



The
Conservative party
and the
extreme right
1945-75

MARK PITCHFORD

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Abbreviations

ACG	Anti-Communist Guardian
AIMS	Aims of Industry
BCAEC	British Council against European Commitments
BDL	British Defence League
BHL	British Housewives' League
BNP	British National Party
BPP	British People's Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CCO	Conservative Central Office
CPA	Conservative Party Archive
CPC	Conservative Political Centre
FCS	Federation of Conservative Students
FFF	Fighting Fund for Freedom
HINC	Halt Immigration Now Campaign
LEL	League of Empire Loyalists
MCU	Middle Class Union
NDP	National Democratic Party
NFU	National Farmers Union
NFWI	National Federation of Women's Institutes
NRP	New Reform Party
PEST	Pressure for Economic and Social Toryism
PLDF	People's League for the Defence of Freedom
RPS	Racial Preservation Society
SIF	Society for Individual Freedom
TGGN	The Guild of Good Neighbours
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TNC	The New Crusade
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UIA	United Industrialists Association
WF	Workers' Forum

Preface

This book's purpose is to discover what role the Conservative Party played in the extreme-right's failure after the Second World War. Readers will make moral judgements about individuals and groups mentioned, but I do not. This is partly because views that society now rejects were once commonplace and accepted. Moreover, individuals who once held these views may now repudiate them, and I see no point in criticising them now. The historian's task is to explain. Judgement is a matter for society.

Many institutions have helped me. Cardiff University was very accommodating in allowing me to study for a Ph.D., particularly so long after graduating. I found a very warm welcome at Cardiff University and am saddened that my active association with it seems to be ending. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) provided a full doctoral award. This was a life-changing event, without which I doubt that I would have completed my research. The AHRC also granted a scholarship for a substantial period of study at the John W. Kluge Centre in the Library of Congress, Washington DC. I am grateful for the financial and cultural opportunities afforded by the AHRC's generosity. Other institutions also contributed financially. An Institute of Historical Research bursary allowed me to rummage thoroughly through archives in London. The Royal Historical Society and Cardiff University provided funds so that I could attend overseas conferences.

I am indebted to many individuals, and apologise if I have omitted someone from my thanks. The archival staff at the universities of Hull, Sheffield, Birmingham, and at the LSE were very helpful. So, too, were the employees of the British Library in London, and the staff at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. The people at the Colindale newspaper library were remarkable in meeting my requests. I am especially grateful to Colin Harris, Jeremy McIlwhaine, and their colleagues at the Bodleian Library, who provided exemplary service and a warm welcome. I also want to thank Mary Lou Reker at the Kluge Center for her kindness, and the staff at the Library of Congress for their help and perseverance. Former members of the Monday Club were also generous in giving their time and thoughts, and in allowing me to include their comments. I also wish to thank all at MUP, particularly Tony Mason, and my copy-editor Frances Hackeson, for getting this book into print.

I am grateful to the medical profession for their care over more than two decades, particularly Dr J. S. Broxton, Mr Geoffrey Ingram, Professor Sir Miles Irving, Mr Iain Anderson and Dr H. Sutherland. My friends Peter Hully, John Kerr and Mark Rathburn have kept me sane over many years, mainly by being as rubbish on the golf course as I am. Peter also frequently offered financial

assistance, which I will never forget. Thanks, too, to Sarah Lloyd for her encouragement and friendship. Dr Garthine Walker was incredibly tolerant in accommodating me when necessary, which I appreciate very much. All research students are indebted to their supervisors: I am particularly so. Dr Keir Waddington acted as my second supervisor and provided cogent comments that assisted in focusing my efforts. My connection with Dr Kevin Passmore goes back to the early 1990s when I was one of his undergraduates. He was exemplary then, and as a Ph.D. supervisor, and I consider him a friend. His only flaw is a deluded belief that Cardiff Blues will win the Heineken Cup some day.

I wish to end with comments about my family. I appreciate the encouragement of my parents-in-law, John and Mary Rabbitt, whose help and assistance, and care for their grandchildren, has been excellent. John was my year master at De La Salle Grammar, and I am sure that he is as amused by how events have transpired as me. During the course of writing this book, my brother, Michael Pitchford, confirmed what I have long thought about him. On a number of occasions, he made substantial journeys to bring me home when I was having problems. He is the best of brothers. As for our parents, Neville and Mary Pitchford, I will never be able to repay their love and kindness. Without their practical assistance and moral support, I would not have completed this book. They are excellent role models, both as parents and grandparents. As in so much of my life, however, four people have made what I do worthwhile, my wife Joanne, and our children Christopher, Edward and Amy. They have lived with the consequences of my medical condition with love and without complaint. It is to them that I dedicate this work.

