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CHURCHILL AND THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

By Stuart Ball

THE words 'Churchill' and 'party' lie in uneasy company. Winston Churchill is regarded as the least orthodox and party-minded of all those who stood in the front rank of British politics during the twentieth century, always navigating by his own compass. This view is shaped by Churchill's remarkable egotism and the well-known incidents of his career: the two changes of party allegiance, the coalitionism of 1917–22, the rebellious 'wilderness' years of the 1930s, and the premiership almost above party in 1940–5. It has been reinforced by the preponderance of biography in the writing about Churchill, and especially by those which regard him as a 'great man'. Churchill tends to be removed from his political context and separated from his peers, and there is a reluctance to see him in any conventional light. As a result, by far the most neglected aspect of Churchill's life has been his party political role, and in particular his relationship with the Conservative party.¹

There are several reasons for this. It is the antithesis of those aspects which most attract admirers and authors – this is the Churchill of the 'Gestapo' speech, not of 'blood, toil, tears and sweat'.² Seeing him as a party politician is in conflict with the picture of the lone hero, the

¹The only discussions are Lord Blake, 'Churchill and the Conservative Party', in Crosby Kemper (ed.), *Winston Churchill: Resolution, Defiance, Magnanimity* (Columbia, Mo., 1995), 141–56, a brief narrative treatment which does not go beyond 1940, and the more specific study by John Ramsden, 'Winston Churchill and the Leadership of the Conservative Party 1940–51', *Contemporary Record*, 9, no. 1 (1995), 99–119; the latter's volume in the Longman History of the Conservative Party series, *The Age of Churchill and Eden 1940–57* (1995), provides further analysis and is the most valuable exploration of this theme after 1940. Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front 1900–55* (1992), is unusual in concentrating on domestic politics and makes many important points, but still leaves Churchill's relationship with the party in the background; it excludes discussion of the India revolt and thus has a comparatively short examination of 1929–39, and like most works gives less weight to the 1945–55 period. A recent substantial study by Graham Stewart, *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (1999), focuses on Churchill's career during the 1930s.

²None of the twenty-nine essays in the last major collection, Robert Blake and W.R. Louis (eds.), *Churchill* (Oxford, 1993), discussed Churchill's relations with the Conservative party. There is a similar pattern in the various biographies, whether it is the orthodox narrative of the massive volumes of the official life, summarised by Martin Gilbert in *Churchill: A Life* (1991), or the revisionism of John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory* (1993). The most recent brief synthesis, Ian Wood, *Churchill* (Basingstoke, 2000), does not even have an entry for Conservative party in the index.

unique and iconoclastic. At the same time, Churchill does not stand for any particular brand of Conservatism, and his name does not figure within the party in the same way as Disraeli, Baldwin, Macmillan, Thatcher and even (in more intellectual circles) Salisbury. Since 1945 Conservatives have certainly been glad to hail him as their own, but they raid his past for little other than the summer of 1940. Churchill is seen as a great man *of* the party, rather than a great figure *in* it, and his legacy is unclear. It is easy to say that Churchill was not an 'orthodox' Conservative, as if Conservatism was reducible to some formulaic recipe. In fact, there were three strands in Churchill's outlook which he shared with most Conservatives of his era. First was the Empire and Britain's world role; for this Churchill had an instinctively positive outlook and a sense of mission. Second was the independent spirit of the British people; the 'Tory democracy' of Disraeli and Lord Randolph, resting upon practical measures but never to be stifled or circumscribed. The third theme was a guarantor of this: a balance between the classes, without the dominance of one over the others – as needful in the taming of the unchecked House of Lords as it was in the danger of socialism.

The aim of this paper is to examine the most important themes and issues in Churchill's relationship with the Conservative party, concentrating on the period between his return to the fold in 1924 and the second premiership of 1951–5. It seeks to ask questions which are rarely raised, and to offer some different perspectives.³ His position cannot be assessed if it is treated too much in isolation – for example, was Churchill any more 'in the wilderness' in the 1930s than Amery or the fourth marquess of Salisbury, or was he less constructive as opposition leader in 1945–51 than Balfour had been after the previous landslide defeat in 1906–11? Churchill was far from flawless as a party politician, but his abilities have been undervalued. A successful political career needs not just oratorical and executive talent, but also an awareness of relationships and the ability to work with others. Churchill is not known for the latter, but the problem is that because in his case

³The monographs on party and political history are more helpful than any biographies. In addition to Ramsden, *Age of Churchill and Eden*, and Stewart, *Burying Caesar*, see Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–31* (London and New Haven, 1988); Gillian Peele, 'Revolt over India', in *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918–39*, eds. G. Peele and C. Cook (1975), 114–45; Carl Bridge, *Holding India to the Empire: The British Conservative Party and the 1935 Constitution* (New Delhi, 1986); Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy 1933–40* (Cambridge, 1975); Neville Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1971); N.J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935–40* (1998); Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (1975); Kevin Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics 1940–45* (Manchester, 1991); and Anthony Seldon, *Churchill's Indian Summer: The Conservative Government 1951–55* (1981).

the ability and egotism were more strikingly evident, he is treated as if he was of an entirely different breed.

An assumption which colours many views of Churchill is that he did not appreciate party political realities. This is untenable: Churchill was a constituency MP for several decades, and showed that he was well aware of the limits of party tolerance in the 1930s. He sat through many local functions, delivered speeches around the country, attended as many conferences as most ministers in this era, and was present at party meetings. He was aware of how the parliamentary Conservative party worked, and of the backbench groups and committees. Churchill had a better understanding of the role of party than was displayed by Lloyd George, Austen Chamberlain, Mosley, Beaverbrook and Stafford Cripps between 1918 and 1939, and his awareness of its importance was shown by his desire to underpin the Lloyd George coalition by the fusion of its followers into a single party. He also had a better feel for what the Conservative party and the public would accept than was demonstrated by Austen Chamberlain in 1922, Hoare in 1935, and Balfour and F.E. Smith more generally; the latter burned his boats more irretrievably than Churchill without leaving the party. However, in the interwar period Churchill tended to underestimate the resilience and adaptability of parties. He thought that a major crisis was likely to lead to the parties breaking up and realigning; in other words, that party in general was a constant part of the landscape, but the particular parties in their present forms were not. Up to 1939 he seemed often to be looking for a repeat of the upheaval of the 1880s which had been so crucial in his father's career. In December 1929 he thought 'that all three parties would go into the melting pot within the next two years and come out in an entirely different grouping', but when this happened in August 1931 he was not in a position to take advantage of it.⁴

There is some basis for the traditional view, especially during the Second World War. There is no doubt that Churchill wanted most of all to succeed as a war leader, and that all else was secondary. This was partly due to his patriotism and the peril which the nation faced; with invasion a real danger, party matters naturally had little call on his time. Anything which disrupted national unity or took attention away from the war effort was disliked – particularly party frictions, and later plans for postwar reconstruction. It is also true that Churchill was comfortable with coalition, and not only in wartime. He always wished to broaden the base of the government and form a ministry of all the talents. However, his desire to continue the coalition into peacetime was based upon the assumption that Labour would still be the junior

⁴Jones to Bickersteth, 23 Dec. 1929, *Thomas Jones: Whitehall Diary, Vol. 2: 1926–30*, ed. K. Middlemas (Oxford, 1969), 229.

partner, whilst the end of the war would allow more Conservative involvement on the home front. This expectation was not unreasonable in 1944–5, given Lloyd George's victory in 1918 and Labour's limited advance in the 1930s. Churchill did not spurn party as the working means of British political life, or the nature of the Conservative party as such – but he sought to broaden it, to hold the centre and contain Labour. He favoured a coalition arrangement when the elements were more equally balanced, as in 1918–22, and fusion and absorption when not, as in the Woolton-Teviot agreement with the Liberal Nationals and the offer of a cabinet post to Clement Davies, the Liberal leader, in 1951. In seeking to widen the Conservative base, and to appeal to former Liberals on the basis of moderate reformism, Churchill was following the same course as Baldwin had before him.

