



Book Reviews

The Conservatives: A History
(Robin Harris) Publisher
Bantam, £30



This new, comprehensive history of the Conservative Party is a profoundly important book. Its author, Robin Harris, is a highly regarded historian and writer. He has been well-known in Conservative circles since the 1980s, when he was director of the Conservative Research Department.

In some 520 pages of clear, forceful prose he draws on a wide range of (largely published) sources to provide an immensely stimulating, and often highly provocative, account of the party's changing fortunes – its triumphs and its setbacks – since the early 19th century. It was then that the modern Conservative Party began to take shape.

There are many fine passages in this beautifully written book. The philosophical foundations of Conservatism supplied by Edmund Burke – ironically, not a Tory at all, but an Irish Whig – are summarised incisively. Harris notes perceptively that 'the most effective exponents of Conservative politics have often been outsiders'.

No-one proved that point more memorably than Disraeli, the exotic Jewish outsider who cast his spell over the party so profoundly that it continued to grow in strength after his death in 1881, making him the greatest Conservative icon of all time. 'National prestige,' writes Harris, was 'his decisive contribution to the idea which the Conservative Party has of itself'.

After Disraeli, Conservatives never wavered in their belief that their country must always be a leading participant in European and world affairs. In developing our national greatness, Disraeli's successor, Lord Salisbury, achieved considerably

more in practical terms than the remarkable Jewish adventurer. Yet Salisbury rarely gets the recognition he deserves in Conservative Party history. Harris redresses the balance, drawing on Andrew Roberts' magnificent biography of Salisbury, published in 1999.

This book cannot, however, be regarded as a definitive history

of the party. Harris allows his own strong, often controversial political opinions to intrude on his assessments of the party in the 20th century, which has been dubbed 'the Conservative century'. Harris finds little merit in most of the leaders who brought the party success in this period. Harold Macmillan is treated with particular scorn: "by no known definition was he, philosophically speaking, a conservative".

Harris believes that Margaret Thatcher's predecessors should have done far more to get the state out of the economy and promote the kind of liberal, free market policies she pursued so successfully after 1979. But that approach would not have brought electoral success before the late 1970s. Throughout the earlier decades of steadily rising prosperity the Conservative Party won its victories by showing that it could extend economic and social well-being throughout all classes more effectively than Labour, without resorting to worryingly unorthodox economic doctrines.

The party's great 20th century goal was spelt out by Stanley Baldwin in 1924: "to make one nation of our own people at home which, if secured, nothing else matters in the world". More Conservatives have been inspired by the One Nation ideal than by anything else; the 20th century cannot be understood without reference to it. And, thanks to David Cameron, it is being brought back to inspire Conservatives once again in this century. 🏰

Lord Lexden is the Conservative Party's official historian

A Walk-On Part: Diaries 1994-99
(Chris Mullin)
Publisher Profile,
£24.99



This, the third (and last) volume of Chris Mullin's magnificent diaries, begins with the death of John Smith, our last listening Labour leader, in 1994, where the first volume dealt with the end of Labour's 13-year rule, which was also the end of Mullin's political career before he went on to a new and successful role as pundit and literary *flaneur*.

Chris began his political career, a start which evidently wasn't diarised and won't be chronicled, as a radical lefty, editor of *Tribune*, Tony Benn's loyal lieutenant and the author of *A Very British Coup*, a paranoid left fantasy. He entered Parliament in 1987 as MP for Sunderland, which plugged him into the real world. Vestiges of raving radicalism remained: he still thinks a little wistfully that if Benn had won in the early 80s, Labour could have won big as a proper socialist party in the early 90s. He opposed the dropping of Clause IV, joined the Campaign Group and criticised the ideological emptiness of both Blair and Brown.

All this is, however, disavowed in the preface to this volume and was, in fact, only weakly defended in 1994, because by that time he was beginning to tell Tony Benn he was impractical, and reluctantly admiring 'The Man' Blair. Chris was not yet 'ministrable', unlike Benn's other lieutenant, Michael Meacher, who Blair had to appoint as a minister because of his placing in the shadow cabinet and who, despite Tony Blair's efforts to make his life difficult, was one of the most successful ministers of New Labour's early, do-nothing days. Chris



TV Review

Mullin wasn't yet house-trained or popular enough to reach such heights, though he climbed them later. We're the beneficiaries because by 1994 his compromise with reality had gone far enough to put him in a strong position as a diarist. He was a trustee, sufficiently sound to mix with Labour's great and almost good, and not be shunned by them like Benn.

