Introduction

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Academic interest in Britain's leading political parties has not always run in parallel with their electoral fortunes. The Labour Party has commanded a fairly consistent level of attention, whether in office or in opposition. But it seems that the Conservatives are fated to be regarded either as unavoidable or irrelevant. For understandable reasons, during the eighteen years of Conservative government after 1979, political scientists and historians did much to redress the balance. But there was always a suspicion that the trend would tail off as soon as the party left office.

It can be argued, though, that since their landslide defeat in the May 1997 general election, the Conservatives have been more interesting even than they were in the late 1980s, when it seemed that their hold on power was unshakeable. Suddenly that ruthless, relentless election-winning machine looked terribly vulnerable, and an organisation that thrives on the exercise of power seemed disorientated. The 1997 election produced the Conservatives' heaviest defeat of the mass democratic era; the party polled almost 6 million votes fewer than at the 1992 general election and at 31.5 per cent its share of the vote was the lowest since 1832. The Conservatives' reputation for party unity, sound economic management and governing competence had been shattered by the travails of the Major government – notably divisions on Europe, sterling's exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) and 'sleaze'. Whereas the Conservatives appeared politically and intellectually exhausted, New Labour was reinvigorated and successfully pitched its appeal at the disillusioned voters of 'Middle England'.

The Conservative Party's survival as a significant political force was now open to serious question for the first time since the crisis over the Corn Laws. John Major resigned as Conservative leader immediately after the election and a number of potential successors lost their seats in the landslide. By electing William Hague as leader, Conservative MPs handed the daunting challenge of restoring the fortunes of a shattered party to the youngest and least experienced of the leadership candidates.

This volume examines the Conservative Party's response to the crisis it

faced after the 1997 defeat. It includes chapters on the key challenges facing the party, with contributions from academic experts on the Conservative Party and from three prominent Conservative parliamentarians of the period. The first two chapters are comparative, looking at previous Conservative spells in opposition and at the revival of the US Republican Party for pointers to recovery. The following three chapters then examine the Conservative Party leadership, parliamentary party and voluntary party in the Hague period. Chapters 6–10 focus on Conservative policy and ideology; Chapter 11 examines the party's electoral performance after 1997. Three Commentary pieces by leading Conservatives then draw differing conclusions about the 1997–2001 period, before the editors offer some conclusions.

It is a traditional article of faith for conservatives that the past can provide valuable lessons. In his chapter, Stuart Ball provides a comparative analysis of previous periods when the Conservative Party was in opposition. His discussion leads to an innovative evaluation of each attempt to recover from defeat. The findings lend strong empirical support to the familiar proposition that electoral outcomes depend crucially on government performance; the conduct of the opposition can only reinforce the result, one way or the other. In Ball's rating of each Conservative recovery, that of 1945–51 scores best. This suggests that the party's best hope for long-term revival after 1997 was a radical review of its policies, with the purpose of 'reconnecting' itself to the real concerns of voters. Significantly, though, it implies that only a combination of successful policy renewal with a run of serious misfortunes for the Blair government could have propelled the Tories back into office after one term of opposition; even Winston Churchill's reinvigorated party took two elections to come back.

Ball's analysis suggests that the party leader plays a less important role in Conservative recoveries than a distinctive policy programme and an effective party organisation. This may be somewhat surprising, given the current media obsession with leaders. Immediately after the last three general elections, the defeated leader has resigned, suggesting that the leaders themselves take a more exalted view of their role and responsibilities. But in assessing the record of William Hague between 1997 and his own 'Waterloo' in June 2001, Mark Garnett accepts that he could have made little difference to his party's fortunes. From Hague's own point of view, though, he was right to resign after the 2001 defeat; indeed, his bid for the leadership had been a highly dubious gamble in the first place. If he had delayed his challenge until after what was always likely to be a second depressing result, his chances of reaching Downing Street would have been infinitely better.

While Hague failed to convince much of the electorate of his leadership credentials, at Westminster he was widely admired for his performance at Prime Minister's Question Time. However, at a time when parliament was in low public repute, this proved a doubtful blessing to Hague and his party.

