

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

With unrestricted access to its records, Lord Norton's masterful account sheds fresh light on the workings of this mysterious committee

The 1922 Committee Power Behind the Scenes

By **Philip Norton**
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Some historical myths seem virtually indestructible. The origin of the 1922 Committee is a case in point. People say with absolute confidence that it was formed by triumphant back bench Conservative MPs after they had brought down David Lloyd George's coalition government at a famous meeting in the Carlton Club in October 1922.

The 1922 Committee itself has given a helping hand to this wholly erroneous version of events by organising celebrations at the Carlton Club on the anniversary of the historic 1922 meeting.

The tenacious myth is demolished in this masterly account of the 1922 Committee's history by Philip Norton, long-serving professor of politics at the University of Hull and Conservative peer respected across the Lords as an expert on Parliament and the constitution. He has had unrestricted access to all the committee's records and has made the most effective use of them, along with a

wide range of other sources. From them he has fashioned a wonderfully clear and authoritative account of a central, but little studied, element of the Conservative Party.

He writes: "The general election of November 1922 saw the return of a Conservative government and 111 new Conservative MPs." One of them proposed "forming a party group for the guidance of those like himself who were new to the House".

The first meeting was held in April 1923, making this year the centenary of the self-help committee set up by new boys finding their feet in the Commons. This modest little outfit, with some 20 members initially, drew

all back bench Tories into its fold over the next few years.

The party's leaders played no part whatsoever in the committee's creation or growth. It has always operated independently of them. When in 2010 David Cameron tried to curb it by proposing that

July 2022 Anti-Boris Johnson protest



ministers should be admitted as members, he was humiliatingly rebuffed. Embarrassingly, I provided what turned out to be a spurious historical precedent for Cameron's proposals (Philip Norton corrected me gently in *The Times*).

The ultimate victor in this tussle, which Bill Cash entered with enthusiasm, was Graham Brady, who has now been the committee's chairman for longer than any of his predecessors. Cameron's defeat is recorded here with characteristic thoroughness.

After a century of having its origins misrepresented, the 1922 Committee today faces

a new danger: that it will be seen primarily as an assassination bureau. With three prime ministers felled in four years, a taste for political death could come to be widely regarded as its defining characteristic, reinforced perhaps by the unresolved argument over the

role that the party's small, declining membership – down from some three million in the 1950s to perhaps 150,000 today – should play in choosing its leader.

In reality only a fraction of the committee's time has ever been

devoted to such high drama. This book shows how carefully it has scrutinised the abilities of its leaders at innumerable private meetings over the last century. Only Neville Chamberlain enjoyed its unwavering support. Winston Churchill was often criticised, an observer noting in 1951 how "he wiped away a tear which was beginning to run down his face".

Little is known about most aspects of the committee's work. In this meticulous study, Philip Norton reveals for the first time the full story of how this rather mysterious body operates. 🐾

