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978-0-521-43812-4 - Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values

Philip Williamson

Excerpt

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Few British political leaders have been so successful and significant as Stanley Baldwin. Yet few have suffered so much belittlement and abuse in retirement, and later biographers and historians have had considerable difficulty in producing plausible explanations for his ascendancy. More nonsense has been written about him than about any other modern prime minister. This has had consequences for wider understandings of twentieth-century Britain, as interpretations of his politics are integral to several major debates: on the Conservative party's long-term electoral dominance, on constitutional issues, on 'national culture', and on Britain's industrial, imperial, and international decline.

This book is not concerned primarily with recounting Baldwin's life. Rather, it concentrates upon defining the nature of his politics, identifying its sources, examining its expressions, and assessing its impact. It aims to contribute to a fuller grasp of larger issues, especially the character and success of modern Conservatism. In doing so, it suggests a method for creating new understandings of British political leaders, by directing attention towards their widest public functions – not just to their particular party and ministerial roles, but to their relationships with the electorate, opposing parties, and the media, and to their interaction with 'political culture'.

I

Baldwin was Conservative leader for fourteen years from 1923 to 1937, and prime minister three times, from 1923 to 1924, 1924 to 1929, and 1935 to 1937. He led his party to larger electoral victories than any other twentieth-century party leader. If his four years, from 1931 to 1935, as deputy to MacDonald within the

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'National' government are included, he also led it for a longer period in office than anyone except Thatcher. What makes his career still more significant is that these successes were achieved in new and difficult conditions. Aside from Bonar Law's brief (seven-month) tenure in 1922–3, Baldwin was the first Conservative prime minister to preside over a truly mass democracy, with universal suffrage – female as well as male, and overwhelmingly working class. He was certainly the first to feature on the modern mass media of radio and sound film. He was the first to bear the political impact of prolonged economic depression and mass unemployment in the traditional manufacturing and mining areas, and the first to face a major socialist party and highly politicised trade-union leadership. He became the first leader of opposition to a Labour government, and the only prime minister to confront a general strike. His reputation was made in 1922 by helping to free the Conservative party from a coalition government, yet in 1931 he led it into another and more enduring coalition. During his leadership the British overseas dominions moved from Empire to Commonwealth, and Indian nationalists mounted their greatest civil-disobedience campaigns. The last great struggle between free trade and protection was fought, and sterling suffered its first and most spectacular devaluation. Baldwin was also the first Conservative leader to be confronted by Stalinist and fascist ideologies, and the first who had to justify rearmament to an electorate apprised of the horrors of modern aerial bombardment, steeped in anti-war feeling, and placing its trust in international peace-keeping. He remains the only prime minister to have superintended a royal abdication.

Such were the hazardous conditions for the leader of a party long identified with hierarchy, privilege, monarchy, property, sound finance, imperialism, and the armed services. Not simply Conservative party interests but the very structures and values which sustained those interests seemed under threat, and there were sharp disagreements among Conservatives about how best to react. In these circumstances Baldwin's resilience and success were remarkable. Few political careers have veered so often between such high peaks and such low troughs. He survived several party rebellions, and two attempted coups by senior colleagues. He suffered sustained criticism from conservative mass-circulation newspapers, and the most serious organisational and

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electoral challenges ever mounted by newspaper owners. He defeated or out-manoeuvred many of the leading public figures of his time – Lloyd George, Asquith, MacDonald, Birkenhead, Austen and Neville Chamberlain, Beaverbrook, Bishop Temple, King Edward VIII, and Churchill. He lost two general elections, in 1923 and 1929, but on both occasions Conservatives retained the largest share of the popular vote and denied their opponents an overall parliamentary majority. Those defeats were amply recouped in the landslide victories of 1924, 1931, and 1935, when Conservatives secured majorities of over 200 seats, and in the last two elections the largest popular support of modern times. Baldwin also enjoyed more personal parliamentary triumphs than any other twentieth-century party leader. In the mid 1920s and again in the mid 1930s he commanded an extraordinary national ascendancy, surpassed only by Churchill from 1940 to 1945. To criticise him at Conservative meetings during the 1930s was said to be ‘little short of blasphemy’. If an MP interrupted him while speaking in the House of Commons ‘it seemed almost like brawling in church’.¹ During the 1937 Coronation he shared the popular applause with the new King and Queen. Unusually for a party leader he retired at a time of his own choosing, amidst warm tributes not just from his own party but from his opponents – in Churchill’s words, ‘loaded with honours and enshrined in public esteem’.²