Churchill's tactics were often more cautious than his oratorical style might suggest. Its memorable vigour obscures the fact that his moves were generally as carefully rehearsed as his major speeches – where hours of work lay behind any apparent spontaneity. However, whilst there is no doubt that Churchill had a gift for words and an original turn of phrase, no one has ever suggested that he was a skilled tactician. If anything, the view is quite the opposite – that his decisions were poor and his judgement flawed, and that this was his area of greatest weakness. This derives mainly from three events – the failure of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, the rejection of his charges against Hoare and Derby by the committee of privileges in 1934, and the shouting down of his speech in the abdication crisis in 1936. Yet, in the first two of these at least, it could be said that his case was sound enough and need not have led to such a setback. The abdication speech was a failure to understand the mood of the hour, but even so too much should not be construed from one blunder. In any long parliamentary career there are speeches which fall flat or have unintended results, and Churchill had no more stumbles than most. Baldwin is often considered to have been a master of the moods of the House and the currents of public opinion, but in reality his touch was as erratic as Churchill's. Churchill's approach was based upon an almost mid-Victorian concept of the importance of opinion in the House of Commons and the degree of independence of the backbench MP. Before he became leader himself, he hoped for a definition of party loyalty which was based broadly upon principles and sentiments rather than narrowly upon the present leaders. Although he was generally disappointed, throughout the century similar expectations have been held by figures from different generations, backgrounds and parties, including Mosley, Bevan, Powell, Jenkins and Heseltine.

Churchill's main forum was parliament, and only secondarily did he go beyond that to address a wider party audience. Given that in the

Conservative party policies were made by the leaders and that the strongest influence upon them was exerted by or through the parliamentary party, this was a sensible strategy. However, few excluded figures have had more than a handful of regular followers, even if they have been able to muster greater support during a crisis. Rebellions tend to occur on issues rather than in support of a personality, however respected or popular; the rebel vote of 1922 was not *for* Bonar Law any more than that of 1975 was *for* Thatcher or that of 1990 *for* Heseltine – although in each case a credible alternative leader was needed, as Meyer's failure in 1989 demonstrates. So it is not surprising that the India rebels or the anti-appeasers did not wish to be thought of as Churchill followers even when they applauded his speeches. The point of note about Churchill's two campaigns in the 1930s is not that they did not involve more Conservative MPs, but rather that they gathered so many. This was particularly the case with India, perhaps the largest sustained internal rebellion the Conservative party has ever seen – but it is also true of the smaller and less consistent band of anti-appeasers, for they were still larger than the Suez group of the 1950s, the Profumo rebels or Powellites of the 1960s, the resisters of the poll tax in the 1980s, or the Maastricht rebels in the early 1990s.

The most significant period of Churchill's relationship with the Conservative party begins with his return to the fold in 1924. Churchill's predominant theme since 1918 had been anti-Socialism, and the changes in the political landscape left him with no other natural home. His return was encouraged by the new party leader, Stanley Baldwin, and in the 1924 general election he was returned as Conservative MP for Epping, a safe seat near London.⁵ Conservative doubts about Churchill in the 1920s were not due to his prewar years as a Liberal or his crossing of the floor in 1904. Much of prewar politics seemed remote by 1924, and the only leading figure of that era who was still active, Balfour, was one of the strongest proponents of Churchill's return. Indeed, it is this connection which links to the real concern about Churchill in the 1920s – his leading role in the Lloyd George coalition, and the suspicion that he would intrigue for its revival. The fear of a returned coalition was a constant theme in Conservative politics from 1922 to 1935, with plots and conspiracies being frequently suspected – and not just by such paranoid minds as J.C.C. Davidson.⁶

Any reservations were certainly not because Churchill was not

⁵ Churchill contested the election as a 'Constitutionalist', but he was the officially sanctioned candidate of the Epping Conservative Association and was regarded as such by Central Office (which had helped him secure the candidacy).

⁶ *Memoirs of a Conservative: J.C.C. Davidson's Memoirs and Papers 1910–37*, ed. R.R. James (1969), 213, 215, 309–10; *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: the Headlam Diaries 1923–35*, ed. Stuart Ball (1992), 68, 140, 150–1, 189.

Conservative enough in his views.⁷ As the hammer of the Reds at home and abroad since 1918, he was if anything too much to the right. Given the tone which Baldwin wished to set in 1924, putting Churchill in any cabinet post was an ambivalent step. The danger that Churchill might give the government too belligerent a face may also help to explain Baldwin's decision to offer him the exchequer. Although prominent, it was less politically sensitive than other departments, as it was less in direct contact with Labour and the trades unions and had no immediate role in executing foreign or imperial policy. The treasury was less of a danger than a return to the home office would have been (if Joynson-Hicks caused problems with the ARCOS raid, consider the fireworks that Churchill might have set off), or ministries such as labour, health or even education; the board of trade was critical on tariff and safeguarding issues, whilst giving Churchill a military department would have been more unacceptable to party opinion and given him not enough to do – considerations which also applied to the imperial and non-departmental posts respectively.

The strategy worked well: the treasury kept Churchill occupied and returned his attention to his best regarded field of domestic reform, where he worked as effectively with Neville Chamberlain as any two such powerful colleagues and partial rivals have in any other ministry. The appointment as chancellor did not go to Churchill's head; he had plenty of ideas, but put the greatest emphasis upon loyalty to Baldwin and being a reliable member of the cabinet team. He delivered good, but not too showy or individualistic, debating performances.⁸ He cultivated Conservative MPs, and was aided in this by the large influx of new members in 1924. In 1925 the clash with Bridgeman over the naval budget aroused a few fears of coalitionist plots, but the admiralty's case was not conclusive whilst the need for economy was strong. The Economy Bill which Churchill delivered in March 1926 was a response to backbench and constituency pressure, although the savings identified fell well short of the sweeping reductions for which – however unrealistically – the party clamoured.

Churchill was happy with the course of the 1924–9 government on social reform and conciliation.⁹ His stance on the general strike was the same as Baldwin's: that this was a challenge to the constitution and must be defeated. If there was a difference, it was only in the vigour

⁷ For example, his anti-Socialist views were set out in a long letter to *The Times*, 18 Jan. 1924, at the formation of the first Labour government.

