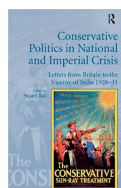


This invaluable set of Stanley Baldwin's letters tells the inside story of an underrated PM, writes **Lord Lexden**



Conservative Politics in National and Imperial Crisis
Letters from Britain to the Viceroy of India 1926-31
Edited by Stuart Ball
Ashgate Publishing Limited

For some years after his death in 1947, it seemed likely that Stanley Baldwin would go down in history as one of the worst of all Britain's prime ministers alongside his successor, Neville Chamberlain.

Churchill, who had at one time praised him to the skies, later denounced him for allowing Hitler to menace European peace by postponing the start of British rearmament because of its electoral unpopularity. In a vicious phrase that stuck, Churchill accused him of putting party before country.

The man whom Baldwin himself chose as his official biographer, G.M. Young, a supercilious intellectual, agreed. "No one who remembers the early months of the Second War can deny that Churchill is here giving voice to the judgement, or sentiment, of multitudes", he wrote, endorsing the attack.

In recent years a great deal of academic research has been done on many aspects of Baldwin's career with the active encouragement and participation of his grandson, the present Earl Baldwin of Bewdley, a thoughtful cross-bencher.

Churchill's damning verdict no longer stands. It is now clear that Baldwin (and Chamberlain after him) steadily rebuilt Britain's armed strength in a determined and prudent manner after 1934, giving priority to air power, as Churchill had commanded. That did not stop him constantly complaining that the pace was too slow, hoping by his widely publicised

criticisms to win himself a place in government.

Modern research has also established that Baldwin was a consummate Tory leader who held firmly to the centre ground of British politics, cleverly outmanoeuvring the strong right-wing elements in the party whose strident demands would have set class against class in vehement fashion. That would have played straight into the hands of the Labour Party, as it displaced the Liberals to become the second party in the state. Baldwin (not Disraeli) was the first person to use the phrase One Nation. It summed up his entire political philosophy.

“ It was Baldwin's great strength to appeal far beyond the ranks of traditional Tories, garnering support in particular from natural Liberal voters whose own party was floundering ”

No one has done more to make Baldwin's true political stature clear than Stuart Ball, Professor of Modern British History at Leicester University and the leading academic authority on Conservative history in the twentieth century. Having written incisively and at length about the flourishing fortunes of the party under Baldwin, he

has now published an invaluable set of some 180 letters, many of them long as well as richly informative and well-written, sent by Baldwin himself, his Cabinet colleagues and other senior Conservatives to Edward Wood, who was made a peer as Lord Irwin on his appointment as Viceroy of India in 1926. He started to prepare the sub-continent for self-government. Later as Lord Halifax he would become Chamberlain's controversial foreign secretary and the Labour Party's preferred candidate for the premiership when Chamberlain fell in May 1940. Labour trusted his progressive instincts while regarding Churchill as a right-wing diehard.

Time and again Irwin's correspondents extolled Baldwin's virtues, which contributed so significantly to the Conservative Party's political ascendancy in the 1920s. Writing on 12 August 1928, Neville Chamberlain reflected on the importance of the numerous speeches "in which Stanley excels, which he enjoys making and delivers admirably, speeches at public dinners of scientific, literary or artistic bigwigs, speeches at Universities or public-schools, these have wide publicity and are enjoyed and admired by all parties and particularly perhaps by Liberals. Therein lies a tremendous asset to our party".

It is hard today in the age of the trite sound-bite to realise the cumulative effect

Reviews

that eloquent speeches delivered to a wide range of audiences, many of them non-partisan, could have in the making of a Conservative statesman's reputation. It was Baldwin's great strength to be able to appeal far beyond the ranks of traditional Tories, garnering support in particular from natural Liberal voters whose own party was floundering. As Chamberlain put it: "I have long since become aware of a certain simple shrewdness about him which seems to provide him with an instinctive knowledge of the mind of the common man."

