

1 The National Government and Interwar Conservatism: The Historical Task

Frankly, he had no use for the National Government. He feared the Conservative Party had been led astray by strange gods and had departed from its old ideals.

This was how the *Norfolk Chronicle* summed up the speech of Colonel Thomas Purdy to a gathering of the North Norfolk Conservative Association in January 1935.¹ The colonel was well known in the county. He had served as an officer in the Norfolk Regiment during the Great War, including as a company major with the men of the king's Sandringham estate who met their fate in Gallipoli. A lifelong Conservative and party activist, he had railed against the cross-party National government's 'un-Conservative' policies since the formation of that administration in 1931. Continued membership, he warned, amounted to self-destruction. He had most emphatically not become a Conservative in order to support a coalition government, much less so one led since 1931 by a Labour prime minister. Ramsay MacDonald was a peace campaigner during the war and a socialist whose policies now included far-reaching reforms to the Indian constitution, a particular bugbear for Purdy.

Such partisanship was rooted in more than instinct and ideology. It was shaped by the Conservative party's unhappy experience of the post-war coalition led by Lloyd George, whose toppling by Conservative MPs in 1922 was attributed in large part to grassroots dissatisfaction.² However, whereas the post-war coalition was condemned by a majority of activists (except in large parts of Scotland), by 1935 Colonel Purdy cut an increasingly lonesome and eccentric figure in his hostility to the MacDonald coalition – as he himself acknowledged in his speech to his local association. Similarly in the House of Commons, whereas 187 Conservative

¹ *Norfolk Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1935.

² K. Morgan, *Consensus and disunity: the Lloyd George coalition government, 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), ch.14.

2 Introduction

MPs voted to leave the first coalition in 1922, in 1934 a hundred of them signed a letter to *The Times* calling for the establishment of a National Party that would make the National government ‘for all practical purposes, a permanent ideal in British politics’. The following year, virtually all Conservatives campaigned to renew the government at the general election.³

The National government was formed in August 1931, following the collapse of the Labour government, and lasted until 1940. It comprised the Conservative party, led first by Stanley Baldwin, followed by Neville Chamberlain from May 1937; a rump of the Labour party loyal to MacDonald, known as National Labour; and two Liberal contingents, the Liberal Nationals led by John Simon and the National Liberals led by Herbert Samuel. With the exception of the Samuelite Liberals, whose ministers resigned in 1932 in protest at the introduction of tariffs, the government remained intact until May 1940. Up until Chamberlain’s resignation as prime minister and Winston Churchill’s decision to invite the mainstream Labour party into the wartime coalition, thereby creating a genuine all-party coalition government, Labour was locked out of power. It is therefore unsurprising that the opportunity to control a broad anti-socialist alliance, one that commanded much Liberal and ‘moderate’ support, is commonly cited as the reason for continued Conservative membership of the National government.⁴ According to this view, the Conservatives used the crisis of 1931 to exploit patriotic feeling in the country and thereby secure for themselves a ‘national’ mandate to force through partisan priorities, including protection and budgetary cuts.⁵

This caricature of a Tory administration in thin disguise has long been discredited, with historians arguing that the government pursued more centrist policies than a purely Conservative administration would have done.⁶ Even so, the relationship between the National government and the culture of popular Conservatism in the country has remained surprisingly under-examined. Our understanding of Conservative involvement in the National government comes from historians’ attempts to explain the party’s electoral dominance of the interwar period as a whole. Thus it

³ *The Times*, 14 Jun. 1934.

⁴ E.g., P. Williamson, ‘The Conservative party, 1900–1939: from crisis to ascendancy’, in C. Wrigley (ed.), *A companion to early twentieth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2003), 3–22, 19.

⁵ For a classic statement, see R. Miliband, *Parliamentary socialism: a study in the politics of Labour* (London, 1961; 2nd edn, 1973), 169–92.

