

POLITICAL ORPHAN'S TALE

On a March day in 1979, the life of Lord Lexden changed forever. Though the death of Airey Neave robbed him of a friend and ended their shared vision for Northern Ireland, his relaunched career soon saw him rubbing shoulders with some rising stars in the Conservative Research Department

Shortly before 3pm on 30 March 1979, the bomb which killed Airey Neave echoed throughout the Palace of Westminster. Over lunch at the nearby St Ermin's Hotel, Alistair Cooke, Neave's adviser, heard the blast. Neave's death robbed the Conservative Party of a future cabinet minister and radically altered the incoming government's approach to Northern Ireland, but it was also decisive in Cooke's own career.

"Had Airey survived, I would have gone as a special adviser at the Northern Ireland Office and we would have attempted to conduct policy in a different way. Instead my life took a different course," he says, in clipped, well enunciated, tones. "It brought to an end my really close involvement in Northern Irish politics, and the scope for influencing what went on there. I haven't really had a chance between then and now."

Today, Cooke is a Conservative peer, recently ennobled as Lord Lexden, rewarded for a career largely spent working behind the scenes at the Conservative Research Department (CRD), an organisation which he joined as a Northern Ireland specialist in 1977. It was a position for which he was well qualified, having worked in Belfast. He was introduced to politics on the streets of Lexden, on the outskirts of Colchester, where he grew up.

His father, a GP, revolved his life around "being a doctor, a gardener and playing bridge, all of which he did superbly". He also took "a rigid line in excluding politics from his existence". However, Lexden's mother took her son on canvassing duties for the Conservative Party. "She was one of those great post-war figures whose life extended broadly, and she was very much a constituency helper. It was from her that my political interest was formed." Whilst at Cambridge, his politics "shifted from the practical to the cerebral", and Lexden admits that his "connection with the Conservative Party was frail".

After post-graduate research into Ireland's first home rule bill crisis, a period which saw him work with the former UUP MP Connolly Gage, Lexden took up a teaching post at Queen's University, Belfast. With the Troubles in their infancy, the university was not immune. "The activities of Bernadette Devlin [the Queen's student elected as an independent MP] roused considerable feelings amongst those students who came from a republican

LORD LEXDEN...ON TERRORISM AND POLITICS

"My feelings were clear. We faced an appalling terrorist campaign which had to be suppressed. If means can be found then one wants to put terrorists totally out of business rather than bring them to the negotiating table. If I was called upon today to work with them in devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, then the feeling of discomfort would be enormously acute."

background, with the minority community becoming more present," Lexden explains. "This coincided with the majority community sending their children to universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. The best tended to go in larger numbers, but the staff were determined to keep the university functioning as a university should."

During his time in Belfast, Lexden says he didn't feel that his safety was "seriously imperilled", taking the view that: "If something with your name on it is going to come your way, then that will happen. It didn't really enter my own personal thought much, but my parents, in the tranquillity of Essex, were deeply worried."

By 1977, with the situation in Northern Ireland continuing to deteriorate, relations between the Conservative Party and the Ulster Unionists began to fracture. The established CRD policy of choosing a candidate "born and reared in Northern Ireland" for its Northern Irish advisory post was proving impossible. Instead Lexden swapped academia for politics – though his appearance remains of the donnish variety – and began work with Airey Neave.

The two shaped a policy which argued against a return to devolved institutions and proposed a regional council – or councils – without law-making powers in the first instance. Neave's murder changed everything, as Humphrey Atkins, who became Northern Ireland secretary, quickly dropped the policy. "Civil servants have a view, strongly rehearsed, and they were determined to find a new power-sharing arrangement. It was suggested that I help Atkins, but Mrs Thatcher was opposed to special advisers and dissuaded him from appointing me."

Lexden admits that he had got on badly with the Tory leader. "If we were to do things slightly differently in Northern Ireland, then you desperately need the prime minister's vigorous support – particularly *that* prime minister. She was a unionist to her fingertips but the reality put her off. Her impatience increased as Northern Irish politicians tended to talk too much and interrupt her."