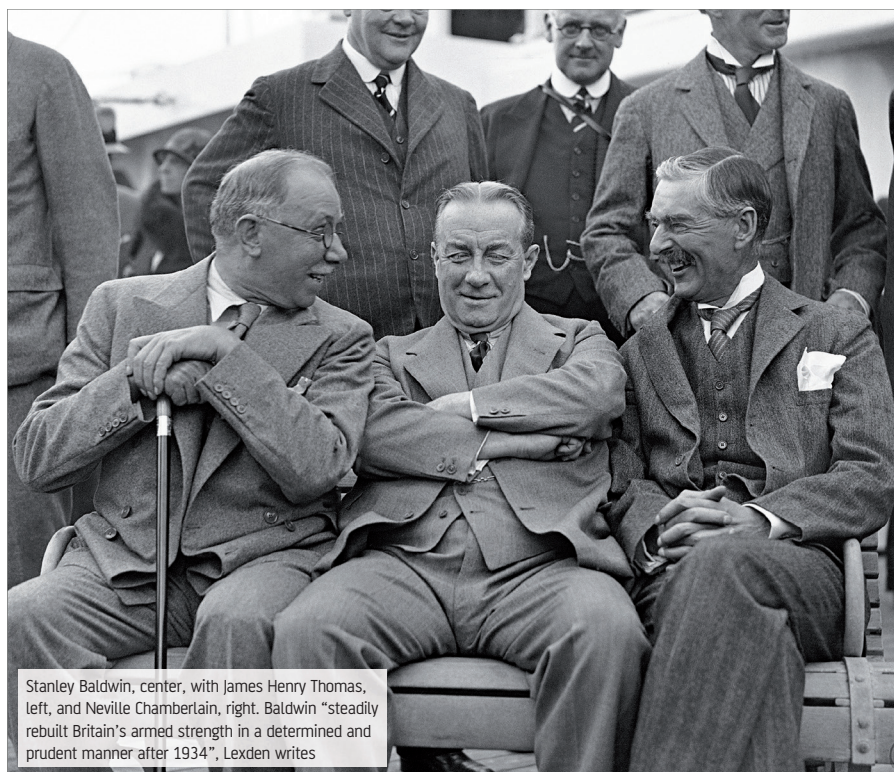
In the same letter Chamberlain also paid tribute to Churchill, "a real man of genius", but one more fitted to opposition than government because of his difficulty in distinguishing between practical and unworkable policies. "In opposition", wrote Chamberlain, "his want of judgment and his furious advocacy of half-baked ideas would not matter, while his wonderful debating and oratorical gifts would have free play".

At this point Churchill was in government as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1927 he denounced – d along with almost every other member of the Cabinet – the proposal that women should have the right to vote on the same terms as men. "The Cabinet went mad yesterday and decided to give votes to women at the age of 21 [even though] every speaker was against the proposal", Irwin was told on 13 April 1927.

So too were members of the party. "Conservative Associations all over the country are sending in frantic messages. The Central Office is proportionately disturbed, and I am afraid S.B. is having a rough time and rather looks like it", a letter of 28 April added.

But Baldwin, a close friend of Mrs Pankhurst, persisted. The party has him to thank for sweeping away an injustice to women whose votes would return it to power many times over the years ahead.

Baldwin soon sensed the damage an unwise policy could do. He rapidly dropped a detailed scheme for Lords reform drawn up by a Cabinet Committee in 1927 when



Stanley Baldwin, center, with James Henry Thomas, left, and Neville Chamberlain, right. Baldwin "steadily rebuilt Britain's armed strength in a determined and prudent manner after 1934", Lexden writes

it became clear that the proposals, which involved strengthening the powers of the Upper House and bringing in a batch of county councillors while cutting the number of existing peers entitled to sit, would split the party and hand a gift to Labour. One of the many critics, Lord Crawford, doubted whether it would even tackle the major weakness of the Lords. He wrote on 24 June 1927 that "one of the chief sources of criticism of the existing House is that peers attend so badly, whereas under the new scheme I do not think they would attend any better". Many MPs "thought an elective element was very necessary", another correspondent added a few days later. With internal arguments mounting, Baldwin's decision to leave the Lords unreformed was greeted with sighs of relief.

The letters are by no means confined to matters of high politics. On 8 August 1928 Lord Crawford wrote about his efforts to secure the skull of George Curzon, the great Indian Viceroy and unsuccessful contender

for the Tory leadership in 1923, for the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons. His skull was thought highly desirable "as being that of the man who has worked hardest in history". Curzon died before Crawford got round to asking him if he would mind being beheaded in the name of science. His widow was "coaxed and flattered and cajoled" without success, but said that "George would have looked upon the idea as the greatest compliment he had ever received in his life".

These letters to a distinguished reforming Viceroy tell the inside story of Baldwin's leadership of the party over six eventful years. They have been edited with meticulous care by Professor Ball. He even provides a footnote explaining the meaning of ad infinitum. ■

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian. His history of the Carlton Club published in 2007 to mark its 175th anniversary has just been reprinted