⁶ J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *The slump: society and politics during the depression* (London, 1977); J. Ramsden, *The age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902–1940* (London, 1978), ch.14; N. Smart, *The national government, 1931–40* (Basingstoke, 1999); G. Fry, *The politics of crisis: an interpretation of British politics, 1931–1945* (Basingstoke, 2001).

is tempting to interpret the National government as the ultimate embodiment of Baldwin's strategy, starting in the 1920s, to position the party as the only reliable repository of 'national' values, as an appeal to men and women across the social, political, and religious divides through a disarmingly common-sense commitment to national instead of party interests.⁷ Or it can be interpreted as the apotheosis of a powerful coalition of voters known as 'the public', which – in Ross McKibbin's famous argument – relied on anti-socialist propaganda to compel many working-class voters to coalesce around middle-class opinion, served by Conservative policy but cast in the form of 'conventional wisdom'.⁸ In this way, the National government appears as little more than an adjunct to the party's electoral designs of the 1920s. Indeed, Conservatives like Purdy, who rejected the National government, are commonly presented as opponents of Baldwinite Conservatism, misfits in the whole project of moderate Conservatism between the wars.⁹

Moreover, our understanding of the National government is distinctly national in perspective. Accounts of its formation have focused on high-level politicking, reflecting the fact that after 1922 the idea of party cooperation at the level of central government was almost entirely confined to high political circles.¹⁰ Accounts of the government's life have tended to focus on foreign policy, while research on the domestic politics of the 1930s has preoccupied itself with tracing the rise of the planned economy, primarily by the left in reaction to the National government.¹¹ This, in turn, reflects the relative neglect of the local dimension in analyses of the decade. Several historians of interwar Conservatism have turned to local party records, but none as the basis of sustained

⁷ Ramsden, *Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 330–1; P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative leadership and national values* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁸ R. McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative party and the "public" in inter-war Britain', in *The ideologies of class: social relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 259–93.

⁹ E.g., R. Self, *The evolution of the British party system, 1885–1940* (Harlow, 2014), 187; M. Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' *Fascists and fascism in Britain between the wars* (London, 2006), 123–4.

¹⁰ S. Ball, 'The Conservative party and the formation of the National government: August 1931', *Hj*, 29 (1986), 159–82; P. Williamson, *National crisis and national government: British politics, the economy and empire, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992); G. Searle, *Country before party: coalition and the idea of 'national government' in modern Britain, 1885–1987* (London, 1995), ch.7.

¹¹ M. Cowling, *The impact of Hitler: British politics and British policy, 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1975); N. Crowson, *Facing fascism: the Conservative party and the European dictators, 1935–40* (London, 1997); D. Ritschel, *The politics of planning: the debate on economic planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997); R. Toye, *The Labour party and the planned economy, 1931–1951* (Woodbridge, 2003).

4 Introduction

examination of National Conservatism.¹² Furthermore, these works stand in contrast to work on Victorian and Edwardian popular Conservatism, which embeds local parties in the wider and grittier world of community politics.¹³ Only with the same focus on local communities can the implications of the National government for popular Conservatism on the ground, and the reasons for grassroots support for the coalition, be understood.

This book offers the first detailed study of why local Conservatives, up and down the country and across a range of constituency types, supported the National government. While the landslide election victory of 1931 and the introduction of tariffs in 1932 obviously played an important part, these initial advantages hardly explain why Conservatives continued to forfeit the prospect of single-party rule for so many years after. Writing to Baldwin in 1932, the party chairman, Lord Stonehaven, expressed grave doubts about the grassroots' commitment to the government and predicted that its break-up was 'only a question of time'.¹⁴ This book delves beneath existing accounts of the National government to explore why local Conservative activists, contrary to Stonehaven's fears, supported the new government up to a second general election in 1935 and beyond. Given that their experience of the Lloyd George coalition was instrumental in forcing Conservative withdrawal in 1922, their experience of the 1930s is key to understanding the party's enduring commitment to the National government in the face of the undoubted costs of coalition – to the career prospects of Conservative MPs competing for ministerial jobs; to party morale, at least in constituencies where the 'national' ticket was held by the Liberal Nationals or National Labour; and to the integrity of party opinion on the empire and much else. In 1934, the County Durham MP Cuthbert Headlam confided to his diary that the government's record on employment looked insufficient to impress working-class voters in the depressed north. He also described how many of his colleagues in the region, desperate to