⁸ See Neville Chamberlain's rather patronising assessment at the end of the first session, Chamberlain to Baldwin, 30 Aug. 1925, Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Companion* (hereafter Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*), v, part 1 (1979), 533–4.

⁹ See his response to Baldwin's speech on the trade union levy bill, Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 8 Mar. 1925, *Companion Documents, Volume V (Part 1)*, 424.

of the tactics and language used, and throughout the strike Churchill accepted and discharged the tasks which he was given. Although he supported Baldwin's decision not to legislate in 1925, Churchill was more in tune than his leader with Conservative opinion on the trade union levy, another key theme of the mid 1920s. He was in favour of the change to 'contracting in' even before the general strike, and had no disagreement with the terms of the 1927 Trade Disputes Act. Another matter on which the rank and file felt strongly was strengthening the House of Lords as a bulwark against an overriding Socialist majority, and here again Churchill was of the same mind as the centre and right of the party. The de-rating scheme which he developed with Neville Chamberlain in 1927–8 was the centrepiece of the government's unemployment strategy. Although the reform failed to generate public enthusiasm, it had something to offer both urban and rural Conservatives and was well attuned to mainstream party opinion.¹⁰ By the election of May 1929, Churchill had established a fairly secure position in both the party and the cabinet; if the Conservatives had won, he would have been seen as a positive member of the team which had secured victory. Whilst Baldwin was considering a reshuffle which would have moved him from the Treasury, there was no intention or pressure to leave him out of the next cabinet.¹¹ A change of post was not a snub or unwelcome; there were more creative opportunities elsewhere, and now that Churchill had worked his passage the party would be willing to give him greater latitude.

The Conservative defeat in 1929 left the Liberals holding the parliamentary balance, and Churchill was willing to seek an arrangement with them to block Labour or remove them from office after a few months. He was not the only Conservative to consider this, but few others were willing to deal directly with Lloyd George, or thought that Lloyd George would set a feasible price. Nevertheless, the revival of coalitionism, or even the rumour of it, damaged Churchill's position. Although Churchill was fairly effective in replying to Snowden in set-piece debates such as the 1930 budget, in general he did not shine on the opposition front bench; Baldwin was not alone in thinking that he had 'made one blunder after another'.¹² However, he was not the only former minister who found adapting to opposition difficult, and Austen Chamberlain and Baldwin were even more indifferent performers. The

¹⁰ Amery diary, 24 Apr. 1928, *The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume 1: 1899–1929*, eds. J. Barnes & D. Nicholson (1980), 547.

¹¹ Neville Chamberlain diary, 11 Mar. 1929, Neville Chamberlain MSS, Birmingham University Library; Churchill's own recollections, Amery to Baldwin, 11 Mar. 1929, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 1, 1431, 1444–45.

¹² Amery diary, 26 May 1930, *The Empire at Bay – The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume 2: 1929–45*, eds. J. Barnes and D. Nicholson (1988), 72.

revival of protectionist feeling in the Conservative party in 1929–30 was not as difficult for Churchill as might have been expected. Now back in the party mainstream, he was ready to take a more flexible view. The problems of the slump undermined the certainties of many defenders of free trade, and whilst he was still reluctant to put duties on food imports, he was not prepared to quit the front bench over this.¹³ He was sensitive to the move of party opinion towards tariffs and imperial preference in the winter of 1929–30 and developed his own position alongside it, closing rather than widening the gap.¹⁴ It is significant that when Beaverbrook was identifying the barriers to be overcome in the spring and summer of 1930, Churchill had faded into the background; Salisbury and even Percy offered more resistance, until the attack moved on to Davidson and ultimately Baldwin.

Churchill's eclipse in 1929–31 was not mainly due to the renewal of the tariff issue, or even his opposition to Baldwin's line on India. There was a third factor which affected a considerable number of the 1924–9 cabinet: the feeling against the 'old gang', and the desire to refresh the Conservative front-bench. Fanned by Beaverbrook as part of his efforts to remove obstacles to his protectionist Empire Crusade, this became a forceful pressure during 1930.¹⁵ Inclusion in the 'old gang' was not so much a matter of age alone, but rather of style, outlook, and length of career. It affected most those who seemed to have late Victorian roots or mentalities, and so included Austen Chamberlain, Joynson-Hicks, Churchill, Salisbury and Percy, but not Neville Chamberlain, Hoare and Cunliffe-Lister. Churchill was thus only one amongst several who were washed into a backwater by this tide of party feeling. As this pressure mounted at the end of 1930, his attention turned to the India question. It was not a deliberate search for a weapon to use, but rather that the dwindling chances of his inclusion in the next cabinet removed the counterbalance to his strong convictions on this issue. In November 1929 Churchill had been deeply unhappy when Baldwin supported the Irwin Declaration of eventual dominion status, but he remained a loyal member of the front-bench team until his resignation in January 1931.¹⁶ His departure was not a leadership bid; like Eden in 1938, Thorneycroft in 1958 and Heseltine in 1986, it was the only reaction left when an

¹³ Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 294, 296–9; Churchill to Baldwin, 14 [not sent] & 16 Oct. 1930, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2 (1981), 191–4.

¹⁴ Nicolson diary, 23 Jan. 1930, *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1930–64*, ed. Stanley Olson (1980), 14–15. He was happy to accept the referendum policy announced by Baldwin on 4 Mar. 1930 and the advance to the 'free hand' in September and October 1930, and in the budget debates of April 1931 gave public support to introducing tariffs for revenue and negotiating purposes.

¹⁵ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, 115, 116, 159–61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114–117; Hoare to Irwin, 13 Nov. 1929, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 111.

existing tension was stretched to breaking point. He remained loyal on other issues in 1931, and sought to help in the party's attacks on Labour.¹⁷

At the height of the tariff crisis in September 1930, Churchill had warned Baldwin that he cared about India 'more than anything else in public life'.¹⁸ He was unwilling to go beyond the Simon Commission's proposals for limited regional devolution, and was appalled when the first Round Table conference ended in January 1931 with a commitment to a federal constitution including areas of native control of the central government. A few days later, on 26 January, Baldwin gave firm support to this in an ill-judged speech which dismayed Conservative MPs. He had barely consulted his front-bench colleagues, and several were angry and upset. Churchill resigned the next day, and during the following weeks sought to draw back the party's position.¹⁹ This had some effect: despite scoring some debating points at Churchill's expense, Baldwin sounded a more careful note in his next speeches in March 1931. Between 1931 and 1935 Churchill was not using India to overthrow Baldwin and seize the leadership – not because he did not want it, but because he knew that it was not likely to be obtained in that way. Although there were a few moments when the tide of party feeling swung towards Churchill's views on India, he would not have been Baldwin's replacement. Any successor would need the support of most of the front bench and have to be able to command wider and deeper confidence amongst MPs and the constituencies than Churchill did. As the crisis of March 1931 showed, the most likely new leader would have been Neville Chamberlain.²⁰

Churchill had been aware since 1929 that Chamberlain might be Baldwin's eventual successor, blocking his own chances and providing a less congenial style of leadership.²¹ He had considered retirement and concentrating on making his family's financial situation more secure, even before the depression hit his investments in late 1929. In fact, he largely followed through with this, adopting a kind of semi-retirement. During the 1930s Churchill followed his own course first and foremost, and took remarkably little account of the views of others. This could be ascribed to egotism and lack of judgement, but makes more sense

¹⁷ Churchill to Boothby, 21 Feb. 1931, *Companion Documents, Volume V (Part 2)*, 275. He delivered a powerful attack on MacDonald in the debate on the Trades Disputes Bill just after his resignation, although this could also be seen as a bid to win over Conservative MPs.

