

THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

British Conservatism, 1945-1951: Adapting to the Age of Collectivism

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Abstract

Having been unexpectedly and comprehensively defeated at the 1945 general election, the Conservative Party returned to office just six years later. While the Tories languished in the wilderness, Labour enacted a series of sweeping changes, nationalising large swathes of the economy, establishing a National Health Service and implementing many of Beveridge's social insurance recommendations. When the Tories returned to office, they pledged to leave most of their predecessors' changes intact, including many of those which they had vehemently opposed in Opposition. This has led some historians and some Conservatives themselves variously to celebrate the advent of 'new Conservatism', lament Conservatism's descent into watered-down socialism, or conclude there was not really much change at all, with some further claiming that the 1950s was characterised by a cross-party 'consensus'. This thesis explores whether there really was a shift in the Conservatives' attitude to the role of the state. On the basis of extensive archival research it examines Conservative policy development in three major areas: nationalisation, the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) and social insurance.

Using these policy areas, this thesis argues that while the Party made pragmatic accommodations to measures once they were enacted, there was no underlying shift in its broad conception of the role of state. Where the Conservatives supported measures before their introduction, they did so in part for electoral reasons, but also because they were reconcilable with the Conservative tradition as interpreted in the context of the time. Where measures went beyond what they were prepared to accept, the Conservatives opposed them, even where that opposition proved electorally damaging. The mere fact that the Conservatives subsequently resigned themselves to accept measures to which they were previously hostile should not in itself be read as a shift in, nor a deviation from, pre-war Conservatism. The Party had a long history of working with changes created by rivals where it was felt those changes were irreversible. Minor exceptions aside, major alterations to the post-war settlement were rejected mostly on the pragmatic grounds that doing so was both impractical and would hinder the Conservatives' chances of blocking further, more radical, change. This thesis concludes that, in an era of apparent popular demand for increased state intervention, most of the party could tolerate Labour's changes, even if private doubts remained, as the alternative appeared even worse.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Date

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List of Abbreviations

ACP	Advisory Committee on Policy
ACPPE	Advisory Committee on Policy and Political Education
BMA	British Medical Association
CCO	Conservative Central Office
CPA	Conservative Party Archive
CPC	Conservative Political Centre
CRD	Conservative Research Department
CUCO	Conservative and Unionist Central Office
LCC	Leader's Consultative Committee
NHS	National Health Service
NU	National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations
PWPCC	Post-War Problems Central Committee

A Note on Titles and Spelling

A number of the figures mentioned in this thesis changed their names as they inherited or were elevated to titles. For example, Edward Wood was elevated to Baron Irwin in 1926, inherited his father's viscountcy in 1934 and then elevated to First Earl of Halifax in 1944. For the sake of convenience, when a figure was known by more than one name at different periods, the name or title at the period being discussed is used unless otherwise stated.

Although the Party was known as the Unionist Party from the late nineteenth century until the early twentieth century, for the sake of convenience the name 'Conservative Party' is used throughout this thesis. Reflecting common practice, the words 'Tory' and 'Conservative' are used interchangeably. Where reference is made to Conservatism as relating to the philosophy of the Conservative Party, capital letters are used.