

# STANLEY BALDWIN

*Conservative leadership and national values*

PHILIP WILLIAMSON



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## CHAPTER 1

### *Public career*

#### I

The circumstances of Baldwin's political rise were crucial to his leadership style and public reputation. A relatively late start in Parliament and a short ministerial apprenticeship contributed to one of his persistent characteristics, a sense of detachment from 'professional politics'. Propelled to high office by the successive disruptions of war, party rebellion, divided leadership, and a fatal illness, he was acutely conscious of having been specially favoured by events and – far from disguising the fact – made this central to his public character. Nevertheless he had acquired some relevant experience, although he did not always choose to emphasise it. Nor could events have swept him forward had he really been such an 'obscure' backbencher and 'insignificant' minister as would later be claimed.

Baldwin succeeded his father as Unionist MP for West Worcestershire (Bewdley) in 1908, at the age of forty, during the long Edwardian period of Liberal government. An unassuming man at a time when Unionist opportunities for promotion were scarce, he had little incentive but to follow his father's example as a permanent backbencher, concentrating his energies more on his industrial and commercial career than on politics. Until 1917 he continued to expand his family's business interests, speaking infrequently in the House of Commons and then mostly on matters relating to his constituency or to commerce. Nevertheless he attended regularly, and moved on the fringes of London political society.<sup>1</sup> He was in the mainstream tariff-reform section of his party, and participated in backbench movements. He joined the

<sup>1</sup> M&B pp. 50–1; Baldwin to his mother, 1909–14 *passim*, BF.

council of the Anti-Socialist Union (ASU), and became a member and financial sponsor of the Unionist Social Reform Committee (USRC), associating with many future Conservative ministers.<sup>2</sup>

The Great War brought a gradual increase in his political involvement, as his priorities shifted and as demands upon MPs increased. In early 1915 he was among the founders of the Unionist Business Committee, a precursor of the 1922 Committee of backbench MPs. After the formation of the Asquith Coalition government in May 1915, he joined a group of Unionist and Liberal MPs pressing for military conscription, but later helped organise backbench resistance to critics of the Unionist leadership.<sup>3</sup> Much of his time became taken up by appointment to departmental committees – for the Home Office, interviewing large numbers of interned foreign citizens and later Sinn Fein prisoners; for the Board of Trade, on trade relations after the war; for the War Office on expenditure control and for the Treasury on War Loans for the Small Investor, which recommended the creation of the National Savings scheme.<sup>4</sup> By 1916 he was known in government circles as a respected and diligent MP with useful commercial and financial experience. These qualities explain his appointment as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Bonar Law, when the Lloyd George Coalition government was formed in December 1916, and his promotion a

<sup>2</sup> For ASU: F. Coetzee, *For Party or Country* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 156–7. For membership of USRC and its agricultural, industrial unrest, and health sub-committees: J. W. Hills *et al.*, *Industrial Unrest. A Practical Solution* (1914), preface; A. Ashley, *William James Ashley* (1932), p. 114; J. Ridley, ‘The Unionist Social Reform Committee 1911–1914’, *Historical Journal* 30 (1987), 396–7. Lord Birkenhead, the former USRC chairman, in ‘Mr Baldwin’s Power’, *Britannia*, 4 Jan. 1929, described Baldwin as its ‘life and soul’ and having ‘largely financed our activities’. The first statement is plainly dramatised by hindsight, but the latter is possible.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. S. Hewins, *Apologia of an Imperialist*, 2 vols (1929) II, 11, 63, 66 (diary, 27 Jan. 1915, 11 Feb., 24 March 1916); A. Marrison, *British Business and Protection 1903–1932* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 223–4; backbench Liberal and Unionist MPs’ letter to Asquith, *The Times*, 15 Sept. 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Respectively: (a) McKenna to Baldwin, 22 May 1915, BF, warning that the work would be heavy; *HCD* 72, cc. 4, 189, 923 (3, 17, 23 June 1915); Baldwin’s extensive log-books of cases in JCCD 25–6, 65; Jones *DL* p. 524; (b) Runciman minutes, 2 Nov. 1915, 11 Jan. 1916, SB 26/1–2, 5; committee papers in Ashley papers 42245, with ff. 38–41 recording that Baldwin was so hard worked elsewhere that he might not have time to serve; (c) *HCD* 92 c. 347 (27 March 1917); (d) Reports, 28 Dec. 1915, 26 Jan. 1916 in *Parliamentary Papers* 1914–16 (Cd 8146) xxxvii. 473, and 1916 (Cd 8179) xv. 649. He also served on the Home Office Committee on the Use of Cocaine in Dentistry: report, *Parliamentary Papers* 1917–18 (Cd 8489), viii. 151.

month later to Junior Lord of the Treasury and again in June 1917 to Joint Financial Secretary.