¹⁸ Churchill to Baldwin, 24 Sep. 1930, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 186.

¹⁹ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, 121–2, 134; Churchill had a favourable reception at the N[ational] U[nion] Central Council, 24 Feb. 1931.

²⁰ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, 135–6 201.

²¹ Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 27 Aug. 1929, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 61–62.

as the conduct of someone who feels above the fray of the day-to-day struggle. Churchill's course was closest to that of the 'elder statesman', combining experience which should be deferred to with some detachment from the government, though not hostility.²² This gave him the licence to concentrate on issues of particular interest, and explains the nature of his interventions. His attendance at the House was intermittent, and the habit of delivering a prepared speech and then departing was not calculated to draw in the many new members who hardly knew him. He expected to offer advice and be heard at the highest level, and to be given privileged access to information in certain areas; he played a part behind the scenes, and over air defence was certainly not 'in the wilderness'. At the same time, Churchill was giving much more of his time and energy to activities outside politics. Some of these were to make money, but others were leisure; the involvement in Chartwell, and the painting – which unlike his writing was never intended to produce income. His absence from the fray at the crucial party conference of 1934, cruising in the Mediterranean and painting, was not a tactical move but a reflection of other priorities.

It is wrong to regard Churchill as being isolated or excluded after 1931, although this is the romantic myth of the 'wilderness years'. This implies that his omission from the national government in 1931 was a consideration in its making, rather than the natural consequence of his resignation from the front bench and the limited number of ministerial places available for Conservatives in a coalition. This false perspective results from viewing events as if the political world revolved around Churchill, and assuming that such a giant could only have been marginalised by the deliberate efforts of the 'pygmies' who ruled the national government. The truth is more ordinary; he was one of a number of Conservative ex-ministers whose position and influence had declined, and who were peripheral to the events of August to November 1931. Several who were still members of the business committee found no place, such as Steel-Maitland, Peel and Amery, whilst Austen Chamberlain and Hailsham were marginalised. Nor was Churchill unusually detached from his party, being no further removed than Heseltine in 1986–90 and less so than Bevan in the early 1950s, Cripps in 1939, Austen Chamberlain in 1922–3, or Powell after 1968. Another perspective on Churchill's position in the 1930s is offered by a comparison with the two most recent Conservative chancellors of the exchequer. He was more in touch with the party mainstream on India

²² He was described in these terms by Harold Nicolson as early as January 1930: Nicolson diary, 23 Jan. 1930. This does not mean that 'elder statesmen' do not harbour hopes of a recall to the cabinet; Austen Chamberlain's position – which was more similar to Churchill's in 1929–35 than is usually recognised – is an example of this.

than Kenneth Clarke has been on Europe since 1997, and more respected and listened to than Norman Lamont after 1993, despite the latter's Euroscepticism. The closest parallels to Churchill's position were Balfour after 1911 and Gladstone after 1874 – for certainly he did not rule out the chance of a recall to high office, although he expected not the leadership but a cabinet post related to defence.

Churchill's conduct during the 1930s makes little sense if he really was aiming to seize the party leadership or bring down the national government. In 1931 Amery noted: 'I imagine that his game is to be a lonely and formidable figure available as a possible Prime Minister in a confused situation later on.'²³ This would have been a remote and wildly speculative strategy, but Churchill's independent course was open to misinterpretation, and the suspicion that he was seeking to overthrow the leadership was a handy weapon to use against him. However, if this was his purpose, then his judgement was deeply flawed and his tactics foolish beyond belief. His campaign over India was conducted separately from the other heavyweight former ministers who might have been allies, such as Austen Chamberlain and Salisbury. Churchill's onslaught drove them towards an ineffective middle ground, and consolidated party moderates behind Baldwin and Hoare. Mainstream opinion regarded Churchill's intemperate language and forecasts of doom as exaggerated, and their excess made the official policy more credible. Up to 1933 Churchill made little effort to appeal directly to the Conservative grass roots, and by then the firmer regime of Willingdon as viceroy provided a less worrying state of affairs in India than had been the case in 1929–31. Nor was there any real attempt to canvass Conservative MPs in general, and the rebels acted according to their own personal agendas. As the 'diehards' did not view Churchill as their leader and were often ineffective in debate, they were hardly a suitable basis for a leadership bid.

Churchill was far from being opposed to the national government in principle, for it was precisely the sort of cross-party anti-Socialist pact that he had been looking for in the 1920s. His opposition to the India policy and urging of rearmament can obscure the fact that he was in agreement on the broad range of domestic policy.²⁴ India would not, in any case, have been the issue on which to divide the national government. Agreement since the Irwin Declaration in 1929 had enabled Baldwin and MacDonald to feel that they could work together

²³ Amery diary, 30 Jan. 1931, *Empire at Bay*, 146.

²⁴ For example, his support and praise for Chamberlain's budget in 1936: Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 320. This contrasted with the manifesto of the five Conservative MPs who resigned the whip over India in 1935: Atholl, Todd, Astbury, Nall and Thorp to Baldwin, 1 and 21 May 1935, Baldwin MSS 107/82–7 and 91–4, Cambridge University Library.

in August 1931, and India was one of the main factors in the latter's decision to remain in office. The round table policy was subscribed to by Labour and Liberal figures in the government, and was further reinforced when Irwin joined the cabinet in June 1932. There was no significant cave amongst the Conservative ministers on India, or fault line between them and the other parties; if this was an attempt to weaken the national government, then it was misguided in attacking one of its most cohesive fronts. Although Conservative activists in the constituencies were disturbed, especially where they had economic or personal links with India, public opinion generally was little moved. Nor was this an issue upon which to make alliance with Lloyd George or appeal to the middle ground, and some combination of mavericks from all sides was never likely.

Churchill's campaign over India was focused almost obsessively upon that single issue, and he was determined to fight to the bitter end.²⁵ Although he was defeated, his strategy was not unsound. At the outset he made such effective use of the Conservative party's official backbench India Committee in March 1931 that Baldwin was nearly toppled from the leadership.²⁶ After the national government's landslide majority in 1931, it became clear that success was not likely to be achieved through parliamentary dissent alone. From the summer of 1932 the focus was widened to the constituencies; rejection of the policy by the National Union would not bind the leadership, but it would be a difficult barrier to surmount.²⁷ Churchill's link with Rothermere was not foolish: contrary to myth, the party crisis of 1929–31 had showed how much impact a campaign conducted by the likes of the *Daily Mail* could have on the Conservative grass roots, especially in the safer seats of middle-class south and middle England. The official line was opposed by large minorities at the central council and annual conference meetings in 1933 and 1934, and seventy-nine Conservative MPs voted against the second reading of the India Bill in February 1935, even though on all these occasions the issue was made one of confidence in the leadership. In April 1934 Hoare admitted that 'not thirty' Conservative MPs were strong supporters of the Bill, whilst 'the great mass is very lukewarm'.²⁸

Churchill's decision in 1933 to refuse a place on the joint select committee considering the white paper was not a mistake, as it would have muzzled him during the key months of the struggle, but there were other tactical errors.²⁹ In March 1933 his speech in the debate on

²⁵ Churchill to Croft, and to Carson, 31 Mar. 1933, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 558–9; Cazalet diary, 19 Apr. 1933, in Robert Rhodes James, *Victor Cazalet* (1976), 154.