¹² S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative party: the crisis of 1929–31* (London, 1988); Crowson, *Facing fascism*; N. McCrillis, *The British Conservative party in the age of universal suffrage: popular Conservatism, 1918–1929* (Columbus, OH, 1998); S. Ball, *Portrait of a party: the Conservative party in Britain, 1918–1945* (Oxford, 2013).

¹³ E.g., J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the people: party, language and popular politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998); M. Brodie, *The politics of the poor: the East End of London, 1885–1914* (Oxford, 2004); T. Cooper, 'London-over-the-border: politics in suburban Walthamstow, 1870–1914', in M. Cragoe & A. Taylor (eds.), *London politics, 1760–1914* (Basingstoke, 2005), 211–32; M. Roberts, "'Villa Toryism' and popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885–1902', *HJ*, 49 (2006), 217–46; A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in imperial London, 1868–1906* (Woodbridge, 2007).

¹⁴ Memorandum by Stonehaven, n.d. 1932, Cambridge University Library, Baldwin papers, 46/47–58.

retain their seats, were becoming ‘more Socialist than the Socialists’.¹⁵ Meanwhile in the prosperous south, a leading activist, Sir James Hawkey, had fewer doubts about the anti-socialist instincts of his fellow voters in suburban Essex, which made the ‘socialistic tendencies of the Government’ all the more puzzling.¹⁶ Such could be the topsy-turvy world of cross-party government for many Conservatives. Yet up and down the country the party grassroots supported the government regardless. Why?

It was not just senior Conservatives in Westminster who exploited the crisis of 1931; party activists in the constituencies did so too. The book builds on Ross McKibbin’s interpretation of 1931 as a pivotal ‘accident’ that recalibrated British politics amid the parties’ ongoing attempts to adapt to the challenging new conditions of mass democracy ushered in with the armistice.¹⁷ This was something that local Conservatives themselves came to realise and act upon in the months and years that followed. For while the new government brought its own challenges, it also set in train a range of opportunities for local parties to forge new narratives, reconsider priorities, and formulate new appeals – which, after their fraught experience of adapting to mass politics since the war, party activists were glad to embrace. In short, the book investigates how Conservative activists responded to the National government over time; how they shaped the government’s appeals in the country, with what objectives and results; and with what consequences for the party itself and British political culture more widely.

Party Activists and Local Politics

To bring the focus of analysis closer to the party grassroots and their relationship with the voters they sought to mobilise, the arguments presented here draw upon evidence from a range of constituencies. This case-study approach has important advantages. It allows for clear and systematic analysis of a range of different constituency types – urban, suburban, and rural; metropolitan and provincial; agricultural, industrial, and professional; northern and southern; ‘working-class’ and ‘middle-class’; English, Scottish, and Welsh. It also facilitates a depth of historical contextualisation that is all but impossible to ensure when analysing a larger sample of constituencies. As many works of microhistory tell us, the conclusions drawn have relevance beyond the case studies

¹⁵ *Parliament and politics in the age of Baldwin and MacDonald: the Headlam diaries, 1923–1935*, ed. S. Ball (London, 1992), 301–2 (24, 30 Apr. 1934).

¹⁶ Hawkey to W. Churchill, 27 Nov. 1934, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill papers, CHAR 7/12B (232).

¹⁷ R. McKibbin, *Parties and people: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010).

