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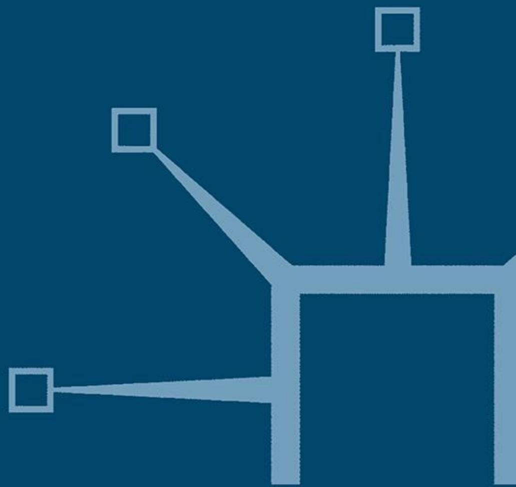
Recovering Power

The Conservatives in Opposition since 1867

Edited by
Stuart Ball and
Anthony Seldon



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Edited by

Stuart Ball
School of Historical Studies, University of Leicester

and

Anthony Seldon
Brighton College

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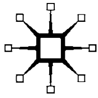

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Chapters © 1 Stuart Ball, 2 Angus Hawkins, 3 David Steele, 4 David Steele, 5 Frans Coetzee, 6 David Dutton, 7 Stuart Ball, 8 David Willetts, 9 Mark Garnett, 10 Dennis Kavanagh, 11 Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, 2005

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-3241-9

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First published 2005 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

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ISBN 978-1-4039-3242-6 ISBN 978-0-230-52241-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137456789

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05

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Notes on Contributors

Stuart Ball is Reader in History at the University of Leicester, and the author of *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–1931* (Yale University Press, 1988), *The Conservative Party and British Politics 1902–1951* (Longman, 1995) and *Winston Churchill* (British Library, 2003), and is editor of *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Headlam Diaries 1923–1935* (The Historians' Press, 1992) and *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935–1951* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). He has previously edited, with Anthony Seldon, *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *The Heath Government 1970–1974: A Reappraisal* (Longman, 1996), and, with Ian Holliday, *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* (Frank Cass, 2002).

Frans Coetzee, who has taught at Yale and George Washington Universities, is the author of *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (Oxford University Press, 1990), and co-editor (with Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee) of *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War* (Berghahn, 1995), *World War I and European Society* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995), and *World War I: A History in Documents* (Oxford University Press, 2002). Together they are preparing a history of the Second World War to be published by Oxford University Press.

David Dutton is Professor of History at the University of Liverpool, and the author of *Austen Chamberlain* (Ross Anderson, 1985), *His Majesty's Loyal Opposition: The Unionist Party in Opposition 1905–1915* (Liverpool University Press, 1992), *Simon: A Political Biography of Sir John Simon* (Aurum, 1992), *Anthony Eden: A Life and Reputation* (Arnold, 1997), *British Politics since 1945: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Consensus* (Blackwell, 1997), *The Politics of Diplomacy: Britain and France in the Balkans in the First World War* (Tauris, 1998), *Neville Chamberlain* (Arnold, 2001), and *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave, 2004).

Mark Garnett is Visting Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Leicester, and the author of *Principles and Politics in*

Contemporary Britain (Longman, 1996) and *Alport: A Study in Loyalty* (Acumen, 1999), and co-author of *Whatever Happened to the Tories? The Conservative Party since 1945* (Fourth Estate, 1997), *Keith Joseph* (Acumen, 2001) and *Splendid! Splendid!: The Authorized Biography of Willie Whitelaw* (Jonathan Cape, 2002).

Angus Hawkins is a member of the Modern History Faculty at the University of Oxford, Director of International Programmes in the Department of Continuing Education, and a Fellow of Keble College. He is author of *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain 1855–1859* (Macmillan, 1987) and *British Party Politics 1852–1886* (Macmillan, 1998), and co-editor of *The Journal of John Wodehouse, first Earl of Kimberley, for 1862–1902* (Royal Historical Society, 1997). He is currently completing a biography of the 14th Earl of Derby, titled *The Forgotten Prime Minister*.

Dennis Kavanagh is Profesor of Politics at the University of Liverpool, and is author of *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford University Press, 1987), *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics* (Blackwell, 1995), *The Reordering of British Politics: Politics after Thatcher* (Oxford University Press, 1997), *British Politics: Continuities and Change* (Oxford University Press, 4th edition 2000), and co-author of the Nuffield *British General Election* studies since 1974 (Macmillan, 1974–), *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister* (HarperCollins, 1999) and *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Thatcher* (Blackwell, 1989). He is editor of *A Dictionary of Political Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1987), *Electoral Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1992), and co-editor of *Comparative Government and Politics* (Heinemann, 1984), *The Thatcher Effect* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and *The Major Effect* (Macmillan, 1994).