²⁶ Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, 144–5.

²⁷ Stewart, *Burying Caesar*, 153.

²⁸ Hoare to Willingdon, 20 Apr. 1934, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 769–770.

²⁹ On the Select Committee, see the discussion in Stewart, *Burying Caesar*, 157.

the white paper was wrecked by an unproven allegation that the government was manipulating and coercing the Indian civil service. More serious damage resulted from his accusation in April 1934 that Derby and Hoare had interfered with evidence submitted to the select committee. This was not a mistake in itself and could easily have led to Hoare's downfall; only packing the investigating committee and other dubious tactics saved him and possibly the government.³⁰ However, the rejection of Churchill's case when the committee of privileges reported in June reinforced views of his unfitness for office and made him almost a pariah. On this and other occasions, he was vulnerable to claims that he was seeking the destruction of the national government.³¹ Nevertheless, Churchill was not alone in making mistakes. It was Page Croft – who had been campaigning within the Conservative party since Edwardian days, and should have known better – who breached unwritten conventions in sending propaganda directly to constituency delegates before the 1933 conference.³² Although he was dammed by the involvement of his son, Randolph, Churchill was very doubtful about using the by-election tactic which backfired at Wavertree and Norwood by letting Labour in.

The proper test is not whether a revolt reverses a policy or brings down a government, for it is exceptionally rare for resistances in the Conservative party to have such results. The fall of the coalition in 1922 was the product of an unusual combination of issues and groups on a wide front. More limited effects are the norm, and it is these with which the India campaign should be compared. Churchill's campaign affected government policy in several ways – in its timing, in its presentation, and to some extent in its content. It certainly put down a marker beyond which concessions could not be made, placing the emphasis upon safeguards, limited powers and the counterbalancing role of the princely states. The India campaign achieved more than the protectionist pressure to apply tariffs to iron and steel in the late 1920s, or the Suez group in the 1950s, or the opponents of the common market in 1970–1, or the critics of the poll tax in the late 1980s. The closest parallel is with the opponents of the Maastricht treaty in the Major period, and if the 'Euroscptics' achieved more this was mainly due to Major's vulnerable majority after the 1992 election. The India campaign was fought under the largest-ever government majority; whilst this might give some MPs more latitude to express dissent, it ensured that there were many more who could be counted on for loyal

³⁰ C. Bridge, 'Churchill, Hoare, Derby, and the Committee of Priveleges: April to June 1934', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), 215–27.

³¹ Hoare to Willingdon, 17 & 31 Mar. 1933, Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, v, part 2, 549–50, 557–8.

³² Lord Croft, *My Life of Strife* (1949), 232–4.

support. Even so, the leadership had to take care, and there were several alarming moments between February 1931 and March 1935.

Churchill's developing concern about air defence in 1934–36 was shared by many within the Conservative party who feared that disarmament had gone too far. He was not the only senior figure inside or outside the government to urge swifter rearmament, although he was the most persistent and public in expressing his views. Once again there were doubts about his intentions and judgement, but the charge of scaremongering was largely deflated by German statements about the size of their air force. Churchill had seemed wild and emotional about India, but more sober and informed over rearmament and later appeasement. His tactics were less confrontational and he was building support in 1935–6, especially on the need for a ministry of supply to manage the rearmament effort. He dearly hoped to get this post, and from October 1935 to March 1936 moderated his public statements to facilitate this. However, Baldwin was concerned that he would be unwilling to accept the necessary compromises and become a disruptive force in the government. Churchill's public criticisms of the Nazis meant that his return would send a signal which conflicted with the government's efforts to negotiate peaceful resolutions of disputes. For these reasons, Baldwin and later Chamberlain decided against bringing Churchill back into the cabinet in peacetime. However, many of those who did not consider Churchill to be the best man for the job still agreed with him over the need for greater vigour in defence preparations.

The abdication crisis at the end of 1936 was a setback for Churchill, reviving the criticisms of his lack of judgement and the suspicions that he was intriguing to bring down Baldwin and the National Government. Churchill was dismayed to be shouted down in the Commons on 7 December 1936, but the storm was as brief as it was intense. Some fences were mended with more judicious words on 10 December, and two days later Churchill delivered one of his most effective speeches on defence.³³ The impact of the crisis should not be exaggerated, for his diminished impact and support in 1937 owed more to the better international atmosphere.³⁴ Even so, the choice of Churchill to second Neville Chamberlain's formal election as party leader in May 1937 was not just a symbol of unity, but also a sign that Churchill counted for something in Conservative politics. Chamberlain's accession to the premiership was welcomed as a positive step, and most Conservatives were persuaded that his purposeful drive for appeasement offered the

³³ Winterton diary, 12 Dec. 1936, in Earl Winterton, *Orders of the Day* (1953), 223; Amery diary, 10 Dec. 1936, *Empire at Bay*, 433.

³⁴ Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 323.

best prospect of avoiding war. Rearmament still mattered, but visible progress was being made and the government was more readily accorded the benefit of the doubt. The eclipse of Churchill by the end of 1937 was a product of Chamberlain's success, for they could not both be right in their prescriptions. Churchill's message had now become predictable and its negativity was unwelcome. Conservative opinion in parliament and the constituencies rejected the anti-appeasement case because it seemed likely to lead to war rather than prevent it. Churchill's real period of isolation was the eighteen months from the autumn of 1937 to March 1939. He was discounted by the majority of Conservative opinion, and kept at a distance by the mainly younger and left-wing group of anti-appeasers who looked to Eden. Churchill was reduced to a small group of supporters who were little liked or respected: principally Bracken, Sandys and Boothby, with Spears and Macmillan in the outer circle. It is this which gives rise to descriptions of Churchill as a 'lonely figure', although dissident former ministers rarely have more than a couple of brave souls closely linked to them in parliament.³⁵

Even so, during this period he was still listened to, and it was only in the months between the Munich settlement and the occupation of Prague in March 1939 that the atmosphere became bitter. An open breach and resignation of the whip seemed possible after his speech in the Munich debate and his vote with Labour on the ministry of supply issue on 17 November 1938. It was also in this period that he encountered serious opposition within his constituency association, threatening his position as a Conservative candidate. Whether or not central office had a finger in the pie, the local unrest was genuine.³⁶ Dissent was strongest in some of the branches, but Churchill retained the crucial support of his chairman and the central executive. He followed a prudent strategy, and was not in as much danger as other less prominent anti-appeasers such as Vyvyan Adams, Paul Emrys-Evans and the duchess of Atholl. Doubts about the Munich settlement and especially the wisdom of further appeasement were more widespread than appeared on the surface; although only Duff Cooper resigned from the cabinet, several others wavered. There were threats of resignation from junior ministers such as Crookshank, and a feeling that this had been far from 'peace with honour'.³⁷ After the occupation of Prague in March 1939, German conduct provided the vindication of experience and the anti-appeasers became the realists. In the summer months of 1939 the Conservative

³⁵ Blake, 'Churchill and the Conservative Party', 153.

