

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Anne Somerset has produced a masterful and scintillating study of Queen Victoria's relationship with her prime ministers

Queen Victoria and Her Prime Ministers A Personal History

By **Anne Somerset**
Publisher **William Collins**

Queen Victoria began her long reign as an ardent Whig and ended it a diehard Tory.

Her Hanoverian predecessors had always intervened in general elections to help the approved incumbent prime minister remain in office. For well over 100 years after the Hanoverian accession in 1714, no government ever suffered an election defeat.

Though by the time of her accession in 1837 the Crown's electoral influence had diminished, Victoria initially saw no case for royal neutrality. At the 1841 election she contributed handsomely to the Whig Party's election expenses. The money would be well-spent, she thought, if it helped keep her charming prime minister, Lord Melbourne, whom she adored, in power.

It didn't. Although no one seemed particularly shocked by what she had done, there would be no more royal donations to election funds. As the cost of elections rose ever higher in these years, too much had to be supplied with so grave a risk

of obtaining no adequate return on the cash.

In any case the high-minded Prince Albert, her domineering husband, put a stop to her rabid Whig partisanship. He insisted that the monarchy must be above party politics. In this he was strongly supported by Sir Robert Peel, one of the two truly great men among Victoria's 10 prime ministers. The other was William Gladstone who saw himself as Peel's political heir, but came to be loathed by the queen from the 1870s onwards just as forcefully as she had once admired Peel.

Peel himself set a fine example of putting country before party by breaking the Conservatives in two through the repeal of the Corn Laws, which laid the basis for Great

Britain's prosperity during the rest of Victoria's reign.

That is how Victoria and Albert thought all political leaders should conduct themselves. The task of the monarchy was to gather such people



together under the best available prime minister chosen by the sovereign, discourage them from giving way to unseemly party prejudices, and shower advice and guidance on them to help them serve the national interest.

In the 1860s Walter Bagehot declared famously that the monarch had just three rights: to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. As Anne Somerset shows in this scintillating book, Victoria accepted no such limitations on her constitutional role. She was for ever pouring out her opinions and wishes, often accompanied by sharp reprimands, in letters and memoranda to her prime ministers.

In 1877-8 she bombarded Benjamin Disraeli with

demands for war against Russia to stop it dominating the Balkans. One minister grumbled, "Balmoral is becoming a serious nuisance." In the course of her reign she wrote an estimated 60 million words.

After the Prince Consort's death in 1861, his vision of the monarchy as an institution which would work actively in close association with the best politicians of all parties faded. The widowed queen found merit only in opponents of Gladstone

whom she denounced in 1886 as a "half-crazy and really in many ways ridiculous old man". She had no compunction in showing some of his letters to her to the Conservative leader, Lord Salisbury.

Anne Somerset captures the drama of this bitter conflict, assisted by masterly use of printed and archival material. She is equally good at evoking the queen's less fraught, but rarely wholly calm, relations with her other prime ministers who formed part of "a succession of extraordinarily distinguished statesmen, notable alike for their vision, ability and public spiritedness" – qualities in short supply today.

I doubt if a better history book will be published this year. 📖