Anthony Seldon is the founding Director of the Institute of Contemporary British History, and Headmaster of Brighton College; he is the author of *Churchill's Indian Summer: The Conservative Government 1951–1955* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), *Major: A Political Life* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), *Britain under Thatcher* (Longman, 2000), *Blair* (Simon and Schuster, 2004) and co-author, with Dennis Kavanagh, of *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister* (HarperCollins, 1999), and, with Peter Snowdon, of *The Conservative Party: An Illustrated History* (Sutton, 2004). He has previously edited *How Tory Governments Fall: The Tory Party in Power since 1783* (Fontana, 1996); *The Blair Effect* (Little, Brown, 2001); and, with Stuart Ball, *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *The Heath Government 1970–1974: A Reappraisal*

(Longman, 1996); with Dennis Kavanagh, *The Thatcher Effect* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and *The Major Effect* (Macmillan, 1994).

Peter Snowdon is co-author, with Anthony Seldon, of *The Conservative Party: An Illustrated History* (Sutton, 2004) and a contributor to the *Political Quarterly* special issue on the Conservative Party.

David Steele was formerly Reader in History at the University of Leeds, and is author of *Irish Land and British Politics: Tenant-Right and Nationality 1865–1870* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), *Palmerston and Liberalism 1855–1865* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (UCL Press, 1999).

David Willetts has been Conservative MP for Havant since 1992, and is currently shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Welfare Reform. He is the author of *Mrs Thatcher's Economic Experiment* (Optima, 1989), *Modern Conservatism* (Penguin, 1992), *Why Vote Conservative?* (Penguin, 1997) and *After the Landslide* (Centre for Policy Studies, 1999), and co-author of *Is Conservatism Dead?* (Profile, 1997).

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1
Factors in Opposition Performance: The Conservative Experience since 1867

Stuart Ball

The Conservative Party has been in office much more than it has been in opposition, and its public identity and its own self-image are bound up with being a party of government. Between 1867 and the end of 2004, the Conservatives were in office for 86 years and in opposition for 51 years (see Table 1.1 below). Periods of extended dominance led to the Conservatives being seen as the 'natural' party of government, which was to their electoral advantage. The consequence was that they found opposition to be stressful, considering it an aberrant state of affairs rather than part of the normal cycle. However, although sometimes difficult and turbulent, the spells in opposition have been of crucial importance in the history and development of the Conservative Party. The most significant changes in its attitudes, policies and organization have followed from the shock of defeat. The Conservatives' uncomfortable spells in opposition have seen leadership crises, factional strife and intense debate over the Party's future direction. They have also often been the springboard for recovering power, and the foundation for the next spell of political dominance.

The strengths of the Conservative Party have been its adaptability, resilience and desire for power, and these were often most clearly apparent during its periods in opposition. The longevity and success of the Conservative Party has been founded upon its ability to survive setbacks, accommodate to changes in the political, social or economic environment, and maintain its position as the only credible alternative to

the government in power. Its experience of opposition can be frustrating, but is rarely sterile. In many cases, the Conservatives have been able to return to power within a comparatively short period. Since 1868, there have been only three spells in opposition that have lasted for more than six years: barely so in 1945–51, and for longer in 1905–15 and after 1997. On some occasions, the Conservatives were back in office either before or as a result of the next general election, and in most others they regained many seats and took a significant step towards recovery. All of the periods in opposition have seen changes of programme and attempts to broaden the Party's appeal, and many have seen reforms and innovations in the organization.

Despite their importance, these periods in opposition have been remarkably neglected. They are, of course, discussed in general histories of the Conservative Party and in biographies of its leading figures, but few have been examined in greater depth.[1] There is no detailed study of any of the nineteenth-century oppositions, of 1924 or of 1964–70, whilst the works on 1945–51 and 1974–79 were published many years ago and had no access to archives.[2] In particular, there has been no systematic or comparative study which has sought to examine this topic as a whole.[3] The present volume is intended to address this gap, and make a fresh contribution to our understanding of both the Conservative Party and the nature of opposition in the British political system. It contains examinations of each period of opposition since the Second Reform Act of 1867, written by experts in the field and based upon primary research. The common themes and patterns which emerge from this are discussed in the remainder of this introductory chapter.