The Financial Secretaryship was a senior non-Cabinet post, but for Baldwin's career it had still further significance. As Law was also Unionist party leader and Leader of the Commons, Baldwin learned about party management and benefitted from his patronage. As he now had responsibility for the Treasury tasks of supervising the civil service and controlling government expenditure, he acquired knowledge of other departments and much experience in conducting Commons business. Moreover, at that time the Treasury had a vast increase of new, technical work. It needed a second Financial Secretary because the original appointee had been sent to Washington to obtain United States assistance in the chronic wartime financial crises. Baldwin became engaged in the domestic aspects of these crises, representing Law at the daily Bank of England Exchange Committee and helping to introduce massive War Loans and two war budgets. He was in fact one of the work-horses of the government, and within Whitehall and Westminster one of its most familiar members.<sup>5</sup>

The work demanded quiet efficiency rather than the kinds of political display that attracted public notice and rapid promotion. Baldwin's re-appointment as sole Financial Secretary after the post-war election in 1918 registered this solid but unobtrusive success, since with Austen Chamberlain replacing Law as Chancellor of the Exchequer he supplied ministerial continuity in addressing the almost equally formidable work of financial reconstruction. As chairman of 'the Baldwin Council' and member of numerous other committees, he was among the architects of the new systems of Treasury control imposed on other departments during this period.<sup>6</sup> Even so, approaches from Law about Dominion governor-generalships and speculation that he might become Speaker of the House of Commons indicated modest Westminster expectations of his domestic political prospects.<sup>7</sup>

When Baldwin did enter the Cabinet, in April 1921, it was

<sup>5</sup> See indexes to *HCDeb* for 1917–21; Baldwin to his mother, 1917–19 BF; and 1917 letters to Joan Dickinson, in *Memoirs of a Conservative*. J. C. C. Davidson's *Memoirs and Papers 1910–37*, ed. Robert Rhodes James (1969), pp. 78–80.

<sup>6</sup> E. O'Halpin, *Head of the Civil Service* (1989), pp. 26, 47–51.

<sup>7</sup> M&B p. 75. Some journalists did tip him as a possible Chancellor of the Exchequer: see e.g. J. Green, *Mr. Baldwin* (1933), p. 82; A. Bryant, *Stanley Baldwin* (1937), pp. 62–3. But they did not reflect the views of the government leadership at this time.



because the retirement of Law had created a Unionist vacancy. As a new member of an intimate and supremely confident group which had presided over victory in war and negotiation of the peace, on matters of general policy he was diffident, and rarely consulted by the inner Cabinet leadership. His performance as President of the Board of Trade revealed other qualities. According to Chamberlain, the new Unionist leader, the minister would require 'great knowledge, great skill in debate and perfect . . . tact', because he had responsibility for 'by far the greatest Parliamentary fence' before the government – the Safeguarding of Industries Bill, which by allowing anti-dumping tariffs threatened to divide the Unionist and Liberal wings of the Coalition.<sup>8</sup> In the event the Bill passed comfortably, as Baldwin smothered controversy with good humour and undoctinaire argument. When dispute did arise, in spring 1922, over the application of the safeguarding duties to German fabric gloves, he displayed considerable toughness, resisting all-party pressure from Lancashire cotton interests, reversing an adverse Cabinet decision by threatening resignation, and defeating Liberal ministerial opposition led by Churchill.<sup>9</sup> Conservative MPs were impressed by what seemed an increasingly rare phenomenon within the Coalition government: a Conservative minister taking a stand for Conservative policies.

Baldwin's next threatened resignation involved a much greater disagreement, one which he initially expected would end his political career. Yet the outcome was a giant-killing exploit that catapulted him to the front rank: the overthrow of Lloyd George, Churchill, and the Conservative leadership of Chamberlain, Birkenhead, Balfour, and Horne. During 1921 Baldwin had continued to affirm the Coalition line that the 'old political labels' were 'extinct'.<sup>10</sup> But with the Cabinet losing touch with much Conservative and 'moral' opinion, he became increasingly uneasy. While still defending Lloyd George's leadership of the Coalition,

<sup>8</sup> A. Chamberlain to Lloyd George, 19 March 1921, AC 24/3/62. Chamberlain thought the bill so sensitive that he wanted its author, Horne, to remain at the Board of Trade – though without denying Baldwin promotion to another Cabinet place.

<sup>9</sup> Cabinets 19, 24, 34, 35, 37, 38 (22); Baldwin to A. Chamberlain, 10 April 1922, AC 24/4/2, and to Lloyd George, 5 July 1922, Lloyd George papers F/3/1/16. For Churchill's resentment, see *WSC Comp* iv/iii.2107–8.

<sup>10</sup> *HCD* 142, c. 1573 (6 June 1921), with earlier statements in *Berrows*, 30 Nov., 7 Dec. 1918.

by March 1922 he had shifted to saying that 'there was no more important duty at present than to preserve the Tory party'.<sup>11</sup> In early October he decided to leave the government, if necessary alone. Within the alarming context of growing popular support for the new socialist Labour party, Baldwin was appalled both by the Coalition leaders' readiness to contemplate war in the Near East, and by the Conservative leaders' determination to perpetuate Lloyd George's premiership at the risk of alienating much of their own party. Unionist/Conservative discontent with the Coalition had been mounting for two years, and ultimately only the reluctant return of Bonar Law as alternative leader supplied the certainty of success. Nevertheless Cabinet divisions precipitated the rebellion, and Baldwin was the first of its members to call for the end of the Coalition. It was he, rather than the other, more politically experienced, Cabinet dissentients Griffith-Boscawen and Curzon, who had the resolve and reputation to supply the focus for the final manoeuvres of Conservative junior ministers and backbench MPs, and on 19 October 1922 to open the attack at the party meeting at the Carlton Club.<sup>12</sup>

The rebellion and the refusal of most defeated Coalition Conservative leaders – the 'Chamberlainites' – to assist Law placed Baldwin among the three leading figures in the new Conservative government, and his Treasury experience made him a natural choice as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Initially he complicated matters by proposing that the post should instead go to McKenna, who had been a Liberal but who as a wartime Chancellor and now a major City figure had special qualifications for tackling a looming crisis in international finance.<sup>13</sup> After McKenna refused and

<sup>11</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 March 1922. Lloyd George as early as November 1921 sensed that Baldwin might be unreliable in a major crisis: Jones *WD* iii. 156 (8 Nov. 1921).