³⁶ Colin Thornton-Kemsley, *Through Winds and Tides* (Montrose, 1974), 93-7; David Thomas, *Churchill: The Member for Woodford* (Ilford, 1995), 91-111.

³⁷ Crookshank diary, 30 Sep.-6 Oct. 1938, Crookshank MSS, Bodleian Library.

newspapers pressing for Churchill's return to the cabinet were led by the Baldwinite loyalist Lord Camrose's *Daily Telegraph*.

His conduct at the admiralty after the outbreak of war damped fears about his motives and judgement, and he was careful to give unmistakable public loyalty to Chamberlain. This was carried through to Churchill's speech in the Norway debate itself, and was an essential foundation for his acceptance by the party as prime minister in May 1940. Kingsley Wood's support of Churchill may show that ambition resides in every breast, but it also demonstrated his acceptability to party centrists of a different background and outlook. There was still much fear and bile from those most closely linked to Chamberlain, as shown by Butler's comments to Colville on 10 May.³⁸ However, Churchill's purge of the old guard and elevation of the excluded was far from sweeping, and driven more by the need for efficiency and the pressure of the moment. The dropped or sidelined were mainly those who had not shone in wartime posts or become a liability, such as Hoare, Simon, Stanley and Elliot, and a few younger figures who had not made a strong mark one way or another, such as Wallace. There was no exclusion which seemed unjust or aroused resentment, and most of the inclusions were not provocative.

The events of May to October 1940 focused attention upon Churchill at his best, and when Neville Chamberlain's health unexpectedly collapsed in the early autumn, no other successor as party leader would have been credible. The myths of the prewar decade had already begun to be woven around Churchill: when he became leader in October 1940, *The Times* pointed to the improbability of this outcome because his 'unorthodoxy has so often brought him into conflict with his party'.³⁹ But how true was this view, influenced as it was by the immediate past? Churchill's conflict as a young backbencher had been through holding to an old orthodoxy in the face of a new, of being a recusant Tory. As a Coalitionist after 1917 he had worked in harmony with the orthodox strain of Conservatism which was dominant up to 1922. In the 1920s he was soundly in the Conservative mainstream; along with the majority of the cabinet and most MPs he resisted the pressure of the minority to extend safeguarding to iron and steel before 1929, and then was careful to move with the protectionist tide in 1930-1. His India campaign was solidly Tory – indeed for many too hidebound in outlook – and his doubts were privately shared by many who voted for the official line. The pressure for swifter rearmament did not conflict with Conservative feeling generally in 1934-8; this was why it embarrassed the leadership,

³⁸ Colville diary, 10 May 1940, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries 1939-55*, ed. J. Colville (1985), 122.

³⁹ *The Times*, 10 Oct. 1940; Ramsden, 'Churchill and the Leadership', 99.

who felt constrained by the broader public mood of disarmament. On appeasement Churchill was in conflict with the party leader, Chamberlain, and the major figures around him, and in unfriendly tension with central office. Over the abdication crisis and during the Munich settlement he was for a few days or weeks seriously out of step with a powerful mood in Conservative parliamentary and constituency opinion. However, as with India, the case which he put forward was closer to Conservative instincts and self-image than Chamberlain's pursuit of Gladstonian arbitration in search of an elusive concert of Europe. Many Conservatives were uneasy about appeasement, and felt that Britain was being disregarded and humiliated – a mood which spread as the sheer relief at avoiding war over Czechoslovakia wore off. As leader after 1940, Churchill was orthodoxly Conservative – the usual line of criticism is that he was not forward-looking enough.

There were two areas of tension between Churchill and the parliamentary party between 1940 and 1945. Significantly, the first and most important was a national rather than a party concern: the strategic direction of the war. Doubts emerged as military setbacks and problems in war production continued during 1941, and this became more acute during the most difficult period from late 1941 to the end of 1942. Conservative MPs were unhappy about the influence of Churchill's personal circle, in particular Beaverbrook and Bracken, and the lack of orthodox Conservatives in the cabinet.⁴⁰ The 1922 Committee provided a forum for concern, but would not support any direct attack on Churchill. This was demonstrated at the lowest point after the fall of Tobruk in June 1942, when the lack of Conservative support for the vote of censure in the Commons led its proposer, Wardlaw-Milne, to offer to withdraw it before the debate.⁴¹ Conservative MPs did not want a different leader, but a more responsive and effective government. The feeling that Churchill paid too little attention to Conservative opinion was also balanced by consensus about the priority of the war. Thus an audience of 150 Conservative MPs at a lunch for Churchill organised by the 1922 Committee in 1941 cheered his declaration that no party would sacrifice more in the interests of victory. The turn of the tide in the war at the end of 1942 removed the pressure on Churchill, and his continuance in office was never again in doubt. That the concern had been for nation and not faction was shown by the fact

⁴⁰ 1922 Ctte., 23 July 1941. See also the comments of Hacking and Dugdale, the retiring and incoming Party Chairmen, in March 1942, Collin Brooks diary, 12 Mar. 1942, Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 361; Butler's comments to Chuter Ede, Ede diary 25 Feb. 1942, *Labour and the Wartime Coalition: From the Diary of James Chuter Ede 1941–45*, ed. K. Jefferys (1987), 57; Amery diary, 27 Feb. 1944, *Empire at Bay*, 969.

⁴¹ Headlam diary, 30 June 1942, *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: the Headlam Diaries 1935–51*, ed. Stuart Ball (Camden Sth series, 14, 1999), 322.

that the critics of the previous months were the most pleased and reassured by the news of victory.⁴²

The second area of tension concerned domestic policy; this became more important from 1942 onwards, but never threatened Churchill's position. In 1942 and 1943 Conservatives were restive over some extensions of state direction on the home front, especially when promoted by Labour ministers; there was particular hostility to the coal rationing scheme and a revolt against Bevin's Catering Wages Bill led by the former party chairman, Douglas Hacking. After the Beveridge Report, and especially in the later stages of the war, it was measures of postwar reconstruction which were most controversial. Finally, there was the concern about the lack of any distinctive Conservative policies, especially as the prospect of an election drew nearer. Churchill was not unsympathetic to Conservative resistance to creeping Socialism, and party pressure led to some compromises.⁴³ However, his reaction to Conservative dissent on agreed matters or awkward aspects of the war, such as the equal pay vote in March 1944 or the problems of Poland and Greece in the winter and spring of 1944–5, was much more impatient. His continued priority was to avoid any controversies which distracted from the war effort or threatened wartime unity. Thus he was hostile to R.A. Butler's efforts to reform education as well as unhappy over the need to set out postwar plans. Part of the problem was certainly Churchill's understandable wish to retain his unique stature as a prime minister almost above party. He felt ambivalent about his role as party leader, and attracted to continuing the wartime coalition. Uncertainty over this continued up to May 1945; as long as the possibility remained open, Churchill was opposed to anything which tended to emphasise separateness – such as distinctively party statements or a more forceful approach to by-elections after Conservative losses in 1944.⁴⁴ Together with his exhaustion in 1944–5, this inaction left the Conservatives committed to the coalition's reconstruction proposals without gaining any credit for them. Although a party conference was held in March 1945, it had little impact. When the election eventually was held on party lines, the manifesto had to be improvised hastily and was presented without the word 'Conservative' appearing: it was 'Mr Churchill's declaration of policy', and electors were asked to 'Vote National'. Lacking other ammunition, Churchill turned to the par-

⁴² Report of Churchill's Parliamentary Private Secretary, Harvie-Watt, 13 Nov. 1942, Ramsden, *Age of Churchill and Eden*, 32.