High-profile backbench dissent during the 1992–97 Parliament, particularly on the issue of Europe, ruined the Conservative Party's reputation for unity. By contrast, in 1997–2001 an increasingly apathetic public seemed not to care very much whether the parliamentary party was united or not. Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart examine the Conservative performance at Westminster during these years. There were frequent rebellions against the official party line, but – with the exception of some major revolts on devolution – the dissidents were usually few. Meanwhile, a small number of backbenchers (dubbed 'the awkward squad') who were unhappy about the tactics employed by their leaders, engaged in a parliamentary version of guerrilla warfare, designed to make life uncomfortable for the Blair government. Cowley and Stuart also examine the parliamentary party in the leadership elections of 1997 – the last in which MPs monopolised the selection process – and 2001.

Hague inherited a party organisation which was seething with discontent – not least on the disenfranchisement of ordinary party members in the 1997 leadership election. In his commentary, Hague's first Party Chairman Lord Parkinson recalls the depth of these feelings, and applauds the leader for carrying out the reforms that he had foreshadowed in his campaign speeches. Parkinson argues that without radical changes the party could easily have foundered in the wake of its demoralising general election defeat. From a different perspective Richard Kelly traces the origins of *The Fresh Future* reforms in Chapter 5, providing a detailed critique of the main changes to party organisation. He argues that the 'democratic' nature of these reforms has been overstated. Rather, Hague followed the precedent set by Tony Blair and New Labour, using a process of purported 'democratisation' to reinforce the leader's grip on party management.

Ball argues that while organisational reform is important, past experience shows that at best it has run in parallel with a more general revival of Conservative fortunes. Here, a fundamental problem for the Conservative Party between 1997 and 2001 was that it failed to convince sufficient numbers of voters that it had developed a convincing 'narrative', addressing the negative perceptions of the party which had dogged it ever since 'Black Wednesday' in September 1992. Hague's apparent tactical switch, midway through his leadership, to concentrate his appeal on the party's 'core vote' rather than reaching out to the uncommitted, has been particularly criticised.

In his chapter on Conservative policy, Peter Dorey examines the Conservative position on a series of key issues. He highlights the difficult dilemmas which confronted the party after 1997, notably on economic policy where the urge to promise tax cuts conflicted with voters' demands for public spending on essential services. Here, as elsewhere, party policy makers showed that they had not reached clear conclusions about the reasons for the 1997 landslide. As Dorey shows, New Labour's acceptance of much of the main thrust of Thatcherite economic policy threw the Conservatives off

balance; as a result, instead of outbidding New Labour on the ideological right, or returning to a One Nation position which jettisoned the tax-cutting agenda, they tried to face both ways at once.

'Europe', particularly the question of British membership of the single currency, was for many Conservatives the most significant issue facing the party. Hague quickly ruled out British membership of the euro for two parliaments. But as Philip Lynch notes in Chapter 8, the pragmatism of this new position and the 'In Europe, not run by Europe' platform masked a significant move towards Euro-scepticism. This reflected the increase in Euro-sceptic sentiment in the parliamentary party, though pro-Europeans (like Ian Taylor) were persistent and vocal critics. Europe was one of the few areas where the Conservatives were closer to public opinion than Labour, but Hague's 'Keep the Pound' campaign brought little electoral reward.

The 'politics of nationhood' are now a serious problem to the Tories, who had benefited historically from their image as a patriotic party defending the British nation state. In addition to their internal troubles on 'Europe', the 1997 general election left the Conservatives without a single seat in Scotland and rendered their opposition to legislative devolution untenable. Peter Lynch traces how the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Parties adapted to the creation of the Scottish Parliament, exploring the re-organisation of the Scottish party, its electoral fortunes and political prospects in the new Scottish politics. In Chapter 10, Philip Lynch examines issues of identity and nationhood in Conservative politics in the 1997–2001 period, focusing on the 'English Question' and the politics of 'race'. Hague pledged to redress the perceived inequities of New Labour's devolution settlement by introducing the idea of 'English votes for English laws' at Westminster, but he resisted suggestions that the Conservatives should support the creation of an English Parliament. Hague spoke positively of the contributions made to British life by ethnic minority communities, but adopted a populist position on asylum and failed effectively to deal with incidents of racism in his party.