Factors in opposition party performance

The recovery of power by a party in opposition depends upon the interplay of a range of factors. These fall into two main categories: the internal matters, which the opposition party can determine for itself, and the external situation, which it can neither predict nor control. The reason why opposition is frustrating and stressful is that it is the external factors which are the most significant, because they act directly upon public opinion and produce visible changes in the political situation and in the standing and morale of both government and opposition parties. There are seven such factors, and they are likely to be linked and for several to be present rather than just one alone. The first and most fundamental is the performance of the government, as the opportunities for the opposition depend upon it encountering difficulties. The latter

can involve a change of Prime Minister (although the 'fresh face' factor can benefit a government, as the Conservatives demonstrated in 1955 and 1992); splits in its ranks, either in cabinet or in the Commons; the adoption of divisive or 'extreme' policies (such as the 'poll tax'); scandals, crises or disasters; a perception of ineffectiveness, incompetence or failed policies in key areas; or a loss of momentum, leading to the feeling that it is 'time for a change'.

Some of these difficulties are likely to be the result of the second factor, which many would regard as the make-or-break aspect of any government's situation. This is the condition of the economy, and in particular prices and incomes, inflation and interest rates, the level of unemployment and the state of industrial relations. The latter point links directly to the third factor, the public's perception of the general 'state of the nation': concerns about 'governability' and social stability, including disorder and crime, public confidence in the legitimacy and effectiveness of political institutions, and changes in social attitudes and personal mores. The fourth factor lies mainly outside the government's control: the effect of international crises and external threats to national security. The fifth factor is often the result of failures in the previous areas, but it adds something further to them: this is a hostile intellectual climate, which is likely to be reflected in much of the media being unsympathetic to the government's objectives and sharply critical of its actions and conduct. The sixth factor is the role of a third party, if this has either a public appeal or holds the balance in the House of Commons, as the Irish Nationalists did in 1885–86, 1892–95 and 1910–14, and the Liberals did in 1923–24, 1929–31 and 1977–79. The final factor is any changes in the electoral system: not only the franchise extensions of 1867, 1884–85 and 1918, but also the redistribution of seats which was part of these Reform Acts and has occurred periodically since (the latter has regularly benefited the Conservative Party, especially in 1885, 1918, 1950 and 1983).

The first five of the above factors combine to shape the overall public view of the effectiveness and utility of the government. The most damaging perception is that the government is at the mercy of events and lacks the ideas or energy to tackle the problems of the day, which are therefore increasing rather than diminishing. This is worse than being unpopular, as that is a state that can be affected by a change of tactics or by opportune events, as the first Thatcher government of 1979–83 demonstrated. It is often linked with a second problem – the length of time that the government has been in office, which gives rise to over-familiarity and impatience, or the 'time for a change' factor. Minor matters erode support and party enthusiasm, as much as any larger ones, and the

machine gets lax and complacent. The issue of experience can cut both ways; a party or a Prime Minister may seem to have been around too long, which will weaken their position if they run into other problems. Lack of experience has never prevented the public from electing a party that has been in opposition for a long period, and whose leaders have little or no ministerial experience. When the mood turns against a government, it matters only that a credible opposition exists and that it does not seem to be an even more unpalatable alternative; this was certainly the lesson acted upon by the Labour leadership from the disaster of 1983 to the triumphant return of 1997.

It is these external factors which seem to be the driving force, towing the opposition in their wake. The recovery of unity, support and morale in the opposition flow from the difficulties of the government, rather than causing them in the first instance. The strategy of the opposition is generally shaped by the actions of the government, and it is the government that sets the agenda. The most important things that an opposition party can do are negatives rather than positives, for whilst an opposition cannot win an election by its unaided efforts, it can certainly lose one. The critical objective for an opposition is to put itself in a position from which it can take advantage of the government's problems and weaknesses as they arise, and not let opportunities slip away. The opposition must ensure that it is 'electable': this normally means that it has a credible leader, is united, can put up candidates in most constituencies, and has policies which are not unwelcome to the majority of voters and which have enough coherence and content to be sustainable against attack. Serious flaws in one, and certainly more, of these areas are unlikely to lead to recovering power, even when the government has a poor record or has failed to fulfil expectations.

At a basic level, a party has to recover much of the support that was lost in the previous election, and it may also seek to secure support from new groups in age, gender, class or region. Although it is the external factors that most affect voting intentions, there are five ways in which an opposition party can place itself in the best tactical position. The first of these is 'fresh faces': a new leader or leadership team, and especially the sense of a change of generations. The second is 'cohesion': the maintenance of unity and discipline within the party, which is essential to convey a sense of purpose and effectiveness. The third is 'visibility': a new agenda or a distinctive position, and a distancing from past unpopular policies and their legacy. Here it is important to have an impact upon the political elite and opinion formers, in order to give credibility to revival and reorientation, and for this to be communicated to a wider

audience. The fourth element links to this, and is 'efficiency': not just an improved or revived party organization, but the sense that the party is at least master in its own house, and can respond with speed and authority when the need arises. The final element is 'adaptability': a hunger for office, and a pragmatic or unideological approach which gives room to manoeuvre and seize the openings that appear.