<sup>12</sup> 'The Break Up of the Coalition', Griffith-Boscawen papers c. 396/119–23; *The Crawford Papers*, ed. John Vincent (Manchester, 1984), pp. 450, 451 (10, 16 Oct. 1922); *The Leo Amery Diaries*, ed. John Barnes and David Nicholson, 2 vols. (1980, 1988) i. 294–5, 297, 299 (12, 14, 16, 17, 18 Oct. 1922); *The Austen Chamberlain Diary Letters 1916–1937*, ed. Robert Self (Cambridge, 1995), p. 205 (20 Nov. 1922); Lord Templewood, *Empire of the Air* (1957), pp. 23–5, 28–30. Cf. Lucy Baldwin, 'Recollections of a Cabinet Breaker's Wife', SB 42/3–10, partly in AWB pp. 114–17; Baldwin's own accounts in D. Maclean memo, 25 July 1923, Maclean papers c. 467/52–4, and in Jones *DL* pp. 60–2 (18 Sept. 1932).

<sup>13</sup> AWB p. 117; Jones *DL* p. 62; R. S. Churchill, *Lord Derby* (1959), p. 454 (diary, 19 Oct. 1922). McKenna had been Chancellor in the Asquith Coalition 1915–16, but was now Chairman of the Midland Bank and no longer an MP. As originator of the 1915

after the November 1922 general election had vindicated the insurgents' insistence that Conservatives could win an independent majority, Baldwin had two main tasks as Chancellor. In both he considerably enhanced his standing. The United States government's demand for settlement of the British war debt took him to Washington in January 1923. Law regarded the negotiated terms as harsh and an excessive burden upon the British economy, and the Cabinet recalled Baldwin for consultation. The chronic financial problems of the late 1920s and early 1930s would reveal Law's wisdom, but at this time Baldwin shared the Treasury and City view that early settlement was vital to restore British credit and to obtain American assistance in European financial reconstruction. For the second time in twelve months he persuaded a Cabinet to reverse its position – this time even in the face of a prime-ministerial resignation threat.<sup>14</sup> Then, in his April 1923 budget, he won further City, business, and Conservative approval in his determined efforts to consolidate the restoration of stable and 'sound' finance. Assisted by expenditure cuts achieved under the Coalition he was able both to reduce income tax and to establish a new Sinking Fund for redemption of the government's internal debt. An impression of strength and integrity was completed by growing parliamentary admiration for his straightforward, conciliatory, and amiable manner.

The illness that forced Law's final retirement in May 1923 created an extraordinary problem over the succession to the premiership. Austen Chamberlain and others who just months earlier would have been obvious contenders remained separated from the Cabinet, and were for most Conservative MPs still tainted by their loyalty to the Coalition. This left two otherwise improbable candidates: Curzon, the Foreign Secretary and acting prime minister, but a member of the House of Lords – and Baldwin. The circumstances of the King's choice of Baldwin are notoriously tangled, largely because a small group of Baldwin's personal (and mostly

McKenna import duties, he could have been made acceptable to Conservative protectionists.

<sup>14</sup> It is commonly stated that Baldwin pre-empted Cabinet discussion by naively or cunningly revealing the proposed terms to the press on his arrival at Southampton. In fact they had been revealed by the Americans ten days earlier (see *The Times*, 17, 18 Jan. 1923). Baldwin's solecisms were more precise: to publicise his own support for them, and to claim that the US government was compromised by the need to conciliate ignorant Mid-Western opinion.

non-ministerial) supporters, possibly with his knowledge, side-stepped Law's refusal to offer formal advice to the King. They submitted a powerfully argued case in Baldwin's favour, though they may not have intended it to be interpreted as Law's own opinion.<sup>15</sup> It is nevertheless clear that the memorandum did indicate Law's private preference; that even those who recommended Curzon admitted his faults of arrogance and tactlessness; and that these faults strongly influenced the recommendation of Baldwin by Balfour, the other living Conservative ex-Prime Minister. Balfour and the King were also right to fear damaging political and constitutional complications from the appointment of a prime minister who sat in the House of Lords, which then contained not a single representative of the new Labour opposition. It is clear too that most Conservatives, and indeed most wider political and press opinion, thought Baldwin the better choice. Curzon's bitter description of him as 'a man of no experience, and of the utmost insignificance' revealed more about his own wounded vanity than Baldwin's actual stature. In larger perspective, however, there is no gainsaying Chamberlain's verdict: that Baldwin's emergence had been an 'accident of an accident'.<sup>16</sup>

## II

Even for a man with a string of recent political successes to his name, Baldwin began his premiership with a confidence remarkable in both degree and effect. In part this reflected his inexperience at the highest political levels, but it was also the first manifestation of a distinctive outlook. He made a strength of being little known outside Westminster and Whitehall by addressing his party and the public with a new note of purposefulness, idealism, and sensitivity towards labour. Simple deductions from

<sup>15</sup> See Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, pp. 258–67, and C. Hazlehurst, 'The Baldwinite Conspiracy', *Historical Studies* 16 (1974–5), 167–91. Joan Davidson, 'Diary of 2nd crisis in Government', JD, adds circumstantial details which suggest that Baldwin at least knew that a memorandum was being prepared. On the evening of 19 May Baldwin met Joan Davidson and Waterhouse at dinner, then joined Davidson and Amery at 10 Downing Street. Davidson later had a long talk with Sykes. On the following morning, the 20th, Baldwin had breakfast with the Davidsons before Davidson left for Downing Street to complete the memorandum, which Sykes and Waterhouse then took to the King. Joan Davidson herself believed the memorandum had been 'of great use'.

