

INTRODUCTION

The ancestry of the party

The ancestry of the Conservative party has been variously traced. Some discern a continuous tradition from Strafford, Laud and Charles I, 'the holocaust of direct taxation', as Disraeli termed him, through the Tories of the time of William III and Anne to the younger Pitt and his successors. Others have been unwilling to go back so far. Suspecting that the old Tory party, which Walpole was able to ruin (thanks to the Hanoverian succession and the cowardice of Bolingbroke), had little connection with anything that came after, they have preferred to place its origin with Pitt and the great crisis of 1782-4. Yet others, uneasy at the fact that Pitt never called himself a Tory let alone a Conservative, have endeavoured to place the ancestry later with Perceval, Liverpool, or most commonly with Peel.

It is not easy to date the origin of a political party with any precision. As Sir Ivor Jennings observes:¹

We must remember that in Britain a party is not a legal entity except in the sense that any association having funds vested in trustees or a committee is a legal entity. . . . If a party were a legal entity created by charter or legislation, like a college or a public company, we could give it an age and celebrate its birthday.

This is exactly the trouble. Even if we were to take the matter of central party funds vested in some sort of trustees it is difficult to discover the facts. The researches of Professor Gash² show the obscurity of the subject. It is not clear that any such fund existed

¹ Sir Ivor Jennings, *Party politics*, II, *The growth of parties* (1961), 61.

² Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953), 434-7.

for the Conservative or Tory party before 1832, or even in the election of 1832. There was, however, an election fund in the elections of 1835, 1837, 1841 and 1847. Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington were its trustees and it was administered by the Earl of Rosslyn, the leading member of the party's election committee. But one would hardly date the origins of the Conservative party in 1835, merely because of the fund.

Are there other institutional features which would enable us to identify the continuity of a political party? One characteristic of a modern political party is a centralised bureaucracy and a country-wide mass organisation. As far as the Conservatives are concerned one can be reasonably precise here. Both these features came into being as a result of a challenge created by the first major step towards mass democracy, the Reform Bill of 1867. In that very year on November 12 at the Freemasons Tavern, London, was founded the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations with the avowed purpose of organising working class support for the government. True, a Mr Eadie of Newcastle who said he was the son of a working man declared that the word 'Conservative' would be a fatal handicap in Radical areas, adding that he personally 'was not a Conservative, he never pretended to be one, and he never should be'. But his attempt to elaborate on this interesting theme was drowned not surprisingly 'in hisses and confusion'. In 1870 the Central Office was founded and it is thus possible to say that a century ago the most characteristic institutions of the modern Conservative party had come into being.

The form and features of the National Union and the Central Office today would be fully recognisable to a Conservative party worker of the 1870s. Considering how much has changed in political life since then, one can only be surprised at this continuity — a tribute to Disraeli's organisational power, or if not to his, to that of the people whom he selected to do the work. Is there, then, a case for stopping our search into the past at the early 1870s and dating the Conservative party from then? This would accord with the idea of Disraeli as the founder of modern Conservatism — a notion widely held and by no means devoid of substance. For Disraeli not only innovated in the field of organisation. He did so too in the far more important field of ideas; or, if this is too big a claim, he

certainly expressed old ideas with a personal style and colour which made them seem new. It cannot be wholly accidental or erroneous that so many modern Conservatives look back on Disraeli as their prophet, high priest and philosopher rolled into one.

Yet however strong these arguments, it simply does not sound plausible to begin the story of the Conservative party then. To do so is to ignore a continuity of outlook, of parliamentary organisation and of succession to the leadership which undoubtedly goes back earlier, though just how far is the point we are trying to discover. The Conservatives of the late 1860s and early 1870s did not feel themselves to be in any sense a new party or to be making a fresh start; many of them distrusted Disraeli; a small minority positively detested him. No contemporary Conservative would have regarded him as the founder of the party — least of all Disraeli himself.