⁴³ Churchill minuted 'good' on his PPS's report of Conservative opposition to the coal scheme: Ramsden, *Age of Churchill and Eden*, 33. He also shared Conservative dislike of left-wing broadcasts on the BBC, and of current affairs discussion in the army: Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 346.

⁴⁴ 'Party Truce', Whips' files, in Ramsden, 'Churchill and the Leadership', 102.

tisanship of the misjudged 'Gestapo' broadcast and the Laski affair – more red herring than red peril. However, although the vocal young radicals of the Tory reform committee had been swept by enthusiasm for planning, Churchill was in tune with most Conservative candidates on economic and social policy.

The most common charge against Churchill is that he neglected his responsibilities as party leader in wartime, but both Asquith and Lloyd George had had little time to spare for Liberal organisation during the First World War. There were clear limits to the advisability of party activities in wartime, and it was Chamberlain and Hacking who mothballed central office and set the tone for the interpretation of the party truce in 1939–40, despite being apparently more partisan Conservatives. A recurring theme from Churchill's address to the party's central council in March 1941 to the annual conference four years later was the need to sacrifice party interests in wartime.⁴⁵ In any case, there was little Churchill could have done to prevent the tide of feeling against the 'guilty men' of Munich which swept the country in 1940–2, and the election verdict was even more a punishment of Baldwin and Chamberlain than a rejection of Churchill. There is no suggestion that Churchill was the primary cause of defeat even if some of his actions or inactions, such as the 'Gestapo' speech or being unwilling to hold party conferences, may have contributed to its extent. More could have been done by way of propaganda and election preparations, including a swifter return for local party agents from war service and a less cautious and sober manifesto. However, it strains credulity to argue that the defeat would have been avoided if Churchill had apportioned his attention differently between 1940 and 1945.

Churchill's standing as the wartime saviour protected him from criticism within the Conservative party after the election defeat. The rank and file did not wish to lose his leadership, whilst MPs and the shadow cabinet recognised that he could not be forced out. It was thought that he might decide to fold his tent after the defeat, and that age and health meant that he might not be able to stay for long. In fact, ambition to reverse the defeat soon restored Churchill's vigour, whilst his constitution held up until the major stroke of 1953. He remained leader until 1955 – a longer tenure than Baldwin, and only just surpassed by Thatcher. Yet he is never thought of as a 'party' leader in the same sense, even though the years from 1940 to 1955 were the most productive phase of his career. The period as leader of the opposition has been especially neglected; this is partly due to the general theory that it is governments which fail rather than oppositions succeed,

⁴⁵ Speeches at NU Central Council, 27 Mar. 1941; NU annual conference, 15 Mar. 1945.

but still more to the belief that Churchill had little to do with the recovery – indeed, that it was achieved almost despite him.⁴⁶ The picture which emerges from the memoirs of the shadow cabinet is that he was absentee, reactionary in outlook, difficult to deal with, and imprudent in his parliamentary onslaughts. The image of Churchill in 1945–51 is that of the self-indulgent rambles at the fortnightly shadow cabinet lunches at the Savoy: a poor manager of meetings and men, out of touch with modern realities, lacking a coherent strategy and disliking detail. Yet Churchill was actually a vital part of the equation in 1945–51 – not least because his role and contributions did not duplicate the style and activities of his colleagues. His known reluctance to move too far to the left was reassurance to the party mainstream, which was always dubious about the novel panaceas offered by bright young men. At the same time Churchill wanted to win, and was willing to make the compromises necessary to do so.

Churchill made an effective start in the new House on 16 August 1945 and at his meeting with Conservative MPs on 21 August, but his strategy was little more than criticising the government and waiting for them to make mistakes. His absences in the winter of 1945–6 and the confusion of command which followed produced a critical reaction in the 1922 Committee, but matters improved in 1946 with Eden discharging the role of deputy leader. From the spring of 1946 Churchill began to attack the government over shortages, ration cuts and mismanagement, linking these hardships with Socialist nationalisation, but he left it to Eden and others to present the party line in debates on social and welfare measures in 1945–7. However, it is likely that it was criticism of austerity rather than reassurance on welfare which brought voters – and especially women – back to the Conservatives in 1950, and so Churchill's priorities were not misguided. In 1946 he gave way to rank-and-file pressure for a fresh and authoritative definition of policy, which led to the *Industrial Charter* of 1947. Churchill wanted to avoid giving hostages to fortune in specific pledges, but the content was principles rather than promises; whilst he remained doubtful and out of sympathy with it, he did nothing to block it. The November 1947 local elections showed large Conservative gains, and they held a consistent lead in the opinion polls through 1948. When Labour appeared to be recovering ground in early 1949, and especially after the failure to win the Hammersmith South by-election in March, party anxieties recurred and but were swiftly steadied. Churchill listened to the criticisms of the 1922 Committee once again, and the shadow cabinet agreed on 1 April to draw up a full policy statement. This time, with the election on the horizon, Churchill took a close interest in the

⁴⁶ This is the concluding analysis of Ramsden, 'Churchill and the Leadership', 117.

drafting, though the substance was a reworking of the various charters. Not long after, further gains in the May 1949 local elections and the economic difficulties which led to devaluation in September restored Conservative morale. His leadership during the election campaigns of 1950 and 1951, and of the opposition during the eighteen months between, has not attracted criticism. When the Conservatives returned to office in 1951 with the cautionary but workable majority of seventeen, it was Churchill's victory as much as anyone's. The policy pamphlets and committee minutes which lie in the archives are easily overvalued, whilst growing membership and larger staffs are the result of improving party fortunes rather than the cause. It may be that opposition is as much about waiting carefully for the government to run into difficulty, and that Churchill's wish to keep his powder dry was not unwise. Certainly, when the party was next in opposition in 1964–70 an extensive policy review did not result in confidence during the 1970 election campaign or a successful government afterwards.