<sup>16</sup> H. Nicolson, *Curzon. The Last Phase* (1934), p. 354; *A. Chamberlain Diary Letters*, p. 364 (28 Feb. 1931).

his business and Treasury background were belied. In seeking policies to support his messages, he nevertheless began with a perspective from his departmental experience: that the root of Britain's post-war economic problems lay in the financial and commercial chaos in continental Europe, turning upon the Franco-German dispute over German reparations and, since January 1923, on the French occupation of the Ruhr. He was, he said, 'going to try and settle Europe, though he failed and failed again'.<sup>17</sup> It was for this reason that he again attempted, unsuccessfully, to recruit McKenna, and even thought of Grey, another Liberal, but the most eminent ex-Foreign Secretary, as a possible replacement for Curzon.<sup>18</sup> In the autumn, however, Baldwin abruptly changed direction. Sceptical Cabinet colleagues were persuaded to allow him to announce, during the Conservative party conference at Plymouth on 25 October, his personal belief in tariff protection for domestic industries. By emphasising Bonar Law's pledge at the 1922 election against fundamental fiscal change in the current Parliament he also signalled his intention to seek a fresh electoral mandate while, under Cabinet pressure, avoiding any suggestion of an imminent dissolution. But in mid-November Baldwin again precipitated events and overcame considerable Cabinet opposition to call an immediate election.

The underlying *policy* imperative in Baldwin's adoption of industrial protection was reduction of unemployment, which remained stubbornly persistent and which even an eventual European settlement might worsen in the short term, by increasing German exports. Yet most of the specifics might have been obtained by quieter extension of existing forms of import duties – the McKenna, safeguarding, and revenue duties. The dramatic shift and its linkage to an election must be understood in *political* terms. Baldwin's mission to 'settle Europe' had been obstructed by French obstinacy and Curzon's ill-tempered diplomacy, and in September the sole foreign-policy 'summit' meeting of his career – with the French premier, Poincaré – was embarrassingly inconclusive, confirming that no early success could be expected. For a

<sup>17</sup> Baldwin in Trevelyan to Ponsonby, 30 May 1923, in Cowling, *Impact of Labour* pp. 306–7; cf. Jones *WD* 1. 237–8 (28 May 1923).

<sup>18</sup> McKenna declined when a City of London seat could not be made available for him. For Grey, Dawson memo, 17 June 1923, Dawson papers 70/16–23; Jones *WD* 1. 243 (30 Sept. 1923).

new and inexperienced prime minister without his own parliamentary majority, the resulting criticism from several directions – not just from Labour and Liberals but from Chamberlainites, the Conservative right, and Conservative newspapers – was peculiarly unsettling. More fundamentally, a policy vacuum and continuing criticism during a fourth winter of high unemployment might cause severe long-term damage to Conservative interests, undermining his efforts to evoke a more sympathetic presentation of his party, whetting Labour's most radical ambitions, and assisting its already rapid electoral advance. By reviving a version of tariff reform, the creed of most Conservative activists, and by raising expectations of an early election, he aimed to establish his own authority, restore impetus, and suggest to the working classes that Conservatism offered a constructive and 'national', classless, alternative to socialism. Dividing the former Coalition leaders and regaining co-operation from Chamberlainite Conservatives was an incidental benefit – pursued actively only when Baldwin wished to show his more recalcitrant Cabinet colleagues that they were not irreplaceable – while a desire to pre-empt Lloyd George's rumoured plan to call for imperial economic initiatives may have influenced the precise timing of his announcement. Baldwin then decided upon an immediate election because the party's Central Office was confident of victory, because it would foreshorten Conservative disagreements and hostile parliamentary manoeuvres by the opposition parties, and because it seemed best to proceed before the Liberals, now reunited in defence of free trade, could complete the amalgamation of their Lloyd Georgeite and Asquithian organisations.<sup>19</sup>

The general election on 6 December 1923 was disastrous (table 1). Baldwin had made a major miscalculation: free-trade opinion was even more entrenched than he had supposed. Although

<sup>19</sup> The best examination remains Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, chs. 15–16; it is confirmed by R. Self, 'Conservative Reunion and the General Election of 1923: A Reassessment', *Twentieth Century British History* 3 (1992), 249–73. Jones's well-known report of Baldwin saying *twelve years later* that he adopted protection in order to 'dish' Lloyd George (Jones, *Lord Baldwin*, p. 8; M&B p. 212), was coloured both by Baldwin's current (1935) concern at a renewed Lloyd George challenge, and by Jones's admiration for Lloyd George. Baldwin later corrected himself (Baldwin to Jones, 25 Nov. 1940, Jones papers A6/2), but when Jones subsequently published his obituary notices he preferred Baldwin's earlier, more dramatic, version. Another common view, that his primary concern was reunion with the Chamberlainite leaders, is also unsupported by contemporary evidence.