Perhaps at this stage it is worth glancing at Disraeli's own theory of the history of the party which he came in the end to lead. As so often in his career his view of history varied with the political circumstances in which he found himself. It depended upon whether he was a rebel or an Establishment man. In 1880 when he had just resigned as Prime Minister but had accepted an invitation from the party to continue as their leader, he wrote to Lord Lytton: 'They [the Tory party] have existed for more than a century and a half as an organised political connexion and having survived the loss of the American Colonies, the first Napoleon, and Lord Grey's Reform Act, they must not be snuffed out.' This suggests belief in continuity since the early eighteenth century. The same view in more detail is expressed forty-five years earlier in his *Vindication of the English constitution* where Bolingbroke is regarded as the founder of a Tory tradition which continues through William Pitt the younger, Burke and apparently Lord Liverpool (for although he is not named his measures are praised), the Duke of Wellington and Peel himself. Disraeli makes no attempt to contrast Tories and Conservatives, merely observing that 'in times of great political change and rapid political transition it will generally be observed that political parties find it convenient to re-baptise themselves'.

But in between the time when he was seeking Peel's favour in the 1830s and the time of his own ascendancy a generation later the story was quite different. He was a rebel in the 1840s. Needing a Tory philosophy of history as a counterweight to the Whig philosophy, and at the same time determined to put Peel in his proper place he advanced in his novels an ingenious version of 'true Toryism'. This begins with Charles I, and an inclusive list of members contains the Jacobite, Sir John Hynde Cotton, Sir William Wyndham who was Bolingbroke's lieutenant, Bolingbroke himself of course, Carteret, Shelburne and the younger Pitt. But at this juncture it becomes necessary to distinguish. If Pitt's successors in the leadership were to be included, then, as Disraeli saw it, there would be no means of avoiding a lineal descent through Addington, Portland, Perceval and Liverpool, which would end in Peel; and Peel, for a number of reasons, one of which was his refusal of office to Disraeli in 1841, was just the man on whom he least wished to confer this accolade.

Therefore it becomes necessary to argue that things somehow went wrong during Pitt's reign. Pitt himself was a great man but the Tory apostolic succession stopped with him. He is 'the best of the Tory statesmen but who [*sic*] in the unparalleled and confounding emergencies of his later years had been forced unfortunately for England to relinquish Toryism'. His successors were not in any sense standard-bearers of 'true Toryism' or, as Disraeli sometimes and significantly called it, 'the English system'. They were a 'factitious league' who 'had shuffled themselves into power by clinging to the skirts of a great minister'. They are the ancestors of 'Conservatism'.

Disraeli's denunciation in *Coningsby* of Conservatism as practised by Peel is famous.¹ Less well known is his apostrophe to Toryism in *Sybil*.

But we forget; Sir Robert Peel is not leader of the Tory party – the party that . . . [and a long list follows of its virtues and achievements]. In a Parliamentary sense, that great party has ceased to exist; but I will believe it still lives in the thought and sentiment and consecrated memory of the English nation.

¹ See below, p. 27.

It has its origin in great principles and in noble instincts; it sympathises with the lowly, it looks up to the Most High. It can count its heroes and its martyrs; they have met in its behalf plunder, prescription, and death. Nor when it finally yielded to the iron progress of oligarchical supremacy, was its catastrophe inglorious. Its genius was vindicated in golden sentences and with fervent arguments of impassioned logic by St John; and breathed in the intrepid eloquence and patriot soul of William Wyndham. Even now it is not dead but sleepeth; and in an age of political materialism, of confused purposes and perplexed intelligence, that aspires only to wealth because it has no other accomplishment, as men rifle cargoes on the verge of shipwreck, Toryism will yet arise from the tomb over which Bolingbroke shed his last tear, to bring back strength to the Crown, liberty to the Subject, and to announce that power has only one duty – to secure the social welfare of the PEOPLE.¹

In effect what Disraeli is saying here – and we must not forget the circumstances in which he was saying it – is that some sort of true blue stream has been flowing from the days of the Cavaliers, through the turbid whirlpools of the reigns of William III and Anne, becoming thinner but nevertheless remaining discernible in the marshes and thickets of the mid-eighteenth century, broadening out with the rise of the younger Pitt, and then flowing underground for half a century or so, but always there, ready to be brought to the surface again by the wand of some magical water-diviner. And it is not difficult to guess whom he had in mind.