These elements combine to shape the public view of the credibility of the opposition, which can be established or reinforced through by-election successes, parliamentary impact or effective propaganda, and for the greatest effect some combination of these. To have an impact and draw support towards itself, the opposition needs to be in tune with the general priorities of the voters who lie between its own invariable supporters and the invariable supporters of the other parties. It needs to identify key aspects of public concern, and to present at the least, effective criticisms of government performance, and possibly credible or even attractive alternative remedies. It needs to develop slogans and a general image that resonate with these concerns, rather than distracting from them or raising the ghosts of past unpopularity and defeat.

A party, or its leaders, can exercise some control over what is said and done in a number of important areas. These combine to create an overall image in the public consciousness, which plays a significant – but not determining – part in the prospects of returning to power. The first and most visible of these areas is the party leadership, and this can have two elements. The action of an opposition party which is most noticed by voters is a change of its leader, although this is not always a positive affair. The new leader may be relatively unknown (perhaps Salisbury, and certainly Bonar Law, Thatcher, Hague and Duncan Smith), and may have a negative impact. The latter could be a matter of a dull or distancing personality (Bonar Law, Heath and Thatcher), or identification with unpopular policies (Bonar Law as a leading proponent of tariff reform, Howard as a cabinet minister under Major and especially his role in implementing the 'poll tax' of the late 1980s). Nevertheless, a change of leader can be beneficial in several ways, especially if a party is seeking to put an unsuccessful or unpopular period in government behind it. It signifies a fresh start of at least some sort, whether of strategy (Bonar Law, Thatcher and Duncan Smith), outlook and background (Bonar Law and Heath), or generation (Salisbury, Heath and Hague). All of these can have their appeal, but if the switch is too extensive there is a danger of losing more than is gained (Salisbury, Thatcher and Hague all aroused concern in this respect).

The second element of change in leadership is in the wider group around the actual leader, as this to a lesser extent also shapes the public image and awareness of what the party stands for. Such changes can be rapid and substantial after a long spell in government, when the retirement of long-serving former ministers brings a change of generation on the front bench as the party enters opposition. This is particularly likely after a major defeat, as the former leaders may be discredited and some will have lost their seats – in 1906, even the Prime Minister and party leader, Balfour, was defeated. There were significant generational changes after the defeats of 1906 (although several figures of the Salisbury era had retired with him in 1902), 1945, 1964 and 1997. This was sometimes obscured by the continuation of the existing leader (Balfour after 1906 and Churchill after 1945), but in all these cases the composition of the Cabinet when the party returned to office was very different from when it had lost power.

Leadership is commonly presented as one of the three main areas in which a party can make changes when in opposition (the others being its policies and its organization). However, there is something of a myth about the Conservative Party's habit of ditching leaders who have led it into defeat, as Table 1.1 demonstrates.

Table 1.1 Periods in Opposition and Changes of Leadership

Period in Opposition			Changes of Leadership		
Date of entering opposition	Date of return to office	Length (years months)	Leader on entering opposition	Date of change (if any)	Leader on return to office, if different
1 Dec. 1868	20 Feb. 1874	5.3	B. Disraeli		
21 Apr. 1880	23 June 1885	5.2	B. Disraeli*	23 June 1885	Lord Salisbury
28 Jan. 1886	25 July 1886	0.6	Lord Salisbury		
11 Aug. 1892	25 June 1895	2.11	Lord Salisbury		
4 Dec. 1905	25 May 1915	9.6	A. Balfour	13 Nov. 1911	A. Bonar Law
22 Jan. 1924	4 Nov. 1924	0.9	S. Baldwin		
4 June 1929	24 Aug. 1931	2.3	S. Baldwin		
26 July 1945	26 Oct. 1951	6.4	W. Churchill		
16 Oct. 1964	19 June 1970	5.8	A. Douglas-Home	2 Aug. 1965	E. Heath
4 Mar. 1974	4 May 1979	5.2	E. Heath	11 Feb. 1975	M. Thatcher
2 May 1997			J. Major	19 June 1997	*unknown***

* Disraeli had become the Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876.

** John Major was followed as leader by William Hague (19 June 1997), Iain Duncan Smith (13 Sep. 2001), and Michael Howard (6 Nov. 2003).