Introduction

The Conservative Party is a political phenomenon. A 'Tory' party has existed for over three hundred years, surviving changes that resulted from industrialisation, adapting to the Great Reform Act of 1832, and subsequently introducing its own progressive electoral reforms under Disraeli. A party of landowners, property, and privilege, the Conservative Party not only weathered the century when full democracy emerged but dominated it. It won nineteen of the twenty-six general elections between 1900 and 1997, eleven outright, and gained over 40% of the vote in those it lost. Perhaps most startling is the Conservative Party's domination of politics in the 'hungry thirties', albeit within a National Government, when other western democracies were threatened by, and some succumbed to, authoritarian and extremist alternatives. Of the party's leaders only Austen Chamberlain failed to become prime minister, until William Hague in 1997. The Conservative Party's story is one of consistent success largely explained by its ability to adapt to new circumstances such as an increased franchise, imperialism, and nationalism. Its fierce opposition to change frequently became muted acceptance and party policy, in the course of which the Conservative Party co-opted, and then absorbed, Peelites, Liberal Unionists, Coalition Liberals, and National Liberals. The result is a broad-based electoral monolith. Therefore, it is easy to attribute the extreme right's conspicuous and longstanding electoral failure to the Conservative Party's ability to attract many voters.

Yet the extreme right was a persistent feature of twentieth-century Britain. Prior to the First World War, the Tariff Reform League propounded mass populism, autarky and Anglo-Saxon alliance. The National Maritime League, The Navy League, and The National Service League believed that a liberal consensus antithetical to the demands of empire was dominating British politics, and emphasised defence in reaction. Xenophobia and anti-Semitism existed in the

British Brothers' League, National League for Clean Government, Parliamentary Alien Immigration Committee, the London League, and the Immigration Reform Association. Victory in 1918 arguably deprived the extreme right of fertile soil, but fear of Communism and Socialism helped the National Party to win two seats in the 1918 General Election. Thereafter, fear of the left, Jews and aliens resulted in the formation of movements such as the British Empire Union, National Citizens Union, and Middle Class Union. A welter of mimetic indigenous movements appeared in Britain after Mussolini formed the first fascist government in Italy in 1922. Nazi groups emerged after Hitler came to power in 1933. The Second World War associated these extreme-right groups in the public mind with racism, authoritarianism, and extermination. However, it did not eradicate them. Over two hundred embryonic extreme-right movements materialised in the period 1945–87.

The Conservative Party did not deny its connection with the extreme right prior to 1939. Some Conservatives openly flaunted it. Future Conservative MP Patrick Hannon sat on the British Fascisti's Grand Council. Pugh described Conservative membership of the British Fascisti as a calculated attempt to alter the party's 'limp-wristed attitude towards the left'.¹ The British Fascisti's relations with the Conservative Party were deliberate and open. Its members acted as stewards at Conservative Party meetings, and rented rooms from Conservative local associations. Conservative MPs made no secret of their sympathies for extreme-right regimes, while others betrayed their views by supporting restrictive measures on 'aliens' seeking sanctuary from them. Support for extreme-right views appeared in Conservative publications such as the *English Review*, *Saturday Review*, the *National Review*, and *Truth*. The Conservative Party was associated with *Truth* via its connection with Neville Chamberlain, but so were Oswald Mosley, and former BUF member and subsequent founder of the National Front, A. K. Chesterton, whom it employed. The *English Review* attempted to influence Conservative Party policy in a campaign orchestrated by its editor, the BUF sympathiser Douglas Jerrold, and Lord Lloyd, a Conservative MP until 1925. The proprietor of the supposedly Conservative-supporting *Saturday Review* sided with Mosley against the Conservative Party. Many Conservatives were also members of the January Club, a front organisation of the British Union of Fascists. The mainstream Conservative newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, supported Mosley. One Conservative MP even stated that there were no fundamental differences of outlook between Blackshirts and Conservatives. Individual Conservatives funded Mosley. Some, such as the Duke of Northumberland, financed extreme-right publications that attracted contributions from Conservative MPs and fascists. Other Conservatives formed their own extremist movements. Edward Doran, Conservative MP for Tottenham North, announced in 1933 that he had formed a private Nazi army, 'The Liberators'. Lord Lymington, Conservative MP for Basingstoke (1929–34), founded English Array, a group that harked back to England's rural golden age. and consorted with known fascists who were attempting to form the extreme right into a viable movement. R. Dorman-Smith, Unionist MP for Petersfield

(1935–41), Minister of Agriculture (1939–40) and Governor of Burma (1941–46), joined Lymington's English Array.

Conservatives and extreme-right figures joined organisations such as the National Citizens Union. Their presence in the proliferation of pro-Nazi, pro-peace groups in the 1930s was especially noteworthy given the possibility of conflict. The Anglo-German Fellowship contained peers, Conservative MPs, ministers of the Crown, and extreme-right individuals including the subsequently interned Barry Domvile. The Link was a populist pro-Nazi organisation that sought to attract all classes. It included Conservative MP Sir Lambert Ward and the Duke of Westminster, amongst others. Westminster joined The Link on the advice of Henry Newnham, editor of *Truth*, and headed moves to secure peace with Nazi Germany during the war. Westminster presented a paper written by Henry Drummond Wolff, the Conservative MP who was secretly funding Mosley's BUF, to a meeting of pro-peace activists at his home. Most intriguing was the secretive Right Club. It was a combination of extremists and Conservatives, and included the only MP interned during the war, Captain Archibald Maule Ramsay, Conservative MP for Peebles and South Midlothian. MI5 monitored meetings of these groups and Cabinet members were aware of them. Conservative MPs spoke up for extreme-right individuals interned by the government as potential traitors during the Second World War. Meanwhile, fascist sympathisers sought respectability within the Conservative Party. Sir Charles Petrie, the Literary Editor of the *New English Review*, was a fellow traveller who subsequently argued that if Mosley had identified the BUF more closely with the Conservative Party he would not have attracted as much opprobrium. These examples supported Stanley Baldwin's comment that fascism was simply ultramontane Conservatism. One fascist put it more prosaically when he described the whole of the extreme right as Conservatism with knobs on. However, the Second World War was the extreme-right's watershed. It brought images of genocide that were indelibly associated with right-wing extremism, especially Nazism. Henceforth, no British extreme-right movement used the epithet 'fascist', and it was not until 1962 that an extreme-right party called itself 'National Socialist'.