With the fall of Peel, and his own elevation to the leadership of the party in the House of Commons only four years after *Sybil* had been published, Disraeli altered his attitude, or – perhaps one should say, since he never repudiated his past professions – became silent. But the distinction which he drew between Toryism and Conservatism has always had its supporters. In an essay on Coleridge in his *Sketches in nineteenth-century biography*, Sir Keith Feiling dwells on the distinction, and draws up pedigrees for the two concepts. Conservatism's ancestors are Clarendon,

¹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or, The two nations*, 3 vols (1845), Bk IV, ch. XIV.

Blackstone, Eldon, Peel; Toryism's are Harley, Bolingbroke, Pitt, Canning, Disraeli. The great ideologists or thinkers are Burke for Conservatism, and Coleridge for Toryism. Conservatives, broadly, defended the existing order. Tories, while pruning the abuses of their era, 'looked behind the institutions of their own generation to the spirit of the nation which gave them life'. The distinction is of value in terms of ideology though it would be interesting to know how it ought to be continued after Peel and Disraeli. But it is not intended as a means of categorising the organisational development of the party.

There is much room for argument about the precise ancestry of the Conservative party. But it is at least clear when it got its name, although we do not know from whom. The word 'conservative' in its modern political sense was first used in an article in the *Quarterly Review* in January 1830 - 'We now are, as we always have been, decidedly and conscientiously attached to what is called the Tory, and which might with more propriety be called the Conservative Party'. Like 'Liberal', the word had a continental derivation, as is shown by the alternative use 'conservator'. Baron Vincent writing to the Duke of Wellington in 1819 rightly observed that '*les principes conservateurs ont en vous un fort et noble appui*'. As late as May 1832 we find a correspondent of the Duke observing that Birmingham was far from radical, 'the majority of respectable persons being decidedly conservators'. But this usage soon faded out. By December 1831 the *Standard* was referring to the 'Conservative party' as if the phrase was a well established expression, and, although for a year or two some people still tended to use it with a conscious feeling of novelty, in actual or metaphorical inverted commas, it soon became the normal word for the party of the Right. The article in the *Quarterly Review* has traditionally been attributed to John Wilson Croker, a minor politician, a journalist and a friend of Peel and Wellington. But one of those persons who would be stigmatised by Sir Winston Churchill as 'a tiresome researcher' has discovered that Croker was not writing for the *Quarterly* at that particular time. So the godfather of the Conservative party remains anonymous even if we know the date of the baptism.

This brief chronology shows that the expression was not, as it is

sometimes claimed, invented in the aftermath of the great *débâcle* of 1832. It was in use before that. On the other hand there can be little doubt that its adoption by the leading figures of the party and by leading journals of the Right such as the *Standard* from 1832 onwards was a deliberate attempt to purge the party of its old associations and to symbolise, if not a break with the past, at least a change of course. Was this change so great as to constitute a real break with the past?

There was certainly continuity of a sort. In one sense the Duke of Wellington may perhaps be regarded as the last Tory Prime Minister and Peel as the first Conservative one. But Wellington remained leader of the party after 1832, and the Carlton Club which was to be the organisational headquarters of the party until the creation of the Central Office was founded before the carrying of the Reform Bill - though, admittedly, not long before. On the whole such machinery as there was for co-ordinating party activities seems to have survived the double defeats of 1831-2. It is true that the Chief Whip, William Holmes, the last Tory whip in the unreformed House, did not carry on with his duties with the new House, but this was merely because he lost his seat. It is also true that some important organisational changes took place in the years immediately after 1832. But these were the result of new circumstances, the response of a defeated party to new problems. There was no fundamental break with the past. Peel's emergence in 1834 as Prime Minister was the result not of any party rebellion but of the Duke's deliberate decision to withdraw.