II

The problems in interpreting Baldwin’s career have generated a succession of unusually unpleasant, divided, and amorphous historical reputations. His contemporaries had been perplexed by him. His rise to high office was rapid and unexpected, a surprise magnified by his own insistence that he was just an ordinary, simple, man. A jocular public statement a week before he became prime minister – that he looked forward to retiring to his native Worcestershire ‘to read the books I want, to live a decent life, and to keep pigs’³ – came to define an image, but also a problem. He

¹ C. Petrie, *Chapters of My Life* (1950), pp. 165, 171; T. Jones, ‘Stanley Baldwin’, *DNB* p. 50.

² J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin* (1978), p. 351; Attlee and Sinclair in *HCD* 324, cc. 682–4 (31 May 1937); Cripps to Baldwin, 31 May 1937, SB 152/170; W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1: *The Gathering Storm* (1948), p. 18.

³ Belatedly reported in *The Times*, 25 May 1923.

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had been an industrialist, yet seemed to be a countryman. He was a politician who could appear to be non-political. He had literary and cultural interests yet paraded a dislike of intellectuals; he disdained oratory yet made impressive speeches. Dramatic decisions and sharp reversals of fortune during his first two years as leader deepened the mystery. He could seem both sedate and impulsive, appear ineffective yet transform the political landscape. He made serious mistakes, only to rebound with great successes. He often looked vulnerable but proved to be irremovable, a political innocent yet able to beat the most formidable opponents. Contemporary commentators described him as an ‘enigma’, and searched for the ‘real’ Baldwin. Profile-writers and memoirists predicted that he would ‘puzzle the future historian’.⁴

Within four years of his ministerial retirement many thought there was no puzzle at all, as he became a principal victim in an enduring denigration of the dominant elements of interwar public life. No other former prime minister’s reputation has collapsed so completely and so swiftly, nor turned upon so few sentences.⁵ Munich, the outbreak of war, and Dunkirk created an atmosphere in which earlier criticisms by Conservative ‘anti-appeasers’ of Baldwin’s reactions to German rearmament became widely accepted across the political spectrum, and were expanded into a comprehensive indictment. A misjudged passage in a November 1936 speech was seized upon as proof that, following a severe by-election defeat at East Fulham in 1933, he had minimised the German danger and delayed British rearmament until the 1935 election had been won – resulting in ineffective deterrence, diplomatic humiliation, and military reverses. Most vividly in *Guilty Men* by ‘Cato’ (Michael Foot, Peter Howard, and Frank Owen) and most savagely in an article by A. L. Rowse and in the popular press, it was asserted that Baldwin had deceived and betrayed the nation because his preference, sustained by ruthless party management, had always been for doing nothing except retaining power. He seemed ordinary and simple precisely because he was ordinary and simple; for ‘Cato’ a ‘little man’, for George Orwell

⁴ E.g. A. G. Gardiner, *Certain People of Importance* (1926), pp. 1–8; W. Steed, *The Real Stanley Baldwin* (1930); B. Roberts, *Stanley Baldwin: Man or Miracle?* (1936); L. S. Amery, *My Political Life*, 3 vols. (1953–5), II, 505.

⁵ For fuller examination, see P. Williamson, ‘Baldwin’s Reputation’, forthcoming.