6 Introduction

themselves.¹⁸ The aim of this book is to illuminate, by example, phenomena that had a crucial bearing on the nature of popular Conservatism between the wars – and through this to explore what drove the wider party's attachment to the National government.

The case-study approach also permits a deeper exploration of the enduring role that locality played in shaping political discourse after 1918. Because no area can be defined by an exact set of socio-economic interests to which all residents unanimously subscribe, a locality is best understood as a community of converging interests. 'Interests do not have to be identical to form a community', explains the sociologist Graham Day, 'but they do have to converge with one another around matters of mutual concern'.¹⁹ These communities were rarely static. Many of them changed dramatically in the interwar period as a consequence of suburbanisation, broadcast media, mass consumerism, and long-term unemployment.²⁰ So did the actions of local Conservatives as they responded to the changing shape of community interests, and also as they mediated the relationship between voters and a national political establishment now able to transmit its message with unprecedented reach and directness. In this way, the constituency case studies bring to the fore the local itself, but also the lived experience of those inhabiting it.

This in turn highlights the considerable degree of agency that local political culture continued to wield in the early decades of mass democracy. By the 1990s an interpretative trend had emerged among historians of modern British politics that rejected structuralist explanations of political behaviour and instead laid stress on the role that national politicians themselves played in constructing public appeals.²¹ However, this approach has too often marginalised the question of how these appeals were received by voters and activists. Undoubtedly there are methodological challenges involved in isolating and interrogating multiple processes of reception. Studying the reception of political ideas by 'ordinary' voters, for instance, rarely involves those voters' own individual commentaries or responses except where Mass Observation records exist. Before the introduction of opinion polling in 1937, politicians relied on a contextualised conception of 'public opinion' drawn from the intersecting worlds of the press, parliament, and the public platform.²² Similarly

¹⁸ For a discussion of these microhistories and their legacies, see S. Magnússon & I. Szijártó, *What is microhistory? Theory and practice* (Abingdon, 2013), esp. 1–11, 39–61.

¹⁹ G. Day, *Community and everyday life* (Abingdon, 2006), 117.

²⁰ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).

²¹ See the contributions in J. Lawrence & M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, state and society: electoral behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997); Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*.

²² J. Thompson, *British political culture and the idea of 'public opinion', 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 2013).

for the historian, interpretation of voters' response to political messages is informed by analysis of political appeals in tandem with broad contemporaneous evidence concerning social identity, economic conditions, and social and historical circumstances.

The sources through which activists' reception of political messages can be gleaned are more accessible. Activist voices are heard in local party records and personal correspondence, as well as in party forums and the local press. Yet these currently contend with a somewhat deterministic assumption that places the technological advances of the 1920s and 1930s, which enabled the direct transmission of political appeals across the electorate, as the more important determinant of a party's performance. As a result, not only is the popular reception of political appeals in interwar Britain poorly understood, but the story of their construction is all too often told through the actions of national political leaders. The case studies redress this imbalance. They highlight the fact that the construction of effective appeals was equally a preoccupation of activists in the constituencies. These activists operated at a geographic and temporal remove from their national leaders, for whom the new media represented a means to better *manage* public opinion. In the constituencies, however, the imperative to be seen to *represent* voters was a constant factor in ensuring that political language played a reflective and not just a constitutive role.²³ Appeals were designed according to powerful assumptions about how to address the local electorate – by its class, gender, occupational, denominational, or regional interest; by policy appeal, social events, or philanthropy; through personality, press, or auxiliary organisations. These inherited assumptions also determined how grassroots members mediated the party's national appeals in the constituency. In this way, the case studies extend analytical awareness of the deep contexts of Victorian and Edwardian traditions of popular politics into post-First World War political culture.