The Conservative Party's main objective after the Second World War remained the same as before it: to achieve and maintain power. However, Labour's victory at the 1945 General Election presented the Conservative Party with the new paradigm of a Labour government able to implement its radical socialist programme. This programme meant increased state interventionism, governmental planning and controls, a corporate response to industrial relations, the construction of the Welfare State, and nationalisation. Conservatives had opposed a greater role for the state, and the philosophy that shaped it, but Labour's large majority meant that there was little the Conservative Party could do to stop them. The size of the majority also showed that the electorate wanted Labour's policies, especially as they had emphatically ditched Britain's wartime leader. Therefore, the Conservative Party adapted, just as it had in the nineteenth century, accepting much of Labour's programme in opposition and in

government. The Conservative Opposition of 1945–51 formulated a position similar to that of the Labour Government. Therefore, the Conservative Party had adapted to changed circumstances and acquiesced in its opponents' political agenda. By the time that the Conservative Party regained office in 1951, most of its membership had accepted the substance of Labour's social revolution. The Conservative Party maintained this consensual approach from 1945 to 1975, with the period between 1967–72, when the Conservative Party under Heath appeared to turn rightwards and formulate a more right-wing programme, little more than a cosmetic reaction whose orientation is often misunderstood. This is not to say that historians have unquestionably accepted this view. However, none deny that areas of agreement existed, while many agreed that a broad framework of consensus existed. Nor have any historians challenged the view that the Conservative Party did react to Britain's new paradigm after 1945.

These investigations identified similarities and differences between the two main political parties. In doing so, they helped highlight differences between the Conservative Party and those groups and individuals that operated at its extreme-right edge. However, no matter what these investigations concluded, the real issue at stake here is not whether a consensus existed, but what the extreme right perceived the situation to be. This perception was unambiguous. After 1945, the extreme right thought that the Conservative Party aped the Labour Party both in opposition and in government, and consistently criticised it for failing to implement 'true Conservative' policies. The right in general attacked the Conservative Opposition of 1945–51 for appeasing the Labour Government and meekly accepting its policies, and persistently assailed Conservative governments from 1951. When the Conservative Party returned to opposition in 1964, it faced an increased internal extreme-right challenge from the Monday Club, and an external extreme-right threat that coalesced in 1967 into the National Front. This threat did not disappear with the unexpected victory in the 1970 General Election. The extreme right viewed the policy U-turns by the Conservative Government of 1970–74 as surrender to the left's militant forces, which provided it with added impetus. This impetus made the Monday Club appear capable of dominating the Conservative Party, or forming its own party. By the mid-1970s, it had helped the National Front to become Britain's fourth political party, with hopes of overtaking the Liberals. Magnifying the threat caused by this impetus were connections between the National Front and Monday Club. Yet, the threat from the Monday Club and National Front was over by the mid-1970s. The Conservative Party bureaucracy forced the Monday Club leadership to purge the club of its extremists and cease connections with the National Front. Thereafter, Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Party leader from 1975, made an obvious appeal to potential National Front voters that contributed to its vote crumbling in the 1979 General Election and subsequent fragmentation. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, governed for the next eighteen years.

The extreme-right organisations listed here were but a few that the Conservative Party faced in the post-war period. Conservative Central Office

kept a careful watch on many individuals that they considered extremist both outside and inside the party. The Conservative Party's success in gaining power, and the extreme-right's failure to attain it, was the most obvious manifestation of its role as a barrier to the extreme right in Britain. Yet this relationship remains unexplored, in contrast to the extensive work on many aspects of the Conservative Party and the extreme right.

However, examination of this relationship presents two distinct problems. The first problem concerns definition. Primarily, what exactly was the 'extreme right'? This is a difficult question. Accusations of being 'extreme', 'right-wing', and 'fascist' have been so overused as to result in confusion rather than clarity. Webber understood this and opted to refer to dissident Conservatives and Fascists collectively as the 'British Right' rather than identify its different strands.² In a similar vein, Blinkhorn argued that 'the definitions, typologies and taxonomies beloved of social scientists tend to fit uncomfortably the intractable realities which are the raw material of the historian.'³ Blinkhorn was introducing a study of inter-war Fascists and Conservatives, a period when the extreme right was more prominent and recognisable. His comments are, therefore, particularly apposite for a study of the extreme right after 1945 when many people associated 'extreme right' with the horrors of the Second World War and the extreme right was, consequently, more circumspect and defensive about its antecedents. Additionally, those described as extreme right by historians and social and political scientists do not accept this description. Instead, they see themselves as holding reasonable, even centrist positions. The term 'extreme' is also a subjective one that reflects the views of those that use it to describe groups they passionately disagree with. Yet, an understanding of what constitutes the extreme right is necessary if we are to understand its failure generally and the Conservative Party's reaction to it in particular.