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‘simply a hole in the air’.⁶ A legitimate attempt to preserve his own property – the ornamental gates to his home, requisitioned for scrap metal – brought violent public abuse and hate mail.⁷

Much of the criticism came from writers on the left who preferred to forget Labour and Liberal opposition to government rearmament during the mid 1930s; it became a standard anti-Conservative weapon for radical publicists preparing for the post-war general election.⁸ Yet criticism was also fostered by a Conservative newspaper proprietor and minister – Beaverbrook (employer of the *Guilty Men* authors) – seeking revenge in a quarrel that long pre-dated rearmament, and it went largely unchallenged by other Conservatives now cloaking themselves in the Churchillian mantle. By 1945 Baldwin had been erased from the party’s public memory, his name avoided in election literature and speeches.⁹ Passages from his addresses, quoted or anthologised in innumerable interwar celebrations of English politics and culture, vanished from the equally numerous celebrations published in the 1940s. After his death in 1947 his principal memorial was a simple monument by the roadside near his Worcestershire home – a poignant contrast to his national acclaim in 1937 (plate 15). The critical verdict now received the imprimatur of Churchill’s war memoirs, the index of which encapsulated the indictment: ‘great party manager’, ‘aversion to foreign problems’, ‘excludes Churchill from office’ and, famously, ‘confesses putting party before country’.¹⁰ To this was added a Keynesian historiography which, forgetting that Baldwin was not a social democrat and discounting imperial protectionism as an alternative – even credible – political economy, extended the charges of neglect and failure to the issues of economic depression and mass unemployment. A broad consensus, Labour–Churchillian–Keynesian,

⁶ A. Salter, *Security* (1939), pp. 194–7; ‘Cato’, *Guilty Men* (July 1940), pp. 17–21, 25–7, 35–7; A. L. Rowse, ‘Reflections on Lord Baldwin’, *Political Quarterly* 12 (1941), 305–17, reprinted in Rowse, *The End of an Epoch* (1947), pp. 77–89; press extracts in M&B pp. 1056–7; G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941: Penguin edn, 1984), p. 56.

⁷ For the story of the Astley Hall gates and examples of the abuse, see M&B pp. 1056–63.

⁸ E.g. ‘Gracchus’, *Your M.P.* (1944), p. 18; T. L. Horabin, *Politics Made Plain* (Penguin special, 1944), pp. 49–50.

⁹ J. Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden* (1995), p. 80, and see pp. 171–2. An exception was Q. Hogg, *The Left Was Never Right* (1945), pp. 54, 57–65.

¹⁰ Churchill, *Gathering Storm*, p. 697, and see pp. 30, 80, 161, 181, 194–5, 198, 199. Churchill nevertheless contributed to the Baldwin memorial, and spoke at its unveiling in 1950: M&B p. 1072.

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became entrenched. It entered the textbooks, and it remains a common impression, perpetuated even by some of the better historians.¹¹ Forty years after the war Michael Foot, by then Labour party leader but still brandishing *Guilty Men*, was able to block a proposal to place a statue of Baldwin alongside those of other prime ministers in the Houses of Parliament.¹²

So compelling were the perspectives of the 1940s that they were accepted by Baldwin's official biographer, G. M. Young, and – almost as damagingly – did not seem to be contested by his friend and chief obituarist, Tom Jones,¹³ nor by his surviving Cabinet colleagues.¹⁴ In mitigation Young argued that, during the General Strike and the Abdication especially, Baldwin had preserved the constitution and national unity. But his 'explanations' of the main points of censure only added further criticisms: indolence, irresolution, inattention to foreign affairs, even negligence of official duties, underlain by an inordinate personal need to retain public affection.¹⁵ Baldwin, a reluctant biographical subject but stung by critics who in his view lacked 'historical sense', had been persuaded by friends to commission Young because he thought a historian who had written *Portrait of an Age* (1936) and seemed to share his own distaste for 'the modern psychological approach in biographies' would be well equipped to 'picture the mentality' of

¹¹ E.g. B. Pimlott, 'Many More Pygmies than Giants', *The Independent on Sunday*, 4 April 1993; 'Baldwin neglected to rearm against Hitler'.