Following the 1979 election, Lexden stayed at the CRD, with his focus moving from policy to management. He contributed to any briefings demanded by Mrs Thatcher – "we were fearful whenever 'mother' was on the phone" – and took on the "huge task of getting MPs

LORD LEXDEN ON...THATCHER AND NORTHERN IRELAND

"Events in Northern Ireland affected her, but nobody ever found a way of interesting Mrs Thatcher in Northern Irish matters. It made her deeply impatient, as it does so many people who are looking for swift progress."

LORD LEXDEN ON... THE UNION

“Frequently and sadly, the nationalist republican cause has been presented to people over here in terms that seem more attractive. One would like a serious effort to explain to people why Northern Ireland should be seen as part of their polity. Attitudes vary between indifference and dislike, and that is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs. I am rather fearful.”

and the party at large as fully apprised as possible of the reasons why the government was maintaining a radical course”.

With the CRD also acting as a Conservative Party finishing school, Lexden worked closely with a number of future high-fliers. “I am told that in 1989 I did indeed say that David Cameron – who worked there from 1988 to 1993 – would be in the cabinet in 20 years’ time. If I did, then I rather understated his chances,” he recalls. A month after Cameron joined the CRD, a young Boris Johnson arrived for an interview. “I said he should work here, but he decided to go on a fast-track journalism course. If we had had them both working side-by-side, then that would have been an interesting state of affairs.”

Lexden has clear memories of other would-be politicians who passed through his office: “Michael Portillo was the great star, and Andrew Tyrie was a great operator. Andrew Lansley came in as the overlord with whom I had to work for a few years. The striking feature was his absolute determination to make his mark and become a senior politician. But some who passed through progressed much further than I expected. Mr N. Herbert, for example, didn’t do a great deal of work when he was at the CRD.”

Lexden stopped working in politics after the Conservatives’ defeat at the 1997 general election. “There wasn’t any money, and the Conservative Party doesn’t



keep on its old lags.” Instead, he became general secretary of the Independent Schools Council. “It was such a chequered period,” he recalls of Labour’s education policy. “Tony Blair never brought himself to the point of actually holding to a course of action. One felt a great sense of relief at being involved in independent schools.” On the coalition government’s current vision of education reform, Lexden carefully hedges his bets. “Historians are very reluctant to make pronouncements on current matters. The jury’s out, but one observes with hope.”

As for the House of Lords, Lexden observes with interest as his new colleagues argue passionately over electoral reform. “I quite enjoy being part of an unprecedented time in the House of Lords; for a historian this has obvious appeal.” He describes himself as “a pragmatic Tory, not consumed by ideological fervour”.

Any spare time will be spent completing a historical work – Lexden has written 12 books – on the inter-war period of the Conservative Party. It will be, he says enigmatically, a “biographical study of someone who tried to keep out of the limelight as much as possible”.

It seems a fitting subject. Lexden has remained out of the limelight for much of his career, and he clearly regrets being denied the chance to take his ideas on Northern Irish politics into government with Airey Neave. Now, three decades on, Alistair Cooke will relish being given his voice as Lord Lexden. 🇮🇪

CV LORD LEXDEN

DATE OF BIRTH 20 April 1945

EDUCATION Framlingham College, Suffolk; Peterhouse College, Cambridge (BA, MA 1970); Queen’s University, Belfast (PhD 1979)

CAREER Lecturer and tutor in modern history, Queen’s University, Belfast 1971-77; desk officer, Conservative Research Department 1977-83, political adviser to shadow minister for Northern Ireland 1977-79; Conservative Research Department: assistant director 1983-85, deputy director 1985-97; director, Conservative Political Centre 1988-97

PARLIAMENTARY CAREER Raised to the peerage, 2010

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LORD LEXDEN ON... ENTERING PARLIAMENT

“The fiercely competitive state of affairs in the Commons didn’t appeal. I used to say that the House of Lords would perhaps suit me better, and I would certainly have said this within the hearing of David Cameron in the 1980s. Perhaps he bore me in mind.”