All this made Mullin well placed to do what he's done: given us the best set of diaries of the fourth post-war Labour government and a fascinating inside story. It's a fascinating trip down memory lane and particularly pleasurable for me, because Mullin's inside perceptions were much the same as my own outside feelings. Like him, I thought our first two years were wasted by keeping to spending totals the Tories had never seriously intended to keep, and considered that the tying of our hands against tax increases were a disastrous waste of time. The first two years are, as the Thatcher and Cameron governments knew, the time to do the dirty work.

His perceptions of people are the most interesting part of the book. Robin Cook he saw as the most strongly principled and intelligent, but disqualified by his awkward personality and insufferable egotism. Brown he saw as ideologically empty but a strong humanitarian, anxious to improve the lot of the people. 'The Man' was a brilliant orator, capable of leading the party anywhere but getting exhausted and losing his way.

Because publication of the diaries is in reverse order, those who've read all three will reach this start a little jaundiced by hindsight, but future readers will approach them in chronological order. The present volume will be like a vision of the lambs and shepherds gambolling before the storm breaks in Beethoven's *Pastoral*: an exciting and sunlit start of a journey into dejection, rejection and bitterness at the end. 🍷

Austin Mitchell is associate editor of *The House Magazine*

Borgen (Dir. Mikael Birkkjær) BBC4

At long last, we can watch our equivalent of *The West Wing*. Sadly not made here, or about British politics, but Denmark's *Borgen* is much, much closer to the way we do politics than that imperial focus of power, the White House.

By contrast there has always something odd about the way British representations of politics on TV are so far from reality. The strange grip of the Oxbridge Footlights tradition, where all political life is reduced to farce and played for laughs – think *The Thick of It*, *Yes Minister*, or *B'stard* – means that viewers have never been offered a straight political soap opera. *House of Cards* or *A Very British Coup* were fun but utter fantasy while David Hare's morality plays on politics were like reading a *Guardian* Comment is Free lecture that never ended.

So it is from Denmark that we now enjoy a well-written, tightly plotted, pacy series on politics which has many read-overs to Westminster and Whitehall. The most important one is that in May 2010, the voters decided to become European – not that they fell in love with the EU but, like electorates in many European states, they decided not to allow any party a majority. Denmark has not had a majority government since 1909 and the current Danish prime minister, the social democrat and Neil Kinnock's daughter-in-law, Helle Thorning Schmidt, presides over an awkward three-party coalition. The betrayals, double-dealing, ditching of old friends and policies needed to form a coalition are perfectly caught, and a manual for what may well turn out to be 21st century politics in Britain. The interface with spin doctors and key TV news anchors could also have come from 4 Millbank. Sadly, British TV political stars are not as pulchritudinous

as Katrine Fonsmark – but at least one set up with a key prime minister's aide, so British political life does imitate Danish political art.



The problems the woman PM has in providing her husband with adequate sex as well as children-time comes from Cherie Blair's memoir, or David Cameron's hints about home-alone evenings with Samantha. The politics is pitch perfect: a row over extraordinary rendition, a former part of Denmark now miserable as an independent state (does Scotland really want to be Greenland?), corporate muscle trying to block a policy, an authoritarian state trying to bully an opponent living in freedom in a democracy. These are real-time UK problems that reflect recent events. The pressure of 7/24 media and the narcissism of small differences blown up into 24-hour Wagnerian epics by the press before they subside into barely recalled stories are accurately retold.

In reality *Borgen* is *Downton Abbey* set in contemporary politics. The characters, events, and *denouements* are larger than life but much closer to the real thing than all recent British TV series on politics. Scandinavian thriller writers are all intensely political and from this small region of Europe are coming some real page-turners or with *Borgen*, the best political soap since *West Wing*. But the puzzle remains. Why are British scriptwriters and TV commissioning editors so incapable of producing anything similar? 🍷

Denis MacShane is Labour MP for Rotherham and a former Europe minister