It is only in the last decade that the pattern has developed of the party leader resigning immediately after an election defeat, as Major did

in 1997 and Hague in 2001. Part of the reason for this was the scale of these defeats, and neither Heath in 1974 nor Douglas-Home in 1964 felt the need to resign after losing the poll. In 1964 Douglas-Home had been leader and Prime Minister for just one year, and had managed to reduce what had seemed likely to be a heavy defeat to a very narrow one indeed. He encountered difficulties in opposition, and in 1965 withdrew because of these (as Baldwin also nearly did in 1931). Heath's position after losing office in February 1974 was more contentious, but even so he still led the Conservatives into the next election, although this was mainly because Labour's lack of a majority meant that a dissolution was likely to come soon and the party would be caught at a disadvantage if it was in the midst of a leadership change. In the inter-war period, Baldwin briefly contemplated quitting after the 1923 defeat, and fought off a series of attacks on his position in 1929–31, but he was always able to retain the support of the majority of Conservative MPs. After 1906, Balfour led the Party for nearly six years in opposition, and through two further – though closely related – general elections in January and December 1910, before resigning in 1911. Before this, the need for a new leader had only been due to natural causes, with Disraeli's death in 1881.

Leadership is a key element because it critically affects both a party's public image and the decisions which are taken about the fundamental strategic questions which have to be addressed in any period in opposition. The most significant of these is whether to adopt the 'active' approach of initiating new departures, or the 'reactive' stance of waiting for and exploiting the problems of the government. New policies and directions can have advantages, both in attracting attention and in making a break with the past. However, as with a new leader, they have to be carefully chosen – they may deter as much as attract, and divide as much as unite. There is a particular danger in making commitments to exploit a government difficulty that may be only minor or temporary, as with Bonar Law's statement that the Conservatives would repeal Lloyd George's National Insurance Act of 1911.

If an 'active' strategy is followed, there is also a dilemma over the direction which should be taken: whether to emphasize a distinctively Conservative identity and programme, or to present a consensual image in order to capture the 'middle ground'. The choice for any party is between concentrating upon its core values and expressing the outlook of its most vocal supporters, or giving a higher priority to widening its appeal and social base, even if this means changes in outlook and image. Pragmatism and the hunger for office may promote adaptation to the factors which caused the party to lose power, as in the policy reviews of

1924, 1945–51 and (though more apparently radical) 1975–79. However, as Balfour found in 1906 and Baldwin in 1929–30, an election defeat tilts the balance of strength in the remaining parliamentary party towards the safest seats. The grass-roots membership and MPs from the heartland regions may have little experience of conditions elsewhere, and lack the willingness or need to compromise on cherished objectives.

The danger in the 'active' strategy is that proposals have to be put forward in sufficient detail to be credible, but are then vulnerable to counter-attacks from the government. This leads to an unsatisfactory reversal of roles, as the advantages of being in opposition (flexibility, vagueness, a focus upon general principles and the broad picture) are lost, without gaining the assets of being in government (prestige, patronage and access to civil service and other supporting structures).[4] Churchill was convinced that this was both bad tactics and unnecessary. He strongly favoured making as few commitments as possible and focusing energy on attacking the government, holding the classic view that an opposition's first duty is to oppose, and not to propose. Those who favoured the 'reactive' strategy subscribed, whether consciously or unconsciously, to another basic assumption about the operation of the British political system: the adage that 'oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them'. In other words, it is the actions and performance of the government which determine its fate, and by itself the opposition can do little to affect these matters. It logically follows that the most useful thing an opposition can do is to chip away at the government's morale and popularity, and certainly not to allow it to sidestep its problems by providing either a distraction or an easy target.

Whether the 'active' or the 'reactive' approach was being adopted, there was one further strategic issue that had to be confronted. This was how to respond to measures for which the incoming government could claim a mandate or which were popular, especially when they involved dismantling or reversing the measures of previous Conservative governments. This question was likely to arise from the very beginning of an opposition period, and the response to it could largely predetermine the broader agenda. Thus, in 1868–74 Disraeli did not give any commitment to reverse the early measures of Gladstone's first ministry, whilst on the other hand in 1906–10 the Conservatives used their majority in the House of Lords to wreck or reject a range of Liberal bills – although up to 1909 they were careful not to do so with anything of general appeal. The classic example of accepting changes and looking forwards is the 1945–51 opposition, and this was validated by the subsequent return to power for not just one parliament but three consecutive ones. The

problem did not arise to the same extent when in opposition during unsuccessful or minority governments, but the Conservatives accepted the land aspect of Gladstone's Irish policy in the early 1880s and greatly expanded it with measures of their own in 1885, 1887, 1891 and 1896. They continued to use the budgetary device of death duties introduced by the Liberals in 1892–95, and of the graduated levels of income tax in Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909. Despite any reservations, the measures on race and gender discrimination of the 1964–70 and 1974–79 Labour governments were left in place, as were a range of other social and moral reforms.

