



international relations, in which great powers compete ruthlessly and cynically for pre-eminence. Any idea of a liberal world order, or Gladstonian notion of the concept of Europe in which countries co-operate for common ends, is put aside in this penetrating study.

“ While impressed by Simms’s book, I’m not convinced by its central thesis ”

The strength of the book lies not so much in the early part of this 500 year period, but in its discussion of more recent events. The later chapters relating to the settlement of Europe after the cataclysm of World War One are especially impressive. Simms undoubtedly is a historian of the first rank whose future works can be expected with anticipation. 🇬🇧

Kwasi Kwarteng is Conservative MP for Spelthorne

Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party 1918-1945

Stuart Ball, Oxford University Press, £85



The Conservative Party dominated the period covered by this impressive and important book of nearly 600 closely printed pages. No one predicted its success. The Tories themselves were taken by surprise. The left, not the right, was expected to be the beneficiary of the belated arrival of full democracy in 1928 when women were at last given the vote on the same terms as men despite Churchill’s vehement opposition, creating an electorate of nearly 29 million (up from eight million just 14 years earlier). As industry slumped and the dole queues lengthened, it seemed obvious that the future belonged to the Labour Party under their charismatic leader, Ramsay MacDonald, who roused the enthusiasm of political audiences in a way that no Tory could match.

Yet to general amazement the glittering prizes went to the Conservative Party. During this period there were only two years (1929-31) when it was not the largest party in the Commons. It won more votes than any of its rivals at every general election. In 1924 it gained the largest majority ever obtained by a political party fighting on its own without coalition allies. It lost power five years later only because Labour won more seats with a smaller share of the vote. The vagaries of the first past the post system deprived it of victory. Even so, the Tories were never tempted to flirt with proportional representation.

Why did they thrive so unexpectedly? Historians have tended to depict them as the lucky and undeserving beneficiaries of the inexorable decline of the Liberals which Lloyd George’s bold ideas for economic recovery were unable to reverse, and of the crisis into which MacDonald plunged Labour when he decided to form a National Government in 1931. Professor Stuart Ball of Leicester University, the leading

academic historian of the 20th century Conservative Party, sees matters rather differently.

In this book, which contains the fruits of 30 years’ research, he shows that the Tories triumphed because they commanded the centre ground of politics, repelling all the assaults of their enemies. Stanley Baldwin masterminded the successful centrist strategy; his successor, Neville Chamberlain, maintained it. Whipped up by Churchill, an ungrateful party later turned against them, ruthlessly destroying their reputations when the war which they had tried hard to avert engulfed the world, and the country became racked by a sense of guilt over appeasement which had been wholly absent in the late 1930s when the policy was practised.

“ In this book, which contains the fruits of 30 years’ research, Ball shows that the Tories triumphed because they commanded the centre ground of politics ”

Ball rediscovers for us the progressive attitudes and devotion to the cause of “one nation” shared by both men (Baldwin indeed invented the phrase) which subsequent bitter controversy swept from the historical record. During their years of power Baldwin and Chamberlain were acknowledged as the great architects of Conservative ascendancy based on a flexible, pragmatic approach to policy. As Baldwin explained, the secret of Conservative success lies in its “continuous adaptation to the ever-changing facts of social life”. It is what David Cameron today calls modernisation, which Tories resist at their peril. All social classes, Ball writes, responded to Baldwin’s “projection of a Conservatism based on shared traditions and values, which emphasised community, trust, honesty and Christian morality”. ➤



Parliament in 1929. At Westminster most Tory MPs behaved beautifully, providing a spectacle of unity which made a very favourable impression on voters. The contrast with the party today could hardly be greater, says Alistair Lexden

Cameron must work much harder in the same cause.

The party which Baldwin made the dominant political force in Britain had some 1.5 million members. Constituencies up and down the land were hives of Conservative activity from which women were rarely absent. The Tories in Bath reported in 1936 that “they had a large number of lady members but their husbands were not members” which makes the flat refusal of most constituencies to consider women as candidates for parliamentary seats all the more unforgivable. Conservative Central Office, which had 250 staff in 1928, constantly expanded and improved its services, financing much of its work, as it always had, through the sale of honours,

an activity which was now handled with care and discretion after the scandals of the Lloyd George era. “The organisation,” Ball writes, “was generally effective at every level, and probably had a more complete

“ Tories in Bath reported in 1936 that ‘they had a large number of lady members but their husbands were not members’ ”

national reach than any other national body of its kind”. At Westminster most MPs behaved beautifully, providing a spectacle of unity which made a very favourable

impression on voters. The contrast with the party today could hardly be greater.

Stuart Ball has marshalled a vast amount of material, much of it from the 400 or so collections of private papers and constituency records which he has consulted. “The inter-war Conservatives have the richest archival record of any British political party in any historical period,” he tells us. Even so, he should have resisted the temptation to write such a long book. At £85 it will not gain the readership which his invaluable reappraisal of the party of Baldwin and Chamberlain deserves. 🇬🇧

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and a historian of his party. His previous book reviews and historical articles are available on his website, www.alistairlexden.org.uk