In one sense, the answer to this question is simple: the extreme right was that which was vehemently against the left, to the extent that it demanded either of the Conservative Party, or itself, strong and concerted action against it beyond accepted democratic norms. Even simpler is the view that the 'extreme right' was that which stood further to the right of the Conservative Party. Though simplistic, this approach allows for recognition of groups, and investigation of any ideological shifts by the Conservative Party, along a traditionally accepted linear spectrum. It also avoids the anachronistic error of assuming that today's extreme right corresponds exactly with that of previous years. This, however, is insufficient as it fails to recognise that a number of distinct strands ran within the extreme right. For example, a 'Conservative' strand was authoritarian, supported the institutions of Church, monarchy and parliament, but was extreme in that it desired the dictatorship of social elites. A 'Radical' strand likewise sought an authoritarian dictatorship, but a populist one drawn from the people, which it delineated, while criticising existing elites and their institutions. More difficult to determine were groups that can be termed the 'Freedom Right', difficulty resting on their sub-divisions into those that espoused economic liberty and those that advocated institutional liberty. In a sense, they were 'liberal',

but they were also on the extreme right in the sense that in our period implementation of their programme required hard measures against the unions and Welfare State. Finally, there was the ‘fascist’ and ‘neo-Nazi’ extreme right that encompassed elements of both the Conservative and radical extremes, though not necessarily the ‘Freedom Right’. Crucially, this element of the extreme right expressed its views and objectives violently and often had paramilitary organisations. It was prepared to use violence, be it physical or verbal, unlike the other strands whose violence was implicit. These differentiating characteristics, together with shared views on nationalism and a weak Conservative leadership that failed to reverse a deteriorating and decadent society caused by advancing socialism, formed the parameters that determined inclusion within the ‘extreme right’ in this book. These parameters avoid the narrowness associated with attempts to identify a ‘fascist minimum’, which are theoretical concepts that, if used proscriptively and exclusively, would deny revealing comparisons of the Conservative Party’s attitude towards different extreme-right groups. They also allowed for the identification of extreme-right individuals within the Conservative Party itself, a crucial element in assessing the Conservative Party’s refractory role towards the extreme right.

These parameters are useful in identifying different extreme-right groups, and therefore the Conservative Party’s reaction to them. However, in one significant respect argument about extreme-right taxonomy in this period is redundant. For, it is important when examining the Conservative Party’s relationship with the extreme right in this period not to focus on what we consider extreme, but on what the Conservative Party thought was extreme. It is only by acting thus that we can begin to understand the varying attitudes that the Conservative Party displayed to different groups, and minimise our own understandably subjective opinions. Put another way, this book examines the relationship between the Conservative Party and those that it believed were right-wing extremists, and not those that we think were right-wing extremists. It is for this reason that the book frequently refers to Conservative Central Office’s identification of groups or individuals as ‘extreme’ or ‘extreme-right’. Occasionally, the book does refer to groups that Central Office did not consider extreme right. These are included as points of comparison, the two most obvious examples being the One Nation Group and the Bow Group. However, the overriding criterion for inclusion is Conservative Central Office’s belief that a group or individual was extreme-right wing.

Using the parameters outlined within a chronological framework allows exploration of similarities and differences in the Conservative Party’s attitude towards the extreme right based on being either in opposition or in government. They also allowed investigation of the political space occupied by the Conservative Party and the extreme right, via examination of policy statements and objectives, political pronouncements and activities, ideological discourse, electoral fortunes, social connections, and language employed therein, at national, regional, and local level. Membership of various extreme organisations by specific individuals became apparent using these parameters. Moreover,

they facilitated answers to questions fundamental to an analysis that attempted to prove a negative – the Conservative Party's role in the extreme-right's success, an eventuality that did not happen. These parameters helped to place in context, and evaluate, the evidence of the Conservative Party's role, whether policies, objectives, personnel, literature or electoral performance. They allowed an assessment of the extent and impact of the nexus between Conservatism and the extreme right and its continuity after the Second World War, and revealed the Conservative Party's dual blocking role: firstly, how disillusion with the Conservative Party forced extreme-right individuals into actions that were outside the confines and support of this successful, mainstream political leviathan, spawning a number of extreme-right wing groups and parties. Secondly, the existence and function of Central Office's reporting mechanism, monitoring activity throughout this period and allowing it to block the extreme right effectively.