Table 1. *General elections 1922–1935*

Date of election	Percentage of poll	MPs
<i>1922: 15 November</i>		
Conservative	38.5	344
Independent Liberal	18.9	62
National Liberal	9.9	53
Labour	29.7	142
outcome: Conservative government (74 majority)		
<i>1923: 6 December</i>		
Conservative	38.0	258
Liberal	29.7	158
Labour	30.7	191
outcome: minority Labour government January 1924		
<i>1924: 29 October</i>		
Conservative	46.8	412
Liberal	17.8	40
Labour	33.3	151
outcome: Conservative government (210 majority)		
<i>1929: 30 May</i>		
Conservative	38.1	260
Liberal	23.5	59
Labour	37.1	287
outcome: minority Labour government		
National government formed 24 August 1931		
<i>1931: 27 October</i>		
Conservative	55.0	470
Liberal (Samuelite)	6.5	32
National Liberal (Simonite)	3.7	35
National Labour (MacDonaldite)	1.5	13
National	0.5	4
[total National government	67.2	554]
Independent Liberal	0.5	4
Labour	30.9	52
outcome: National government (492 majority: Conservatives alone had a 418 majority over Labour, and 145 over the total of all other groups)		
<i>1935: 14 November</i>		
Conservative	47.8	387
National Liberal (Simonite)	3.7	33
National Labour (MacDonaldite)	1.5	8
National	0.3	1
[total National government	53.3	429]
Liberal (Samuelite)	6.7	21
Labour	38.0	154
outcome: National government (242 majority)		

*Note:* Minor parties and independent MPs omitted, hence apparent arithmetical discrepancies in the size of majorities.

*Source:* Adapted from F.W.S. Craig, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1980* (Chichester, 1981).

Conservatives remained the largest party, the overall Commons majority for which most of their organisers and MPs had repudiated the Coalition only fourteen months earlier was now lost. The Labour advance had not been halted but accelerated to the brink of entering government; the Liberal party had regained potential by winning the parliamentary balance of power. As Baldwin's personal responsibility was complete and conspicuous, he initially thought he should – and would have to – resign both the premiership and the party leadership. He survived the immediate aftermath largely for negative reasons. Despite his colleagues' anxieties about the prospect of a 'socialist' government, many remained anti-Coalitionists and considered his retention of the leadership the best obstacle to Chamberlainite-organised efforts at alliance with Liberals. It also became widely accepted that the least embarrassing way out of the predicament of an indecisive election result would be for the existing government to await the verdict of the Commons. Nevertheless, even in defeat Baldwin had acquired positive assets, which counteracted doubts about his judgement. Conservative protectionists credited him with a heroic fight for a great cause, while bold decisions, submission to a popular verdict, and forthright speeches had secured him a public reputation for unusual – almost non-political – honesty and directness. Once Baldwin had been persuaded that to face Parliament would seem as honourable and constitutional as it was expedient, such opinions helped sustain his leadership as party manoeuvres continued to operate in his favour.

On 18 December the Liberal leaders announced their intention of voting against the Conservative government, allowing the Labour party to take office for the first time. In angry reaction, the Chamberlainites finally abandoned coalitionism and reconciled themselves to full Conservative reunion. They accepted a developing Cabinet view that a minority Labour government could do little harm, and that successful anti-socialism now demanded the demolition of the Liberal party and attraction of anti-Labour Liberals into the Conservative party. After the Conservative government's defeat in the Commons on 21 January 1924 and its resignation the following day, Baldwin invited the Chamberlainite leaders into his new shadow cabinet. In return, they helped him withdraw from his protectionist commitment and at a party meeting on 11 February supported his continued leadership.



Baldwin's position nevertheless remained weak. Although residual tensions between anti-Coalitionists and Chamberlainites meant that no widely acceptable rival could emerge, he had to accept a more collective style of leadership. Baldwin's principal contributions as first Leader of the Opposition to a Labour government were to maintain a constructive Conservative stance to supplement the obvious anti-socialist attacks, and to expound his colleagues' proposals for a programme consisting of reversion to industrial safeguarding duties, imperial economic co-operation, measures against food 'profiteering', improved housing, and a new emphasis upon extended social insurance. He helped re-open Liberal party divisions by encouraging Churchill to lead a 'constitutionalist' rebellion, though at first this backfired and created renewed Conservative disagreements when Churchill stood as an Independent against the Conservative candidate at the Abbey, Westminster by-election.<sup>20</sup> He also took much trouble to ensure that the next election would be fought on the Conservatives' most advantageous ground. In August he travelled to Belfast to persuade the Northern Ireland prime minister to accept a proposed Labour government bill appointing an Irish Boundary Commission, helping to remove the danger that Ireland or House of Lords obstruction to the bill could be made into a leading election issue.<sup>21</sup> The shadow cabinet's original intention was to defeat the Labour government by obtaining Liberal support against its proposed treaty with Soviet Russia, until the Campbell case – a bungled dispute over the prosecution of a communist editor – presented them with the tactical gift of forcing responsibility for the fatal Commons vote upon the Liberal leadership. In the subsequent general election on 29 October, a Liberal collapse – the penalty for successively voting out Conservative and Labour governments – helped Conservatives obtain a huge Commons majority, expunging Baldwin's misjudgement of just ten months earlier.

<sup>20</sup> Baldwin wanted Churchill to stand with Conservative support – against the wishes of protectionist colleagues – but was thwarted by the local Conservative association: *WSC Comp* v/i.113–15, and see R. Boothby, *I Fight to Live* (1947), p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin to Joan Davidson, 14, 21 Aug. 1924, *Davidson Memoirs*, p. 196, and to Wood, 6 Sept. 1924, Halifax papers A4.410.14.1; *Amery Diaries* 1. 386 (19 Sept. 1924). M&B p. 270 mistakenly places the meeting in London.