David Broughton's chapter illustrates the predictable results of the Conservatives' failure to develop an attractive, consistent narrative. The tendency of some in the party to see the 1997 result as a mere 'blip' ensured that its opinion poll rating flatlined at around 30 per cent. It was understandable that the leadership should share the outlook of Mr Micawber, and in September 2000 something did 'turn up', in the form of widespread fuel protests. The fact that the ensuing boost in the polls proved short-lived lends extra credence to Ball's suggestion that opposition parties often depend on government failings to improve their popularity. New Labour soon recovered its stride, and the opposition would have lapsed back to its 30 per cent rating even if it had been more credible. In hindsight, the Conservatives were regarded as opportunistic; had the government been more generally distrusted on a range of issues, the surge in Tory support would have lasted

much longer. Broughton also shows that the mistake of dwelling on the wrong issues (in order to retain the loyalty of the core vote) continued throughout the election campaign. Hague hoped to force his main campaigning issue, the single currency, to the top of the electorate's agenda. But, despite the Conservatives' focus on Europe, the NHS and education remained the most important issues for voters.

The bald statistics seem to convict the Conservatives under Hague of astonishing perversity – of an electoral deathwish almost unparalleled in the democratic era. During the years of Tory dominance it was argued (notably by the late Jim Bulpitt) that the party had won its position through its mastery of 'statecraft'; that 'Thatcherism' was an election-winning platform, more than an ideological crusade. The 2001 result suggests that this view was mistaken. As Garnett argues in his chapter on ideology, whatever the differences over issues like Europe and personal morality, in 2001 the most serious handicap for Conservatives was the nature of the principles which united them. The One Nation tradition was virtually extinct, even if the parliamentary ginger group of that name continued its meetings. A party wedded to Thatcherism in the key policy area of economic management was incapable of digesting psephological findings, which had indicated even in the 1980s that the ideology was deeply distrusted. Garnett argues that the Conservative Party can now only be understood in the context of liberal ideology; attempts by 'modernisers' to extend this creed to the social sphere might help to overcome the common identification of Conservatives with 'reaction', but even this seems a most unpromising foundation for an electoral comeback.

Hague and his advisers looked towards the United States for potential solutions to problems facing the Conservatives. Edward Ashbee explores the key factors behind the recovery of the Republican Party after the defeat of George Bush (senior) in the 1992 Presidential Election. He examines Republican strategies, from Newt Gingrich's *Contract with America* to the 'compassionate conservatism' which helped to propel Governor George W. Bush into the White House in 2000. Noting Hague's flirtation with 'compassionate conservatism', Ashbee argues that although the Republican revival offered some lessons for the Conservative Party, there are important obstacles to its translation into the very different British context.

In his commentary, Ian Taylor MP warns against the belief that US Republican emphasis on the 'small state' is the model for the Tories to follow. He argues that the party will have to shift its centre of gravity, and dismisses the notion that salvation can be found through a further move to the right. Europe is the main focus of his comments: he is critical of Hague's policy, but welcomes Iain Duncan Smith's pledge to accept the result of a referendum on the euro. Taylor, who made constructive contributions to the debate on public services between 1997 and 2001, also welcomes the signs that the new leadership has woken up to these concerns. However, he deplores

the persisting impression that the party is interested in curbing expenditure, rather than making genuine improvements to the public services. But he believes that even a shift of public perception in this respect will not be enough to revive his party, while it remains in thrall to Euro-scepticism. On the basis of Taylor's commentary, it seems safe to suggest that internal Tory politics will continue to be fascinating up to and beyond any referendum on the euro, even if the party continues to languish in the opinion polls.

Andrew Lansley MP led both the Conservative Party's policy development process from 1999 to 2001 and its 2001 general election campaign. In his closing commentary, Lansley defends the Conservative campaign, but recognises that painful lessons still have to be learned. He argues that 'in government, you are judged by what you do. In opposition, you are judged by who you are.' The Conservative Party, he says, now has to renew its image; articulate consistently the values of 'Conservatism' – freedom, community, security, opportunity and respect – that reflect that image; and announce a limited number of policy initiatives to reinforce it.

At the time of writing, it remains an open question whether even the fulfilment of this challenging programme will be sufficient to end the years of Conservative crisis. As the editors note in the Conclusions to this volume, it is an indictment of the 1997–2001 period that the task confronting the present party leadership is essentially the same as it was in 1997 – to learn the lessons of defeat and act on this assessment, as free as possible from rigid ideological presuppositions.