¹² J. Critchley, 'Why Baldwin Deserves a Place in the House', J. Haviland, 'Baldwin Must Wait for his Commons Statue', and 4th Earl Baldwin letter, *The Times*, 27 Feb., 5, 10 March 1982. *Guilty Men* was re-published in 1998 as a Penguin 'Twentieth Century Classic' (*sic*), with a new preface by Foot. The introduction, by John Stevenson, gives only the slightest indication of how little the book has withstood subsequent scholarly scrutiny.

¹³ Jones drafted his obituary in 1937, but when revising it in 1941 felt unable to 'appraise' the rearmament controversy (Jones papers A7). What stuck – and was adopted by Young – was the suggestion of 'indolence'. Only a shortened version was published in *The Times*, 15 Dec. 1947, but the full text appeared as a pamphlet, *Lord Baldwin. A Memoir* (1947). Jones's review of Young's book, in *The Observer*, 16 Nov. 1952, left its central charges intact, and Young's interpretation influenced Jones's article on Baldwin in the *DNB*, written 1953–4. Yet as 'P.Q.R.' in *The Spectator*, 7 June 1935, Jones had praised Baldwin for making possible the 'drastic' air rearmament 'now in operation'.

¹⁴ E.g. reviews of GMY by L. S. Amery, *The Spectator*, 14 Nov. 1952; Lord Norwich (Duff Cooper), *The Daily Mail*, 14 Nov. 1952; W. Elliot, *Time and Tide*, 15 Nov. 1952. Amery's criticisms in *My Political Life* became particularly influential.

¹⁵ GMY, esp. pp. 23, 56–8, 61–3, 72, 100, 106, 120–2, 126, 128, 167, 182, 200, 204. In June 1935 Young had shown himself markedly less worried about Germany than Baldwin had already been for two years: see AWB pp. 349–50.

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the interwar years.¹⁶ Young, however, approached his task in exactly the manner Baldwin had feared, one which encouraged the substitution of speculation and innuendo for what Young considered to be the inadequacies of his private papers as source material. Finding ‘the psychology of the subject . . . so absorbing that the history . . . mov[ed] further and further into the background’,¹⁷ Young initiated another persistent strand of interpretation – where psychological or temperamental supposition replaces adequate historical explanation.

However, a reaction to this historiography had already begun, with Bassett’s demonstration that Baldwin’s alleged ‘confession’ on the difficulties of rearmament had been misrepresented. Baldwin’s November 1936 statement had in fact referred to conditions well before the 1935 election, and at that election he had sought a mandate to expand a rearmament which was already under way.¹⁸ The reaction was pursued most vigorously by Baldwin’s second son who – after a private rebuke to an embarrassed Jones¹⁹ – published a biographical counterblast. Against Young’s psychological speculations he presented Baldwin’s formative experiences, religion, and values – although his candour about his father’s parents and a schoolboy scrape unintentionally stimulated the appetite for yet more psychological interpretations. Against the Churchillian–Labour account of the 1930s he deployed the best available historical source – at that time *Parliamentary Debates* – which those claiming historical authority had signally ignored.²⁰ In these ways he anticipated conclusions from later academic research, and enabled Robert Blake to produce the first detached (if plainly Conservative) assessment.²¹

¹⁶ Jones *DL*, pp. 482, 527 (21–22 Jan. 1941, 23 Dec. 1944); M&B pp. 1059, 1063; Baldwin in H. Pearson and H. Kingsmill, *Talking of Dick Whittington* (1947), p. 189.

¹⁷ GMY p. 11; Young to Duff Cooper, 22 Sept. 1946, Cooper papers 2/1.

¹⁸ R. Bassett, ‘Telling the Truth to the People. The Myth of the Baldwin “Confession”’, *The Cambridge Journal* 2 (1948–9), 84–95, also 239–42.

¹⁹ A. W. Baldwin–Jones letters, 29, 31 March 1953, CUL Add. 7938; Jones wrote that ‘in a long life I can’t recall receiving a letter which has so shaken me’.

²⁰ A. W. Baldwin, *My Father. The True Story* (1955). Another notable riposte was D. C. Somervell, *Stanley Baldwin. An Examination of Some Features of Mr. Young’s Biography* (1953), and there was a lesser-known pamphlet defence, D. H. Barber, *Stanley Baldwin* (1959).