The second problem in an examination of the Conservative Party's relationship with the extreme right concerns the choice of sources. Many sources exist, but they often contain weaknesses that, while understandable, make judgments on the relationship between the Conservative Party and the extreme right difficult. In contrast, the Conservative Party Archive at the Bodleian Library contains extensive material, some of it focused directly on concerns about the extreme right. It provided numerous sources for this book. To avoid the distraction of too many note references, some quotations are not acknowledged and in all instances these derive from the Conservative Party Archive. The scope of the archive provided wide-ranging investigation of Party manifestos, by-election campaigns, constituency affairs, and the views of Conservative Party members and supporters. These documents allowed assessment of individual cases and consideration of specific themes. Central Office's files within the archive proved the most valuable source. This is because Central Office reflected the party leadership's wishes, and was the pinnacle of the party organisation.⁴ The party leader nominated Central office's head, the Party Chairman. A number of Vice-Chairmen acted in an executive capacity, often overseeing specific aspects of the party's work, which varied. They were often retired senior and respected Central Office staff. Responsibility for the daily management of Central Office attracted a number of titles. In the period 1945–75, the General Director occupied this role of 'chief of staff', until 1966 when the position was devolved. Central Office acted as a conduit between the party leader and membership via its various departments and its regional network. It contained many and varied departments, including the national offices of organisations that represented various sections of the party, such as the Young Conservatives. Some of these departments disappeared while others emerged to meet changed demands. However, some departments existed throughout the period and provided the main framework for the book. This included the files that revealed investigations based on the work of Central Office's regional network, a network that was extensive and pervasive throughout the wider Conservative Party. Central Office maintained Regional, or Area Offices. The party leadership greatly increased their size after

1945. Central Office employed Area Agents within these regional offices. These Area Agents exercised considerable influence on the supposedly autonomous local associations and their MPs, and formed part of the bureaucratic machinery of decision-making within their regions. Amongst Area Agents' functions was the gathering of intelligence on other organisations and the forwarding of information and material on them to Central Office. The files generated by Area Agents' correspondence revealed the Conservative Party's attitudes towards various extreme-right groups and individuals, and often the reasons for them. Admittedly, the files of one political party can produce an unbalanced picture that reveals only what that particular party wants to convey. In this instance, a number of considerations argued against this. Central Office's agents regularly forwarded the critical comments of the Conservative Party's right-wing opponents as well their literature containing the views and objectives that differentiated them from it. These files were usually internal correspondence and often confidential, which meant that those involved revealed views that they would not necessarily state openly. Most importantly, these files reveal which groups or individuals Central Office thought were extreme-right, and thus warrant inclusion in this study. Today's Central Office restricts access to some of these files, which do not always show the Conservative Party in a positive light. Central Office's eventual decision to grant permission to view them supported the impression reached from investigating those that have no such restrictions. Consequently, Central Office's files were a comprehensive resource that answered many questions posed by this research. These questions included, why did the Conservative Party view a particular group as extreme-right, what action did it take against these groups, what determined these actions, did the Conservative Party differentiate between extreme-right groups, did the Conservative Party's attitude change over time, and what evidence was there of a consistent approach?

The answers to these questions commence in Chapter 1 with a description of a Conservative Party shocked by Labour's landslide election victory in 1945, thereafter adapting to the new paradigm thus created. It investigates the Conservative Party's varied reaction to those right-wing groups that emerged in opposition to this new paradigm from 1945–51, and reveals how the Conservative Party explicitly charged one of the departments within Central Office to investigate these outside organisations. How the Conservative Party dealt with the extreme right after Churchill regained office in 1951 is the theme of Chapter 2. It confirms that Central Office based its different actions on its perception of the nature of a group or individual's extremism, and the usefulness of such a group to the Conservative Party. Chapter 3 discusses the impact of Conservative governments' domestic and imperial policies on an increasingly vociferous extreme right. It shows how the Conservative Party both alienated and attracted the extreme right while maintaining opposition to any groups or individuals that possessed fascist antecedents or characteristics. Chapter 4 examines the Conservative Party's relationship with the extreme right after it returned to opposition in 1964. It describes how the Conservative

Party responded to the challenge presented when the external extreme right coalesced for the first time since 1945 into a viable political party. It also reveals how the extreme right within the Conservative Party posed an even greater threat, and the action taken against it. Chapter 5 investigates the climacteric in the Conservative Party's relationship with the extreme right after 1945, showing how Central Office dealt with the possible incursion of the external extreme right into the Conservative Party.

These chapters show that the Conservative Party leadership and bureaucracy did limit the extreme right's chances of success. Sometimes, this process included the absorption of some of the extreme right's themes. It regularly included attempts to deter Party members from joining extreme-right groups, which was difficult as some parts of the Conservative Party were sympathetic to these groups' views. This study also shows that the extent of the Conservative Party's opposition to extreme-right groups and individuals varied. The party leadership and bureaucracy consistently blocked those whose extremism involved connections with fascism or Nazism. In contrast, they often used those whose extremism amounted to little more than political inexpediency, or went beyond the consensual image that the Conservative Party wished to portray. When the Conservative Party's stance moved towards these groups after 1964, their 'extremism' diminished and was eventually absorbed during Margaret Thatcher's leadership. Overall, however, this book depicts a Conservative Party that after 1945 constantly investigated extreme-right groups and individuals, and took action against them. It reveals a Conservative Party that kept all of the extreme right at arm's length until events reduced the extremism of some of them, while consistently limiting the chances of that part of the extreme right that the Second World War had condemned to pariah status.