The decisions on the basic strategic questions are often strongly contested, and they have been a major source of debate and disunity within the Conservative Party during its periods in opposition in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A key element in this is the interpretations of the reasons for the previous loss of power, and the immediate impact and reactions which have followed defeat. In this context, it is significant that every departure from office since 1868 has been the consequence of defeat in a general election, with the sole exception of 1905 – when electoral defeat was clearly in prospect and followed immediately after. On several occasions, matters were further complicated by differences within the Party over the causes of the defeat or the policies upon which the election had been lost. This happened in 1868 after the Second Reform Act, in 1929 with the moderate economic and social programme, and in 1997 upon the issues of adopting radical 'Thatcherite' policies and of Europe. It was particularly contentious in 1906 over the electoral role of tariff reform, and in 1974 after the 'U-turns' of the Heath government. On the other hand, the task ahead was made simpler, if not necessarily easier, if there was a general consensus upon the reasons for the fall from office. This could still involve self-criticism, as in 1892, 1964 and especially 1923; other defeats were at least partly absolved by attribution to outside factors for which the party was not responsible, as in 1880, 1945 and especially 1885.

The second main area of the internal matters that a party can directly control is its policies. Decisions here are directly affected by the choice between the 'active' or the 'reactive' strategies, as policy matters will be much more important – and possibly contentious – if it is intended to use them as the lever with which to move the rock of public opinion. In any case, a defeated party can hardly rest upon its laurels, especially if they are already withered by age or crushed by popular rejection. Some reappraisal is inevitable, and would occur even if the party had remained in office. There is the natural effect of the passage of time, which brings changing

circumstances and unforeseen events, and thereby affects opinions and priorities. The 'reactive' strategy depends upon this process, making the assumption that the difficulties of managing affairs are bound to weaken a government, and that the compromises of office are likely to alienate some of its own supporters and disappoint some of the uncommitted voters. As a pessimistic view of the human condition is a fundamental element in 'natural Conservatism', it is perhaps not surprising that many Conservatives by temperament favoured the 'reactive' strategy. Certainly, it was less in tune with the Conservative mentality to believe – as did the 'whole-hog' tariff reformers in the Edwardian era, or the libertarian right in the 1990s – that a policy or a programme was the vehicle upon which the party would ride back into public favour.[5]

Even so, attention to policy matters is unavoidable, as the incoming government introduces legislation to which the opposition front-bench has to make some response, at least for debating purposes. Purely negative criticism is not, in practice, attainable – for there are implicit choices made by the selection of what to attack, and how to go about doing so. In practice, some indication of a better alternative has to be given, even if it remains shadowy on detail. Otherwise, the government can turn the tables, by alleging that the opposition are bereft of ideas and could achieve no more if they were in office. Furthermore, over a longer period of time a solely critical stance can be a problem for the opposition party itself. The lack of substance may not satisfy its own supporters, or leave a dangerous vacuum in which they will fall out amongst themselves, as happened during parts of the 1905–14 period, in 1929–30, over devolution in 1974–79, and over Europe after 1997. A lack of positive alternatives is also likely to be criticized by normally-supportive newspapers, and so become a problem and distraction. A simply negative 'reactive' strategy may be too partisan for uncommitted voters, who are alienated by narrow tribalistic attitudes – hence the appeal of SDP-Liberal Alliance when it was launched in the early 1980s.

Therefore, whilst criticism of the government and its works will be the first priority of any opposition, there is bound to be a policy-making process running in parallel. Three other factors may encourage this, and determine the importance that is attached to it and the degree of prominence and publicity that it is given. The first of these is the need for distance from the past, to uncouple the party's future fortunes from the legacy of an unpopular record – something that was achieved eventually by Disraeli in 1874, substantially by Churchill in 1951, partially by Heath in 1970 and Thatcher in 1979, but not yet by any of the leaders since 1997. The second need is for distinctiveness from the government, so that

the party will be seen as a genuine alternative at the next election and not just as 'more of the same', the 'plague on both houses' feeling that was damaging particularly in the 1964–79 era. Finally, policy changes can be used as a demonstration of vigour and vitality, giving the impression that the opposition party is bursting with answers to the nation's problems, if only it can be given the chance to implement them.

The development of new policies may take a little while to get under way, especially if this is complicated by disputes and inquests over the causes of defeat. There is a natural pause for breath, partly from the physical and mental demands of having been in government and then fighting a general election, and partly to see what will unfold. In this sense there is a natural caution, and in practice the strategy of an opposition is likely to mix reactive 'wait and see' with active 'look at me', and for there to be much more of the former in the initial phases. It may also be that the incoming government puts centre-stage an issue upon which the opposition party already has strong and developed views, which was the case with Irish Home Rule in 1892–93 and 1912–14 (though not when Gladstone first raised it in 1886). Alternative policies were not considered as necessary in the second half of the nineteenth century as they had become by the later decades of the twentieth. Even so, the broad principles that Disraeli set out in two major and lengthy public speeches in 1872 were considered to have given coherence and vigour to the opposition, though they were not delivered until at least half of the parliament had elapsed and the government was visibly faltering.