²¹ R. Blake, ‘Baldwin and the Right’, in J. Raymond (ed.), *The Baldwin Age* (1960). Blake had earlier accepted Young’s and Churchill’s interpretations in reviews for Beaverbrook’s *Evening Standard*, ‘The Disastrous Mr. Baldwin’ (14 Nov. 1952) and ‘Was Winston Fair to Baldwin?’ (25 Sept. 1953).

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With the opening of government, party, and personal records from the late 1960s, understandings of the interwar period became more properly historical. The new evidence brought specialist party and policy studies which stimulated fresh and more complicated interpretations, and in 1969 the first comprehensive, fully documented, biography by Keith Middlemas and John Barnes. It became possible to transcend naive criticism or defence in favour of understanding, and led in time to such a rehabilitation of Baldwin's reputation that in the 1990s a Conservative prime minister could publicly claim him as a model, and a Labour prime minister could speak at the dedication of a memorial to him in Westminster Abbey.²²

Some recent historical studies have been perceptive about Baldwin.²³ Nevertheless, the general effect of interpretations since the 1960s has been to re-cast him as an elusive figure. His public position notwithstanding, the official and private records display no firm and persistent imprint of him as a commanding figure. Contemporaries at a loss to explain his dominance frequently ascribed it to 'character', and subsequent accounts – from Jones and G. M. Young onwards – have not always been more substantial or precise. Middlemas and Barnes's 'new style' of leadership turns out to be little more than basic man-management.²⁴ Various versions of an interpretation that Baldwin himself chose to project – 'my worst enemy would not say of me that I did not know what the reaction of the English people would be to a particular course of action'²⁵ – are less explanations than evasions. To say that he

²² John Major on becoming prime minister in 1990 and Tony Blair in his address on 18 December 1997 – marking the fiftieth anniversary of Baldwin's death – both invoked him as a 'consensual' politician, plainly drawing parallels with their own public stances. Earlier, in 1967, Sir Edward Heath had spoken at a private House of Commons luncheon to commemorate the centenary of Baldwin's birth. The organising committee included Lord (R. A.) Butler, Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, Lord and Lady Davidson, and Baldwin's surviving private secretaries.

²³ Notably M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 297–300, 407–8, 421–2, and *The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 259–71; B. Schwarz, 'The Language of Constitutionalism: Baldwinite Conservatism', in *Formations of Nation and People* (1984), 1–18; D. Jarvis, 'Stanley Baldwin and the Ideology of the Conservative Response to Socialism, 1918–1931' (PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1991: hereafter cited as 'Jarvis thesis'), to be published as *Conservative Ideology and the Response to Socialism 1918–1931*.

²⁴ M&B ch. 18, esp. pp. 488–91; K. Middlemas, 'Stanley Baldwin', in H. van Thal (ed.), *The Prime Ministers*, 2 vols. (1975), II. 255–6.

²⁵ E.g. Abdication speech, in *SOL* p. 73 (10 Dec. 1936); GMY pp. 54, 129.

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embodied 'Englishness' overlooks the extent to which Englishness has always been diverse and contested: what did Durham miners, Worcestershire farmers, and City financiers share? It also overlooks a rare period of Conservative success in Scotland.²⁶ Attributing his power to some special ability to interpret and reflect public opinion²⁷ assumes that 'public opinion' formed something homogeneous, easily identifiable, and intrinsically Conservative, rather than divided, diffuse, and in substantial degrees reactionary, Liberal, Labour, or socialist. Over 45 per cent of electors were always non- or anti-Conservative. It also assumes that 'public opinion' existed as an independent entity, rather than developing in dynamic relationship with what was said by the competing political parties, let alone the media. Ascribing Baldwin's success simply to the occupation of the 'centre' or 'middle' of politics presumes that a political 'centre' pre-existed in some manifest and stable form, rather than having repeatedly to be defined and constructed. To describe him unambiguously as 'consensual', moderate, or conciliatory is to disregard periods when he deliberately sharpened differences, notably over the General Strike and at the 1924 and 1931 elections.²⁸ A still grander or (depending on perspective) more dismissive view, that he encapsulated the spirit or will of the interwar age²⁹ begs similar if larger questions. All these interpretations imply that Baldwin's conception and practice of leadership was essentially passive, neutral, or hollow – 'not to create popular feeling', but to 'react to the mood of the people'³⁰ – in effect, non-leadership. Then again, it is certainly significant that he was considered sincere and trustworthy, and had skills of communication on the platform and in the new mass media.³¹ But these