Notes

- 1 M. Pugh, *'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars*, Pimlico, London (2006), 61.
- 2 G. C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right*, Croom Helm, London (1986), 2–4.
- 3 M. Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-century Europe*, Unwin Hyman, London (1990), 2.
- 4 The following is based on S. Ball, 'The National and Regional Party Structure', in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1994), 169–220.

1

The shock of opposition, 1945–51

A right response to defeat?

The Conservative Party entered the 1945 General Election suspicious of its leaders and split over social policy. The direction of Party policy was uncertain, with the Tory Reform Group, Progress Trust, Imperial Group, and numerous smaller bodies fighting for predominance in a party with a moribund and bankrupt machine. The progressive Tory Reform Committee had already welcomed publication of the Beveridge Report advocating extensive social reform, but right-wing Conservatives had attacked it, noticeably in publications connected with the extreme right such as the *National Review* and *Truth*. The right of the party relished the opportunity to end the wartime coalition with Labour. At the party conference in March 1945, Sir Herbert Williams MP spoke of being free of the coalition's chains. Churchill's conference address, on the other hand, suggested a desire to maintain the coalition, and even including in it MPs who had defeated Conservative candidates. Despite Churchill's desire, there was a genuine expectation of an outright Conservative victory. Conservative MP Christopher Hollis, writing in the *New English Review*, wrote that, 'nobody seriously thinks that the Labour Party have any chance of gaining a clear majority at the election'.¹ Hollis had precedent on his side. Victorious wartime Prime Ministers had won in 1900 and 1918. On polling day, the Conservative-supporting *Daily Express* announced, 'we are winning', and some regional Conservative-inclined newspapers stated belief in a three-figure majority. However, the Labour Party won such a majority. The Conservative Party was profoundly shocked not only over the electorate's rejection of it, but at the scale of defeat and the size of Britain's first majority Labour administration. Some Conservatives even feared permanent loss of office, a feeling strengthened by their Party's

inability to win a single seat in by-elections during the period 1945–50, despite fuel and sterling crises, and continuing rationing.

There were a number of reasons for Labour's stunning victory. After the First World War, the government had promised a land 'fit for heroes'. This promise remained unfulfilled due to the Depression of the later 1920s and 1930s. The Labour Party offered a coherent programme to implement this promise in 1945, and the electorate voted for it. The Labour leadership had made a significant contribution to the war effort, especially in domestic affairs where they implemented state controls to ensure that the economy endured and funded the massive demands of the war effort. Their actions meant that the Labour Party's opponents could not portray them as an inexperienced, unpatriotic party that was unfit for government, which Churchill discovered to his cost during the General Election when his comparison of the Labour Party to the Gestapo brought widespread condemnation. Instead, the electorate saw in the Labour Party the possibility of a better future.

In contrast, the electorate in 1945 viewed the Conservative Party's actions before the Second World War negatively. Economic depression had blighted the inter-war period and led to the formation of a coalition National Government. High unemployment had affected many voters and their families. The Conservative Party leadership's alleged doctrinaire adherence to the prevailing policy of *laissez-faire* exacerbated the hardship many electors had suffered. *Laissez-faire* ruled out state intervention in favour of free trade, but also meant the acceptance of high unemployment until market forces readjusted the economy. Associating this policy with the Conservative Party alone was arguably unfair because, although there was a strand within Conservatism that advocated *laissez-faire*, the most prominent exponent of it during Ramsay MacDonald's National Government was in fact the Labour Chancellor Phillip Snowden. However, three factors ensured that the electorate associated their economic hardship with the Conservative Party. First, the Conservative Party governed for much of the inter-war period, either in administrations that were wholly Conservative or in coalitions that they dominated. Secondly, the Conservative Neville Chamberlain replaced Snowden as Chancellor in 1931, and although he moved away from strict *laissez-faire*, his equally doctrinaire adherence to balanced budgets meant the continuing acceptance of existing high levels of unemployment rather than the adoption of deficit financing to reduce it. Thirdly, Chamberlain introduced the 'Means Test' in 1931, a policy that was more understandable to the electorate than debates over economic policies. The Means Test disproportionately harmed the poorest. It resulted in the electorate viewing the Conservatives as the hard-faced men of the inter-war slump, callously disregarding their hardship and prepared to see individuals face the iniquity of National Assistance interviews rather than provide adequate social security. Similarly affecting the electorate's image of the Conservative Party in 1945 was the pre-war policy of appeasement. In 1938, Chamberlain had signed the Munich Agreement that abandoned Czechoslovakia in return for a promise of peace between Britain and Hitler's Germany. Leading Conservatives

had fully supported Chamberlain. Dissidents like Churchill were very much in the minority within the Conservative Party. Although people joyfully welcomed Chamberlain's announcement that the Munich Agreement meant 'peace in our time', the Second World War altered their view. By 1945, people viewed Chamberlain as Hitler's dupe, and possibly even someone who was prepared to pander to fascism.