Like all methodologies, the case-study approach adopted here reflects particular choices in historical reconstruction, and therefore has its disadvantages. Twelve constituencies cannot be fully representative of 600. However, in recognising that no constituency is hermetically sealed from its neighbours, we can incorporate insights from neighbouring seats. Such a framework, involving a dozen primary constituency case studies each in contact with an orbit of secondary constituency case studies, shows how each constituency was shaped by powerful regional forces in addition to

²³ G. Thomas, 'Political modernity and "government" in the construction of inter-war democracy: local and national encounters', in L. Beers & G. Thomas (eds.), *Brave new world: imperial and democratic nation-building in Britain between the wars* (London, 2011), 39–65.

local factors. It also ensures that consideration is given to those seats where the Conservatives gave way to National Labour or the Liberal Nationals, whereas the Conservatives held the National ticket in all but one of the primary case studies.

The Constituency Case Studies

The case studies selected here cover five broad categories of constituency in the 1930s: industrial, old suburban, new suburban, rural, and Celtic. Stockton-on-Tees and Leeds West represent industrial, typically ‘working-class’ areas where families suffered the threat of long-term unemployment and Conservatives suffered the threat of Labour. They possessed historical industries of their own – shipbuilding and increasingly chemical works in the former, and clothes manufacturing in the latter – but were nevertheless steeped in the coalmining and textile-industry politics of County Durham and the West Riding respectively. Harold Macmillan represented Stockton for most of the period, while Vyvyan Adams, a ‘centrist’ Conservative and leading light in the League of Nations Union, represented Leeds West from 1931 to 1945.²⁴ Both were prominent anti-appeasers in the late 1930s, though neither lost the support of his local association.

Representing the ‘middle-class’ sensibilities of old suburbia are Birmingham Moseley and Liverpool East Toxteth. These cannot be separated from their main cities, and therefore offer a glimpse of how the civic culture of the great centres of Victorian caucus politics impacted on the Conservatives’ electoral strategies after 1918. The former was the seat of Patrick Hannon, a figure whose close association with Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Beaverbrook, and involvement in self-styled patriotic organisations such as the Navy League and British Commonwealth Union, has seen him classified as a Conservative of the far right.²⁵ Liverpool East Toxteth, by contrast, passed between several Conservative MPs during the period under consideration.²⁶

²⁴ The social, economic, and political features of the case studies are outlined in greater detail in the historiographical discussion at the head of each chapter. For a general orientation of politics in these two regions, see K. Nicholas, *The social effects of unemployment on Teesside, 1919–39* (Manchester, 1986) and J. Reynolds & K. Laybourn, *Labour heartland: the history of the Labour party in West Yorkshire during the inter-war years, 1918–1939* (Bradford, 1987).

²⁵ T. Linehan, *British fascism, 1918–1939: parties, ideology and culture* (Manchester, 2000), 43–4.

²⁶ There is, remarkably, no modern volume on Birmingham politics in this period, only the rather dated A. Briggs, *History of Birmingham, vol. 2: borough and city, 1865–1938* (London, 1952). On Liverpool, see P. Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism: a political and social history of Liverpool, 1868–1939* (Liverpool, 1981) and S. Davies, *Liverpool*

Suburban expansion, the proliferation of housing estates, and the consequent clash of 'new' and 'old' middle classes was a particular feature of the interwar years. New suburbia is therefore examined through the examples of Ilford and Epping, both in Essex. The former was a fast-growing London dormitory town, adjoined by the Becontree estate, and birthplace of the famous Peace Ballot initiative of 1934–5. Nearby Epping was a more mixed rural-urban area and experienced limited social change in these years. Held by Winston Churchill throughout his 'wilderness years', Epping is of particular interest in bringing to this analysis a Conservative tradition commonly thought to be opposed to the National government.²⁷