In Paul Addison's view, between 1949 and 1953 Churchill 'led the Conservative Party with great vigour and flair towards the middle ground of politics'.⁴⁷ He was more successful at navigating the way back from defeat in 1945 than Balfour was after 1906, and hit fewer shoals than Hague has done since 1997, although admittedly the economic fortunes of the Attlee and Blair governments are poles apart. In comparison to the equivalent defeats of 1906 and 1997, after 1945 there was greater cohesion and sense of purpose. It is too easy to account for this by saying that the tariff issue for Balfour or Europe for Hague were more divisive and difficult to deal with – this may be so, but they were also not handled as well. There were tensions too after 1945, not least between the rump of Chamberlainite backbenchers who felt slighted after 1940 and the anti-appeasers who had risen above them, and between the young upstarts of the Tory reform committee and the staid provincial businessmen. Whilst mistakes and troubles are easy to detect and apportion the blame for, their absence is close to invisible, and the credit likely to be taken by whoever is the busiest bee around – in this case Butler and Woolton, and perhaps Macmillan as well. Churchill's strategy was to give the lead on the major occasions, such as votes of censure, the party conference and mass rallies like that at Blenheim in August 1947, and to delegate the detail. However, his intermittent attendance at the House remained an issue: in March 1949 a senior backbencher considered that Churchill 'is not really a party man – all he wants is to get back to power – people are beginning to realize this'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front*, 387.

⁴⁸ Headlam diary, 7 Mar. 1949.

Whilst his interest in policy and his parliamentary performances can be criticised, Churchill was more successful in the appointments which he made as party leader. Taken as a whole, his record in this area is at least as good as other leaders, and perhaps better than any except Bonar Law. Even if he sometimes favoured candidates from his own circle, it is significant that he could be persuaded to choose someone from the mainstream who would enjoy wider confidence.⁴⁹ The role of R.A. Butler in the wartime policy exercise and in being given charge of the Conservative research department after 1945, is only the most visible example of this. For the party chairmanship, Churchill first appointed Dugdale, a former Baldwin protégé who was widely liked, and then when he fell ill chose Assheton; both were at least equal in capacity to the other Chairmen appointed since the post was created in 1911.⁵⁰ Woolton may not have been Churchill's first thought to succeed Assheton after the 1945 defeat, but still he appointed and supported him. If his appointment had been a flop Churchill would surely have been criticised, and so on the same principle he deserves his share of credit for Woolton's successes. Churchill's choices of chief whips combined orthodoxy with effectiveness: Stuart managed the delicate task of the wartime coalition period well, whilst the outnumbered opposition performed reasonably well from 1945 to 1950. In 1950–1 Labour's narrow majority was worn down, whilst in 1951–5 a fairly small Conservative majority was never seriously troubled. This cannot be put down entirely to Labour's Bevanite problems, and perhaps Buchan-Hepburn is the unsung success of Tory chief whips. Whilst failure in 1945 has obscured the fact that Churchill made sound party appointments, so in a different way did recovery in 1950 and 1951. The problem here is not criticism of his team, but the fact that they take all the credit – especially Butler and perhaps Macmillan on policy, and Woolton and perhaps Maxwell-Fyfe on organisation.

Churchill was also a good constructor of cabinets, given that all prime ministers have limited material to work with. The 1940 ministry had to be a compromise between the old guard and fresh faces, with room made for Labour. It worked competently enough through 1940, and was progressively adjusted thereafter. The 'caretaker' government of 1945 is sometimes unfairly dismissed, but it was a sound and capable team. Most of all, the quality of the 1951 cabinet – most purely Churchill's own – was unusually high, and stands well in comparison with the Conservative teams which returned to office in 1915 or 1979.

⁴⁹ Ramsden, 'Churchill and the Leadership', 111.

⁵⁰ With the exception of the special and temporary status of Neville Chamberlain as Chairman in 1930–31; see Stuart Ball, 'The National and Regional Party Structure', in A. Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: the Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), 174–5.

As well as a few prestigious outside figures such as Earl Alexander of Tunis, there was a mixture of old and new talent. The great offices were in strong hands: for Butler at the treasury and Eden at the foreign office, 1951–5 was to be the high point of their careers, and Maxwell-Fyfe at the home office was suitable and effective. As the government continued a new generation of ministers gained their spurs, including Thorneycroft, Macleod, Lennox-Boyd, Heathcoat Amory, Eccles, and Peake.

Two principal themes run through this paper. The first is that Churchill was much closer to mainstream Conservative opinion than is generally recognised. This is particularly the case for 1923–9, but it is also largely true for 1930–9 when he was in line with the national government on many areas of domestic policy. On the particular issues where he differed, his instincts and reservations were shared by many, even if they did not trust him personally or express open dissent. Hardly any Conservatives were keen on the India policy; where Churchill failed it was through the lack of a convincing alternative, which left the majority of the party uneasily trusting the ‘men on the spot’ in Westminster and India. Most Conservatives wanted faster rearmament as the foundation for a firmer stance which would end the humiliations swallowed from Abyssinnia and the Rhineland to the Tientsin crisis of June 1939. By 1939 Churchill was seen to stand for this, and reservations about him lessened considerably between March 1939 and May 1940. During the war Churchill provided the kind of patriotic and unifying leadership which the Conservative party admires, and his relegation of partisanship was fully in tune with party sentiment. Conservatives did not feel that they should be operating during the party truce in the way in which Labour was, but that Labour should be acting as they did. Between 1945 and 1955 Churchill led the Conservatives from the mainstream. He did not lean too far in the direction of planning and interventionism, or sound reactionary notes which would deter middle opinion. This pragmatic approach was continued after 1951, and there is little doubt that the uncontroversial course which the Churchill government followed was satisfactory and reassuring to the party as a whole.

The second theme is that Churchill was a more capable party politician and effective Conservative leader than has previously been acknowledged. This should not be regarded as tarnishing his reputation or diminishing his stature, even if it means that he is set less apart from others. Churchill should be seen as a man who spent a lifetime in politics in an age when they were dominated and defined by parties. His wartime approach to the party leadership was not necessarily unsound, and the party appointments made then and later were above the average in capacity and effectiveness. The criticism of his opposition

leadership has some parallels with Neville Chamberlain's impatience with Baldwin, for it is the same difference of outlook between the grasp of detail and the appreciation of atmosphere and timing. If the leader bears the ultimate responsibility for the party's fortunes, then Churchill is due the credit for his part in the postwar recovery. Alone amongst Conservative leaders – except perhaps Bonar Law in 1922 – Churchill tends not to be given much credit for the election victory gained under his command. Yet the margin in 1950 was close and the victory in 1951 a narrow one, and it may well be that another leader – which would almost certainly have been Eden – might not have kept his nerve or had the stature to succeed. His contribution to his peacetime ministry of 1951–5 also tends to be overshadowed, partly due to the stroke which affected its second half. Churchill's course between 1946 and 1955 was consistent and coherent, revolving around the defence of freedom against an encroaching state. This was the common link between his strong line on the Cold War and warnings of the danger of Communism abroad, and his support for the liberty of the individual and free markets at home against Socialist planning and bureaucracy. He was able to maintain a clear and distinctive Conservative identity, without either echoing the discredited past of the 1930s or losing touch with moderate opinion. It was under Churchill that the identification of the Conservatives with normality, stability, prosperity and opportunity was strongly established in the postwar era. This was the foundation not just for three consecutive terms in government from 1951 to 1964, but for the predominant role of the Conservative party in British politics in the decades to follow.