In the 1945 General Election, the electorate rejected a Conservative Party tainted by indifference to economic hardship and appeasement of the country's enemies. The former was a charge of callousness, which meant that it would be difficult for the Conservative Party leadership to advocate policies that could lead to high unemployment, no matter how many Conservatives favoured it. The latter was a charge that bordered on treachery, which was particularly difficult for the Conservative Party in 1945. In Europe, the right was associated with fascism. The Conservative Party was Britain's right-wing party, and it had clear connections with the extreme right and even fascism before the Second World War. Connections with any group or individual deemed 'extreme right' were no longer tolerable, and no Conservative leader could take Baldwin's sanguine attitude to them.² Consequently, the Conservative leadership did what it usually did when confronted by a new paradigm, and adapted. There is evidence that the Conservative leadership understood the need to adapt and counter the party's inter-war image even before the Second World War ended. It set up the Post-War Problems Central Committee (PWPPCC) in 1941. It was to the PWPPCC that the Tory Reform Committee and Tory Reform Group advocated state interventionism. In addition, Central Office tasked one of its existing bodies with investigating outside organisations.³ After the war, the Conservative leadership openly implemented a policy review that moved significantly away from its inter-war stance and accepted much of the Labour programme. Behind the scenes, the leadership strengthened the party bureaucracy. This bureaucracy put the job of investigating those extreme-right groups and individuals that could damage the leadership's objectives on a more formal basis. In the period 1945–51, it monitored the extreme right and took whatever action it saw fit. Those whose extremism Central Office considered merely inexpedient attracted minimal action, but those it associated in any way with fascism received harsher attention.

Conservative reaction to Attlee's first government and re-emerging Fascism

The Conservative Party's public response to the 1945 General Election defeat was a thorough policy review that culminated in the *Industrial Charter* and Maxwell-Fyfe Report. The *Industrial Charter* emphasised traditional Conservative themes, but also accepted some nationalisation and an increased role for the state. Many Conservatives welcomed the charter, but the Conservative right thought that it was too much of a step towards Socialism. Right-wing Conservative publications

ran articles with headlines such as ‘Under Which Flag’, ‘Has Anyone Heard of Capitalism?’ and ‘The Milk-and-Water Charter’, with journals such as *Truth* and *National Review* prominent in this criticism. The left claimed that the charter would result in the Tory Party’s worse split for half a century, and the right agreed. The grounds on which right-wing Conservative MPs attacked the charter on its presentation at the 1947 Party Conference is instructive why it caused a problem. Sir Waldron Smithers informed conference that the charter was a threat not only to the Conservative Party, but also to Great Britain, as it represented an inordinate concession to Socialism at a time when Communism in the Soviet Union appeared the more vigorous ideology. The language he employed was unambiguous and emotive: ‘There can be no compromise with Socialism or Communism. You must not let the Conservative Party become infected with the Socialist bug. The Conservative Party must stick to its principles or perish.’⁴ Sir Waldron Smithers told delegates to have no fear of Central Office or the party platform, and to save the Conservative Party and England by rejecting the Charter. Smithers wished the Conservative Party to maintain its pre-war *laissez faire* stance. One commentator thought that at least half the conference supported these views.⁵ The Party’s right wing, however, suffered an overwhelming defeat at conference. Hoffman described this as the ‘rout of the right’, explaining that this was because virtually nobody at conference wished to be linked with a doctrine that was associated with the pre-war period and that was now ‘out of keeping with the spirit of the times.’⁶

Nor was the Conservative Party’s conversion limited to domestic issues. Virtually nobody in Whitehall saw the imminent collapse of the Empire in 1945. For many, there was little suggesting anything other than imperial continuance. The British Empire had proved its ability to endure. It had stood alone in 1940 and remained intact while Nazism and Fascism collapsed. The number of civil servants that departed annually for the colonies trebled after the Second World War. Only Keynes foresaw the possible consequences for the Empire of Britain’s severe economic problems. Nobody actually wanted the end of Empire, other than the anti-colonial left. Instead, there were expectations of a new, reinvigorated empire. Indian independence may have been a foregone conclusion, but many, including Labour Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, sought a viable replacement. Expectations focused on creating a revitalised oil and mineral-rich imperial dispensation stretching from Cape Town to Iraq, with Africa identified as the new jewel in the Crown. Academics described it as a fourth empire arising out of the debris of the third. This was collective political delusion. Britain was unable to withstand the wave of post-war nationalism because it was economically overstretched. Thus, the impact was great when Transjordan (1946), Burma (1948), Ceylon (1948), and Palestine (1948) accompanied Indian Independence, and revealed the impotence of Britain’s imperial ambitions. Nowhere was this impotence more obvious than in the Conservative Opposition’s response. Churchill, hero of the Boer War and a staunch imperialist who consistently opposed Indian Independence before the Second World War, did nothing to obstruct the Indian Independence Bill (1947). Sir Herbert

Williams complained about his party's failure to even vote against the bill, but could do little else. Conservative Associations protested, but their calls for the party to do more to prevent the disintegration of the Empire went unanswered. One young right-wing researcher at the Conservative Research Department later recalled feeling unable to do anything other than bury his head in his hands.

