm and rhyme at the same time as Hulme, was about to formulate his own theory for ‘classical’ modernism.<sup>47</sup> Together, though not wittingly, Hulme and Storer initiated Imagism, the aesthetic doctrine formally launched by Ezra Pound and F. S. Flint in 1913, and considered by Eliot as the ‘*point de repère*’ of Anglophone literary modernism.<sup>48</sup>

*The Commentator* hosted all five of Hulme’s political essays. Although this has been almost completely overlooked, the context in which he formulated and communicated his politics is significant.<sup>49</sup> Hulme did not turn to politics because he ‘ran out of things to say ... about philosophy and art’ (as L. B. Williams claims), nor was he in his political essays simply ‘harking back to the “Chesterbelloc” debate that raged

through the pages of *The New Age* for much of the winter of 1907–8' (as Robert Ferguson argues).<sup>50</sup> Rather, declaring himself a 'Tory by disposition' (in November 1911) and a 'certain kind of Tory' (in April 1912), Hulme took a genuine interest in the events that unfolded following the 1910 elections, and engaged with a very topical debate: the future of the Conservative Party, and its loss of electoral appeal.<sup>51</sup> *The Commentator* also ran many articles by Storer, who started writing for the newspaper much earlier than Hulme; in fact, Hulme's essays closely follow those of Storer, both in print and in argument, which is why they can be read in tandem.

In accordance with the other *Commentator* Conservatives, Hulme and Storer stressed that existing Tory propaganda strategy was in need of reform. Highlighting the emotional nature of political conversion, they argued that Tory rhetoric ought to appeal to the electorate's instincts more directly – at a time when, in their literary writings, they and their early modernist associates were formulating a theory for 'direct instinctive' poetry that, as Pound put it, contained 'facts' that were 'swift and easy of transmission'.<sup>52</sup> A detailed reading of Hulme and Storer's political journalism reveals many ways in which their political essays intersect with their modernist poetics.

### Crowds and the Nature of Political Conversion

Storer joined *The Commentator* in July 1910 as a reviewer.<sup>53</sup> His first explicitly political article appeared seven months later, in January 1911. In it, he wrote:

People are not Conservatives or Socialists by the operation of rational processes, but from conviction, which is an instinctive silent thing. Arguments and reasons are merely means for advancing towards or preserving an end. Though it may seem at first glance a point of little importance that the English intellectuals are mainly, if not entirely, on the side opposed to Conservatism, consideration will show that though theirs is a very small class, it exercises an influence altogether out of proportion to its size.<sup>54</sup>

Storer's argument was twofold. First, he argued that the formation of political ideology was an instinctual or non-rational process and that, consequently, the Conservatives needed to do more to appeal to the instincts of the electorate. Second, he claimed that a major reason for the Radicals' successful appeal to voters was the work done by Socialist intellectuals in disseminating and popularising Socialist beliefs. So if the Conservatives were to be effective in winning over members of the