## III

The 1924 election was dominated by the prevailing anti-socialist 'red scare', heightened during the campaign by the 'Zinoviev letter'. Many Conservatives nonetheless believed the scale of their victory – an unexpected demonstration that even within mass democracy Labour could be decisively defeated – owed much to Baldwin's attractiveness to moderate voters. In contrast to his position on first becoming prime minister, he now also had his own parliamentary majority and the freedom to construct his own government. He used this new authority to consolidate Conservative reunion on his own terms, and according to his conception of a 'national' Conservatism. He disregarded the resentments of anti-Coalitionist colleagues by giving high office to Austen Chamberlain, Birkenhead, and other Chamberlainites. On the other hand he refused to treat the Chamberlainites as a group or Chamberlain as their leader, ignoring the latter's unwelcome suggestions on ministerial appointments. As the election had proved that the party could win many working-class and former Liberal votes, few senior Conservatives now doubted that anti-socialism could be best advanced by 'progressive' rather than reactionary means, and by accommodation of Liberal 'constitutionalists'. Baldwin made sure the strategic lessons were preserved by re-appointing Neville Chamberlain as Minister of Health, and by the surprising choice of Churchill as Chancellor of the Exchequer – intended to be so generous as to guarantee his loyalty, but so tied to financial detail as to curb his belligerence against Labour.<sup>22</sup> By these means Baldwin created a government almost as comprehensive as the Lloyd George Coalition, yet both more attuned to Conservative opinion and less offensive to most Liberal and Labour sensibilities.

In opposition Baldwin had accepted a highly collective leadership because his position had been weak. Now he continued it because his own position had become so strong, because his pro-

<sup>22</sup> Jones *WD* II, 303 (8 Nov. 1924); *Self-Portrait of an Artist. From the Diaries and Letters of Lady Kennet*, ed. Lord Kennet (1949), p. 229 (18 Nov. 1924). Baldwin had originally intended Chamberlain for the Treasury and Churchill for Health, but the political effects would have been similar to those of the eventual appointments. His plans were changed by Chamberlain asking for Health.

tectionist phase had taught him caution, and because with a reunited Conservative leadership most of his Cabinet colleagues had considerable experience and initiative. After ten years of international, economic, and political dislocation, and amid general expectations of a strong economic recovery, the Cabinet's principal objective was to restore stability. This would be done by the traditional Conservative methods of efficient and economical administration, sound finance, prudent tax relief, preservation of imperial interests, and consolidation of well-established official policies. In deference to post-war democratic conditions it would also be achieved by appropriating the radical style of sustained legislative activity, in the Conservative forms of financial and administrative rationalisation, significant yet cheap and uncontroversial social reform, adjustments to reflect the changed social and political status of women, and encouragement to economic competitiveness and working-class self-reliance. There would also be sensitivity towards the League of Nations. Aside from the vital prime-ministerial task of presenting the government's actions in the most broadly attractive terms, Baldwin's normal role was to adjudicate between his colleagues' proposals and to facilitate their acceptance by the Cabinet, including Churchill's return to the gold standard and Churchill's and Neville Chamberlain's major expansion of the state pensions scheme in 1925. He was decisive in winning Cabinet endorsement for Austen Chamberlain's four-power guarantee of Germany's western frontiers, the 1925 Locarno pact; for the establishment of the Central Electricity Board in 1926; and for the equalisation of the parliamentary franchise for women at the age of twenty-one in 1928. He brought Northern Ireland and Irish Free State ministers together to settle their boundary in late 1925. He also arbitrated in the usual disputes between stubborn ministers with strong departmental interests. In 1925 he produced a compromise between Churchill and Bridgeman of the Admiralty over cruiser construction, and reluctantly accepted Churchill's argument that safeguarding duties on iron and steel would breach the commitment against general tariffs.

Baldwin's greatest influence was upon the government's treatment of a developing industrial relations problem. The fundamental economic need for industrial co-operation had long been among his leading themes, but during early 1925 a highly per-

sonal decision and a series of speeches had a major public impact. In February he persuaded the Cabinet to resist intense Conservative party pressures for restrictive legislation against trade unions. At Birmingham on 5 March he appealed for a 'truce of God' to help 'pull the country into a better and happier condition'; in the House of Commons on the 6th he obtained the withdrawal of Macquisten's bill attacking trade-union financial support for the Labour party, as a symbol of Conservative commitment to his prayer of 'Give peace in our time, O Lord'; and then in three speeches at Leeds on the 12th and 13th he invoked the moral and spiritual support of social responsibility, sacrifice, selflessness, and Christian ideals.<sup>23</sup> Although these efforts failed to tranquillise the two sides of the coal industry and the leaders of other trade unions, they gave Baldwin a remarkable command over Conservative and public feeling when confrontation came. After making unsuccessful attempts during July 1925 to reconcile coal owners' and miners' leaders, and in the face of threatened strikes by transport unions in support of the miners, he took the large political risk of offering a temporary government subsidy and a Royal Commission of Inquiry. When the Samuel Commission Report of March 1926 also failed to bring the miners and owners together, Baldwin resumed mediation – persisting beyond a point which most Cabinet members thought prudent – until apparent trade-union interference with newspaper freedom made it politically impossible for him to continue negotiations. By then, however, Baldwin's appeal for industrial peace and his attack upon what he presented as the 'unconstitutional' methods of trade unions had stiffened opinion among much of the public while weakening the resolve of many Trades Union Congress (TUC) leaders, and helped bring the May 1926 General Strike to an unexpectedly early end. Baldwin tried to settle the remaining coal industry lock-out. He presented his own proposals on the basis of the Samuel Report two days after the Strike ended. In June the Cabinet sanctioned both a mines-reorganisation bill and a miners' eight-hours bill, and into the autumn he continued to offer mediation to the miners either personally or through Churchill. But between the owners' absolute rejection of voluntary reconstruction and the miners leaders' absolute rejection of wage cuts no agreement was