Between 1906 and 1910, tariff reform was considered to be the focus, but there were constant concerns by its enthusiasts that the pragmatic leadership was not giving it sufficient clarity and emphasis. After the 1910 defeats, there was little development of policy: tariffs were displaced without being repudiated (giving the worst of all worlds), unofficial initiatives in developing answers to Liberal social policy were greeted with suspicion or indifference (the Unionist Social Reform Committee), and everything became bound up in the defence of the Union and the position of Ulster. This aroused passions, but was at best a one-card trick, and with no certainty that it would out-trump the government.[6]

The periods in opposition since the First World War have seen much more emphasis upon policy development, partly as a response to the democratic franchise created in 1918, and partly because the Conservatives are competing for support in that arena with the more ideologically-motivated Labour Party. The two most successful exercises were those of 1924 and 1945–51, and the example of the latter spurred the most extensive review in 1964–70 and the belief in 1974–79 in the

value of a defining statement of principles to give intellectual coherence to the Party's position: in 1947 this was *The Industrial Charter*, and in 1976 it was *The Right Approach*.[7] There has been no similar document since 1997, at least not in any public visibility, and no systematic or trumpeted policy review, although certainly there have been plenty of statements, position papers and pamphlets. None of these have made a public impact or lifted the Conservatives' popularity, and there remains an impression that too many areas of policy are dangerous minefields into which the opposition dare not venture, for it has no map with which to avoid blowing itself up.

The last, and perhaps least, of the three main areas that a party can take into its own hands is its organization. It is in many ways the easiest area, because it is normally less contentious than policy, though there can be individuals or even groups of supporters who are unsettled or offended by changes in long-established methods. It takes place mainly out of public view, and is implemented by the salaried officials who are under the executive direction of the party leader, since 1911 through his or her appointee as Party Chairman. There may be some institutional resistance at this level – as with the innovation of the Community Affairs Department at Central Office in 1975 – and more so at local level, where the tradition of constituency autonomy is vigorously defended.[8] Even so, organizational changes are mainly a matter affecting the most loyal elements within the party – Central Office staff, local association chairmen and salaried agents.

A review of the organization is also the most obvious area for action, as deficiencies here are often blamed as a cause of defeat. There is often truth in this, especially when the party has been in office for a lengthy period and the need for efficiency and vitality has been absent for some time. This was certainly the case in 1880 after Gorst's departure as National Agent, in 1906 after the end of the Middleton era at Central Office, in 1945 with the almost complete hibernation of the organization during the Second World War, and in 1964 as the great machine crafted by Woolton began to run out of steam. However, it was much less the case in 1892 when Akers-Douglas as Chief Whip and Middleton as chief organizer were in their prime, in 1923 when the National Union executive committee went out of its way to praise Central Office after the defeat, in 1929 when there was more criticism but the organization was actually at its strongest ever apart from 1947–51, or in 1974 and 1997 when the finger of blame was largely directed elsewhere. Devoting attention to reorganization can also be tempting in another way, as activity here can

be substitute for tackling more fundamental and difficult problems in other areas.

Reorganization is the least important of the three areas, because it has the least direct effect upon public opinion. Parties do not pull themselves up by their own bootstraps – if this were so, then returning to power would be a simple exercise indeed. Tackling organization alone will have little impact, unless the government is overwhelmed by a major crisis – and if that should happen, then the opposition will benefit whether or not their party machinery has been improved. Paper restructuring does not of itself attract voluntary workers or bring in donations; it is circumstances in the outside world that do so. In fact, organizational recovery is more a result of revival in a party's fortunes than a cause of it. In many cases, the first response to defeat is apathy and a further falling off in enthusiasm and efficiency. It takes alarm, controversy or adverse conditions to bring back former supporters as well as draw in any new ones. Lord Woolton was credited with much in the recovery after 1945, but his first membership drive in the autumn of 1946 only recovered a part of the pre-war support that had been lost; it was not until after Labour's difficult winter of 1947 that his major fund-raising and recruitment initiatives began to be effective. The role of organizational reforms in the 1945–51 recovery is a powerful element in the heroic myth of that period, but it has much more to do with the return to former allegiance of many middle-class and female working-class voters than with any success in attracting new elements of support.

The period when organizational innovation made the most significant contribution to recovering power was not in 1945–51, but in 1868–74. This was partly because almost nothing existed before the development of the National Union after 1867 and the creation of Conservative Central Office in 1870, and any initiatives would improve upon the existing chaos. It was also the case that in the mid-nineteenth-century electoral system, organization could deliver much greater practical gains. This was firstly in finding candidates to contest seats, an important matter when this was an expensive undertaking, and it was here that Central Office had the most effect. Secondly, the combination of constituency electorates that were often between 2000 and 4000 voters and the importance of the complicated registration system meant that an efficient local organization could significantly shape the outcome before the election was called.