Shock at the size of the 1945 defeat only partly explained this picture of a lacklustre Conservative Opposition. The Conservative Party under Lord Salisbury, facing the demands of extended suffrage in the late nineteenth century, had realigned itself to attract lower-middle and working-class votes. Thereafter, imperialism remained at the heart of Conservatism, contributing to electoral success. Doubtless, there were many right-wing Conservative voters in 1945 who were disgusted at the result. Perhaps, therefore, imperialism could perform a similar role in the mid-twentieth century to win the working class back from Labour. However, the impact of the 1945 General Election was not simply a matter of scale, as Alan Clark noted. Many right-wing Conservative MPs had lost their seats. Progressives now dominated the parliamentary party, determined to avoid connection with any embarrassments of the past. One progressive even advocated the Conservative Party changing its name to the 'New Democratic Party'. What was left of the right wing of the parliamentary party was unable, therefore, to impose their views on their colleagues, hence lacklustre opposition. This explains why there were only a limited number of clashes within the parliamentary Conservative Party over decolonisation. Very few MPs actually disagreed with it. Unlike domestic policy, therefore, this conversion would be more difficult to reverse. The election result was the real 'rout of the right'.

Yet, this image of an ineffective right within a demoralised Conservative Party is not the whole picture. The right was sufficiently strong to propose resolutions at the party conference expressing its dissatisfaction at the lacklustre attack on the Labour Government. The chosen motion was heavily defeated, but it indicated that a repository for such views still existed. Individual Conservative MPs openly attacked their party's ineffective opposition in the *New English Review*. There were even instances of rebellion against the frontbench when the right thought a bill was 'bad socialist business which should be fought every inch of the way'.⁷ Moreover, the notion that the *Charter's* acceptance signalled the complete collapse of the right was misleading. When the leadership responded to unfulfilled expectations of victory at the 1949 Hammersmith South by-election by issuing a revised policy statement, *The Right Road for Britain*, the *Daily Express*, the *Spectator*, and *Truth* carried articles attacking it for failing to move sufficiently rightwards. This also meant that the Conservative Party was presenting a confusing message to those holding extreme-right views or antecedents, whether in the Conservative Party or not. On the one hand, the leadership and even some MPs appeared to be appeasing Socialism. This was evident in the view of one MP responsible for drawing up the *Charter*, who believed that government was impossible if trade unions were hostile. On the other hand, a body of opinion and representation existed within the Conservative Party that

was fundamentally at odds with this position. Individuals and groups opposed to the latter message had to make a choice of whether to act within the party or not. Some fought from within, while others formed outside pressure groups.

There is strong evidence that pre-war consanguinity between some Conservatives and erstwhile fascists continued. The circumstances in which a British Union of Fascists (BUF) leader could claim that thirty MPs and twelve peers were ready to declare themselves Fascists may have gone, but former BUF member Arthur Winn revealed in the *Daily Mirror* that he intended to vote Conservative in the 1945 General Election. The reason Winn gave was that the Conservatives would allow him, and presumably those like him, to 'get away with more than we could with any other party'.⁸ The *Daily Mirror* reported that ex-BUF members' first move after the war was to 'throw themselves and their organisation on the side of the Tory Party'.⁹ One local paper even argued that Mosley was reforming his organisation to 'keep Toryism alive'.¹⁰ Dorril highlighted this consanguinity by recounting Mosley's interest in an 'anti-alien' campaign in Hampstead in 1945,¹¹ where the Conservative MP, Charles Challen, had organised a petition against Jewish residents. Dorril described Challen's petition as owing much to an organisation called the Fighting Fund for Freedom (FFF), led by the Conservative MP Sir Waldron Smithers, and intersecting with a similar, national campaign led by the Britons Vigilante Action League (BVAL), which Lord Kemsley funded. Advising Kemsley was former editor of *Truth* Sir Henry Newnham. Dorril noted that Conservative parliamentary candidate Eleonora Tennant was having meetings with Jeffrey Hamm during which they discussed their mutual anti-Semitism. Hamm was an ex-BUF internee and was instrumental in Mosley's return to politics at the head of Union Movement. These events occurred at the same time, according to Mosley, that friends tried to secure his return to the Conservative fold.

The radical right, in the shape of the British People's Party (BPP), also exhibited anti-Semitism, a fear of communism, and support for Franco, similar to Conservative MPs. The BPP's importance lay partly in its survival of the war intact, despite the internment of its leading political figure, John Beckett. However, the BPP also had a pre-war connection with the Conservative Party via Beckett's association with Lord Lymington in the British Council against European Commitments (BCAEC), which linked it with a number of other extreme-right groups containing Conservatives.¹² Beckett's membership of the British Council for a Christian Settlement in Europe also linked the BPP with the anti-war faction in the Conservative Party. Linking Beckett personally with the Conservative Party was his friendship with Henry Newnham. However, the strongest revelation of the BPP's concordance with some Conservatives was in its regular post-war publications. The Duke of Bedford funded these publications, and sometimes used them personally to attack Jews, albeit using euphemistic language such as 'international finance' to do so. One regular BPP publication, the *Fleet Street Preview*, provided a mine of language that would not have been out of place coming from Sir Waldron Smithers, Charles Challen, Eleonora Tennant and many pre- and post-war Conservatives. This journal

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