If the party retained a basic continuity in terms of institutions and persons, it is equally true that no drastic change occurred in Conservative as compared with Tory political ideas and attitudes. One can easily overdo the contrast between the party of Lord Liverpool and the party of Peel. Almost the whole of Peel's political experience had been under Liverpool, and there is little to suggest that he was critical or even doubtful about his chief. Liverpool was not the figure of reaction depicted by Disraeli. He aimed at a middle of the road policy even as Peel was to do in the 1830s and 1840s. All in all it is hard to argue that the change of name from Tory to Conservative represented any more of a gap in continuity than the change from Conservative to

Unionist sixty years later. Both names remained in concurrent use. The name of Tory is far from extinct even today.

It will be argued in this book that the real gap in organisational continuity is provided by the corn law crisis of 1846 and that the Protectionist party founded by Lord George Bentinck and Lord Stanley constitutes a new departure in a sense to which there is no exact parallel in the period covered. If this interpretation is correct, the party of Peel is not a different party from that of his predecessors, Wellington, Canning, Lord Liverpool. It is basically the same. The question then arises as to when that party first came into being. No doubt it can be argued that there is some sort of continuity in ideas – a Tory attitude to political problems – which can be traced back through the eighteenth century to the political struggles in the reign of Charles II when the words 'Whig' and 'Tory' originated. Both were at first terms of abuse subsequently appropriated with defiant pride by those who were abused. 'Whig' originally meant a Scottish horse thief and was applied first to Presbyterian rebels and then to all those who in the crisis of 1679 supported Ashley's attempt to exclude from the succession James, Duke of York, the Roman Catholic heir to the throne. 'Tory' meant an Irish papist outlaw and was applied to those who supported the legitimate heir to the throne in spite of his adherence to Rome.

As long as the succession to the throne remained a political issue – and it did not finally cease to be so until after the failure of the rebellion of 1745 – the use of the terms Whig and Tory in the old sense had some meaning. But even by then the political structure of Britain had become virtually a one party system with the Whigs providing in effect both government and opposition. It is not easy to trace any organisational continuity between the Toryism of Bolingbroke and the Toryism of Lord Liverpool. The best way of looking at the Whig and Tory parties as they had become by 1830 is to take the second of the three alternatives suggested at the beginning and to regard them as descending from the two sides in the crisis of 1782–4, the Whigs from those who supported Charles James Fox, the Tories from those who supported the younger Pitt.

But it is important to remember that the term 'Tory' was for a

long while not used of themselves by the party later to be described as Tory. Pitt always called himself a Whig. Spencer Perceval, Prime Minister from 1809 to 1812, never spoke of himself as a Tory. Until 1806 the most common party names in the House of Commons were Pittite and Foxite. Canning appears to have been one of the first Cabinet ministers on the Pittite side who actually called himself a Tory. Peel himself only admitted to the appellation of Tory on one occasion, and that was with heavy irony when on May 1, 1827, he gave an account to parliament of his reasons for resignation. 'I may be a Tory, I may be an illiberal, but . . . Tory as I am, I have the further satisfaction of knowing that there is not a single law connected with my name which has not had as its object some mitigation of the severity of the criminal law. . . .'¹ Nevertheless by 1830 when this survey of the history of the party begins, the names Whig and Tory had a clear meaning and were in regular use. There is no need to go back beyond 1784 for the origin of the parties to which they refer, and there is little profit in pursuing a Disraelian search for continuity through the eighteenth century.

¹ Norman Gash, *Mr Secretary Peel* (1961), 497.