Norfolk North and the Wiltshire constituency of Devizes represent two different categories of rural seat. The former was a bastion of the early agricultural trade union movement in East Anglia and one of Labour's great hopes in the countryside between the wars. In Devizes, by comparison a relatively safe Tory seat, the party had to contend with the enduring strength of West Country Liberalism.²⁸ The same was true of much of Wales. The constituencies of Pembrokeshire and Gower form the basis of the study of Wales – a region where the Conservatives failed to prosper under the National government. The former was a mixed constituency, with a Welsh-speaking, nonconformist population in the rural north of the county, distinct from a mostly anglicised population in the industrial and maritime south. Gower was also mixed although mainly industrial, reliant on tinsplate and coal mining, and remained a Labour stronghold throughout the period.²⁹

Scottish Conservatives – or Unionists, as they continued to call themselves – derived more electoral advantage from the National government compared to their Welsh counterparts, as the examples of Dunbartonshire and Dundee reveal. The former was a mixed constituency encompassing Highland country in the north; industry including textiles, shipbuilding, and coal mining on and around the Clyde in the south; and a portion of suburban Glasgow. Up to the First World War, according to Henry Pelling, 'this was a marginal constituency, saved from

Labour: social and political influences on the development of the Labour party in Liverpool, 1900–1939 (Keele, 1996).

²⁷ See A. Olechnowicz, *Working-class housing in England between the wars: Becontree estate* (Oxford, 1997) and D. Thomas, *Churchill: the member for Woodford* (London, 1994).

²⁸ See A. Howkins, *Poor labouring men: rural radicalism in Norfolk, 1872–1923* (London, 1985) and G. Tregidga, *The Liberal party in south-west Britain since 1918: political decline, dormancy and rebirth* (Exeter, 2000).

²⁹ See D. W. Howell (ed.), *Pembrokeshire county history, vol. iv: modern Pembrokeshire, 1815–1974* (Haverfordwest, 1993) and C. Williams, *Capitalism, community and conflict: the South Wales coalfield, 1898–1947* (Cardiff, 1998).

being Conservative . . . by the growth of the industrial population and by the strength of feeling in favour of Free Trade'. By the 1920s its Vale of Leven district, one of interwar Britain's 'Little Moscows', simultaneously posed the ultimate threat to the Conservative world view and a counterpoint to Conservative claims of moderation.³⁰ Further east, Dundee, despite a tradition of working-class Unionism allied with Irish Protestantism, remained a working-class Liberal stronghold up to the 1920s, at which stage it looked set to become a Labour city. Its politics bore three main characteristics: first, the dominance of the jute industry and therefore the city's exposure to global trade; second, the high proportion of women employed in the industry as weavers, which carried implications for the nature of political citizenship in the city, the form of trade-union activities, and the demands of protest movements; and third, the amalgam of radical traditions and campaigns that underpinned pre-war popular Liberalism, including Scottish home rule, prohibitionism, trade unionism, Lib-Labism, municipal welfarism, and women's rights.³¹

The primary source base for each constituency comprises divisional and area Conservative party records, the local or regional press, and wherever possible the papers of parliamentary candidates and MPs, including in some instances those of Labour and Liberal opponents. None of these constituencies was self-contained. Voters shared material and political interests with people in surrounding seats, either electively or circumstantially. This manifested itself across divisional boundaries, most obviously within established urban centres like Birmingham, Leeds, and Liverpool, but also in more diverse areas like the eastern suburbs of London, where rural Essex met the metropolitan East End, and the semi-rural central south, where market towns like Devizes neighboured regional centres of the growing consumer and service economy like Reading. For some, such as the residents of Dundee, perceptions of regional interests involved distinctly global considerations. While the regional unit continued to shape the political imaginary in fundamental ways, a more intricate awareness of other communities and interests further afield was fostered by the growth of radio, cinema, and the popular national press, and indeed the growing market for popular social surveys like J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934). This book uses developments in the documentary movement as a means of accessing these important regional and national hinterlands.

³⁰ H. Pelling, *Social geography of British elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), 406–7; S. Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and working-class militancy in inter-war Britain* (London, 1980).

³¹ J. Tomlinson, *Dundee and the empire: 'Juteopolis', 1850–1939* (Edinburgh, 2014).