<sup>23</sup> Four of these speeches are in *OE* pp. 23–40, 40–52, 61–9, 202–11.

possible. As Baldwin and the Cabinet would not contemplate imposing what would have been effective nationalisation – seen as an unacceptable concession to trade-union pressure and socialism – by November desperate hardship forced the miners to return to work on the owners' terms.

The General Strike and prolonged coal stoppage temporarily disrupted Baldwin's hopes of social reconciliation and co-operation in industrial regeneration. Added to the earlier coal subsidy they imposed large financial and economic costs, exacerbating what had proved to be only a weak and patchy recovery which left over a million unemployed. During 1927 further awkward problems accumulated. The credit which the Locarno pact had created with peace and internationalist opinion was dissolved by armed defence of British interests in China, by the Arcos raid and the consequent diplomatic breach with Soviet Russia, and by the breakdown of the Geneva naval disarmament conference, which led to Lord Cecil's resignation from the Cabinet and strained relations with the United States. The General Strike had made it impossible for Baldwin to continue resisting his party's demand for a Trades Disputes Bill, the introduction of which further embittered relations with the Labour movement. After he reluctantly yielded to party and Cabinet pressures to strengthen the House of Lords by modifying its composition, the resulting proposal aroused so much Labour and Liberal outrage and Conservative division that he was relieved at having to abandon it. In April 1927 he suffered a slight physical collapse, and for a long period was tired, depressed, and uncertain. His procrastination affected the whole Cabinet, with individual ministers complaining of their collective indecision. The government was clearly losing initiative and public support.

Hindsight coloured by eventual election defeat in 1929 created an impression that the decline continued inexorably, weakening Baldwin's authority and reputation. The reality was more complicated. From early 1928 the Cabinet regained momentum with new policies, and Baldwin reasserted himself and dominated the Conservative election campaign. Churchill reduced the financial burden upon agricultural and industrial production by rating relief, and Baldwin convinced a piqued Neville Chamberlain that this 'derating' scheme was compatible with his large-scale reform of local government. With voluntary re-organisation by private

industry and agriculture thought to be the fundamental remedy for economic stagnation, assistance for 'labour transference' and training was provided to ease redistribution of the workforce. Baldwin encouraged discussions between employers' representatives and the TUC on industrial co-operation, the Mond–Turner talks. He quelled Cabinet divisions and an incipient backbench rebellion to preserve the 1924 position on tariffs before the election, but a large extension of industrial safeguarding was promised for the future. He also persuaded a reluctant Churchill to accept a colonial development fund as a further stimulus to trade, and other lesser economic, social, and health measures were prepared.

Many Conservatives shared Baldwin's own belief that his reputation would be decisive at the election, and the Cabinet and Central Office readily entrusted overall strategy to him. The principal threat to the Conservative ability to defeat the Labour party was a Liberal recovery, with Lloyd George using his personal political fund to help finance over 500 candidates and in March 1929 pledging his party to reduce unemployment dramatically through unorthodox forms of loan finance and public works. Baldwin decided the best response both to this and to the Labour challenge was to understate his government's new proposals and instead emphasise its substantial past record, in order to contrast responsible and sound Conservative 'performance' with irresponsible and specious radical 'promises'. The subsequently much-derided slogan, 'Safety First', taken by critics to characterise Baldwin's whole politics – indeed, an entire phase of British political culture – as passive and complacent, was not chosen by him nor by the Conservative Central Office. It was, rather, the inept attempt by the party's advertising agents to summarise for an election poster (plate 10) what was, in context, a calculated counter-attack, underpinned by Conservative confidence in Baldwin's leadership and popular appeal – 'The man you can trust'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> P. Williamson, "'Safety First': Baldwin, the Conservative Party, and the 1929 General Election", *Historical Journal* 25 (1982), 385–409. The Central Office's preferred poster slogan was 'the man you can trust', which more appositely expressed the election strategy. It remained the secondary message, but party officials allowed themselves to be persuaded by supposed experts: Jones *WD* II. 186 (1 June 1929); Gower notes, 22 June 1953, Jones papers AA1/38.