²⁶ Blake, 'Baldwin and the Right', p. 26; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, pp. 212–13. For the indicative significance of the Scottish vote, see R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), p. 264.

²⁷ Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, pp. 207–8; S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party. The Crisis of 1929–1931* (New Haven, 1988), p. 8.

²⁸ A point well made in C. L. Mowat, 'Baldwin Restored?', *Journal of Modern History* 27 (1955), 171–2. See also B. Malament, 'Baldwin Re-restored?', *ibid.* 44 (1972), 95, and Jarvis thesis, pp. 12–14 and ch. 6.

²⁹ E.g. Blake, 'Baldwin and the Right', pp. 25–6; epigraph to M&B, p. viii; D. Cannadine, 'Politics, Propaganda and Art. The Case of Two Worcestershire Lads', *Midland History* 4 (1977), 107; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 207; S. Ball, '1916–1929', in A. Seldon (ed.), *How Tory Governments Fall* (1996), p. 260.

³⁰ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, p. 8.

³¹ J. Ramsden, 'Baldwin and Film', in N. Pronay and D. W. Spring (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics and Film 1918–45* (1982), pp. 126–8; J. Ramsden, *An Appetite for Power. A History of the*

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describe forms of delivery, empty in themselves, rather than the qualities for creating a believing audience: substance and purpose.

There are other lines of inquiry – structural, organisational, sociological, ideological – which suggest that Baldwin himself mattered very little, and that his long period of prominence owed as much to fortunate circumstances as had his original rise to the premiership. The 1918 redistribution of parliamentary seats, the 1921 partition of Ireland, and the efficiency of the Conservative party machine; the Conservative preference of newly enfranchised women voters, the broader social composition of direct tax-payers, the steady rise in real incomes; the division of the anti-Conservative vote, Liberal party disintegration, the troubles of the first two Labour governments: together these certainly explain a great deal about interwar Conservative success. So, more recently, do important analyses of interwar Conservative propaganda, seen as promoting anti-collectivist and anti-inflationary ‘conventional wisdoms’ and hostile stereotypes of the trade-unionised working class.³² Plainly enough, Baldwin’s power and success were no more his own unaided creation than were those of any other political leader. Yet these approaches do not register the large and distinctive impression he made upon the public mind. Nor do they accommodate the widespread contemporary belief that he constituted a political force and an electoral asset in himself.

The nature of writing about Baldwin is so peculiar that it can produce verdicts which are, in the strict sense of the word, incredible. Although now properly discounted as a specific explanation for Baldwin’s calling of the 1923 election, it is still asserted as general interpretation that his chief political aim, an ‘obsession’ which ‘sustained his career’, was to exclude Lloyd George from office³³ – this when he was confronted by the rather more fundamental challenges of newly emergent socialism, direct-action

Conservative Party since 1830 (1998), pp. 253–6; Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, pp. 11, 16.

³² The seminal essay is R. McKibbin, ‘Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the “Public” in Interwar Britain’, in his *Ideologies of Class*, pp. 259–93. See also D. Jarvis, ‘British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s’, *English Historical Review* 111 (1996), 59–84.

³³ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (1970 edn), pp. 220, 222, 227, 236; J. Campbell, ‘Stanley Baldwin’, in J. P. Mackintosh (ed.), *British Prime Ministers of the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols. (1977), 1. 191 and *passim*; M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867–1939* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 229, 274; Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, p. 8. This interpretation originated with Jones and Amery.