## IV

The general election of 30 May 1929, like that of December 1923, gave neither Conservatives nor Labour an overall parliamentary majority and left Liberals with the numerical balance of power. But while Conservatives again polled the largest number of votes, for the first time since 1918 they no longer formed the largest House of Commons party. Against most of his colleagues' advice Baldwin decided not to follow the 1923–4 precedent of meeting Parliament but to resign immediately, avoiding any risk of the Cabinet being accused of seeking unfair means to exclude Labour from office, or of suffering parliamentary humiliation from Lloyd George. He also came to think that Labour should be allowed longer in government than in 1924. The more MacDonald's Cabinet faced the limitations of minority government as well as the usual complications of office, the more its idealistic followers might become disillusioned and divided. The Liberal party might again be split over the dilemma of how to wield the balance of power, this time with still more fatal effects. Conservative positions could be patiently re-adjusted and developed in step with the resulting reaction of popular opinions. Meanwhile a 'hung' Parliament might constrain conflicts over the imminent, and delicate, issue of Indian constitutional reform. At the Conservative shadow cabinet on 17 July Baldwin on the one hand smothered Churchill's soundings for a revived anti-socialist alliance with Liberals, and on the other resisted Amery's and Neville Chamberlain's desire for an early re-adoption of imperial protectionism.<sup>25</sup> In the autumn he supported the Labour Cabinet in accepting proposals by the Conservative Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin, to call a Round Table Conference and to promise India ultimate self-governing 'dominion status' within the Empire – what became known as the 'Irwin Declaration'.

Cumulatively, all this generated one of the Conservative party's most severe and prolonged internal crises, yet also a remarkable feat of political survival on Baldwin's part.<sup>26</sup> As the election stance had depended so much on confidence in his leadership, defeat badly damaged him. Many constituency and backbench Conserva-

<sup>25</sup> *Amery Diaries* II, 45 (17 July 1929); Williamson, *National Crisis*, pp. 118–19.

<sup>26</sup> The fullest account is Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*.

tives had disliked aspects of the 1924–9 government's accommodation with post-war realities, and now had difficulty understanding anything less than persistent all-out opposition to 'socialist' ministers. Baldwin had lost the enthusiastic support of the protectionists which had sustained him after the 1923 election – indeed most of them blamed the latest defeat on his rejection of their appeals for further tariffs. His continued reluctance to risk another electoral rebuff over the re-adoption of general tariffs provoked a revival of protectionist organisation and agitation. 'Diehards' – the Conservative right – were also angry at Baldwin's acquiescence in what they regarded as the Labour Cabinet's abdications of imperial power, in Egypt, over naval disarmament, and especially in India. As discontent spread from autumn 1929, members of the shadow cabinet and its inner 'Business Committee' – themselves exasperated by Baldwin's stoical acceptance that he could not be a good, attacking, opposition leader, and shaken by his assent to the Irwin Declaration – came to doubt whether he could continue. Fearing that his collapsing reputation might damage their own positions, some wondered how far they should continue to support him.

Discontent was exacerbated by the 'press lords', Beaverbrook and Rothermere, though paradoxically their interventions eventually helped Baldwin. As owners of the chief mass-circulation newspapers read by Conservatives – respectively the *Express* and *Mail* groups – and as prominent political figures in the early 1920s, they had resented Baldwin's refusal to accord them the respect they thought they deserved. Since 1923 their newspapers had frequently criticised his leadership, and after the 1929 defeat they saw opportunities to recover their own power and perhaps force his removal. Beaverbrook proclaimed his own version of imperial protectionism, 'Empire Free Trade', which attracted so much interest from frustrated protectionists that he created an 'Empire Crusade' campaign organisation. After Baldwin denounced inaccurate *Daily Mail* reports about his acceptance of the Irwin Declaration, Rothermere allied himself to Beaverbrook and from early 1930 they each sponsored parliamentary candidates, and even formed their own 'United Empire' party. Their newspapers inflamed constituency criticism of official Conservative policies, and their recruitment of substantial memberships and interventions in by-elections restored them as serious political forces.



Control of the Conservative party became extremely difficult. The Labour government's inability to prevent rising unemployment and the onset of economic depression improved the electoral prospects for imperial protectionism, but Baldwin could not easily satisfy Conservative protectionists without creating an impression that party policy was being imposed by newspaper owners. For months he shifted uneasily between his own desire to fight the press lords, and Business Committee and Central Office advice to conciliate at least Beaverbrook. There was a series of increasingly fraught party meetings. At the Albert Hall on 21 November 1929 he embraced imperial economic unity; at the Coliseum on 5 February 1930 he offered more detail. At the Hotel Cecil on 4 March he proposed a national referendum on the most sensitive question, tariffs on food imports. Faced by intense pressure to drop the referendum in favour of a 'free hand' in applying tariffs, at the Caxton Hall on 24 June he discovered his best defence by switching the issue to resistance to 'press dictation'. Nevertheless, by the autumn Baldwin faced a party revolt of similar proportions to that of 1922, and there was no shortage of candidates for the role he had then played. Neville Chamberlain especially had emerged as a crucial figure, removing one of the malcontents' main targets, Davidson, the party chairman closely identified with Baldwin, and taking the chairmanship himself. He and other Business Committee members came close to asking Baldwin to resign, until Dominion proposals at the Imperial Conference supplied an opportunity to adopt the 'free hand' without appearing to submit to Beaverbrook. This enabled Baldwin at another party meeting at Caxton Hall on 30 October to defeat a motion of no confidence in his leadership.

Even now dissent subsided only briefly. A substantial minority of MPs, candidates, and peers had voted against Baldwin, and in early 1931 Beaverbrook resumed the Empire Crusade to challenge him directly by contesting by-elections against Conservative candidates. Divisions had now also widened over Indian policy, following the first session of the Round Table Conference. During late 1930 Churchill placed himself at the head of die-hard resistance to significant concessions towards Indian nationalism. In January 1931 he resigned from the Business Committee to attack Baldwin's acceptance of the Conference's proposal to go beyond the Simon Commission Report and establish a representative All-