In other periods, organizational changes contributed only at the margins or not at all. The innovation of the Primrose League, founded in 1883, could not prevent defeat in 1885, and victory in 1886 was clearly due to the Liberals' division over Irish Home Rule and lack of support

for this policy in many English constituencies. Even where they did take place, organizational changes were not the driving factors in the return to power in 1895, 1924, 1931, 1970 or 1979. The initial reorganization after 1906 actually made matters worse, but the further defeats in 1910 led to the most important changes since the Disraelian foundations of 1867–70. Even so, the creation of the post of Party Chairman in 1911, the restructuring of Central Office, the introduction of new and efficient staff and considerably better funding did not alter the political balance between the government and the opposition. The difficulties in other areas, and especially the lack of an appealing domestic programme, make it at least dubious that the Conservatives would have won a peacetime general election in 1915. Instead, the impact of the First World War brought the Conservatives back into office in the coalition government of May 1915, and by end of the war in 1918 their former rivals, the Liberal Party, had become severely and permanently damaged

The Conservative experience of opposition since 1867

The Conservative Party when in opposition has often been pre-occupied with the internal matters of leadership, policy and organization. This is particularly the case with leadership and strategic direction, which are often bound up together in the choice or retention of the Party leader (as was the case with Salisbury in 1885, Balfour after 1906, Baldwin in the 1920s, Thatcher in 1975, and Hague and Duncan Smith after 1997). These aspects do matter, especially in combining to form and communicate an image to the public at large. A capable party machine, innovative or efficient campaigning methods and good relations with the media will make a difference. So also does the maintenance of unity and discipline within the party, for a factious opposition is unlikely to be effective or to appear an attractive replacement for the government – a problem the Conservatives faced in 1880–85, 1905–10, 1929–31, 1964–70, since 1997, and to some extent in 1974–79. Being in opposition is neither simple nor easy, a problem made worse by the fact that many politicians and commentators assume that it is. There are stresses and pressures, especially from the frustration which develops when there are no clear signs of progress, and tensions and divisions can then emerge. This was a feature of the period 1910–14, in 1930–31, in 1949, in 1968–70 and in the replacement of Duncan Smith in 2003.

The outcomes since 1867 of the Conservative Party's attempts to recover power can be placed in three categories: major successes, modest successes, and failures. There have been five substantial victories, and

Table 1.2 Gains in Seats and Size of Overall Majority on Return to Office

General election	Gain in seats since previous general election	Lead over next largest party	Overall majority
31 Jan. 1874	79	108	48
1 July 1886	69	124	39
13 July 1895	98	234	152
29 Oct. 1924	154	261	209
27 Oct. 1931	210	418	493
25 Oct. 1951	23	26	17
18 June 1970	77	32	20
3 May 1979	62	70	43

Note: The figures for 1886 are for the Conservatives only, and treat the Liberal Unionists as a separate party; if the 77 Liberal Unionists are counted as supporting the Conservatives, their combined overall majority was 116. The figures for 1895 include the Liberal Unionists, as they were now in formal alliance with the Conservatives and represented in the Cabinet. In 1931, the figures for gain in seats and lead over next largest party are for the Conservatives alone, but the overall majority figure is for the National Government as a whole.

it is noticeable that none of these has occurred in the last 70 years. The first, in 1874, is included in this category not so much for the size of the Conservatives' overall majority, which was only 48, or for the number of seats gained in comparison to the previous election, although that was a respectable 79. Rather, it is the fact that any overall majority at all was a huge achievement after almost 30 years of opposition or – rarely and briefly – minority government. The previous Conservative majority had been gained in 1841 by Peel, who then broke the Party apart over the Corn Laws in 1846; Disraeli's victory in 1874 was the first real proof that the rump of the party left after Peel's departure was broadening its appeal. Both this and the other nineteenth-century triumphs, in 1886 and 1895, were based upon two linked factors. The first of these was a feature of elections in this era which dwindled after 1918 and vanished after 1945: a large number of unopposed returns. In 1874, 125 Conservative MPs were returned to Parliament without a challenge; in 1886, it was 118, and in 1895 it was 132; the only other instance with over a hundred unopposed returns was in the following election, in 1900, where there were 163.[9] All four of these high levels were explained by the second factor in these Conservative recoveries – the falling apart of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons into factionalism and apathy. Special factors also applied in the case of the other two landslide recoveries, in 1924 and 1931. In this period the Conservatives benefited from the twin effects of the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour. These

victories were in elections where there was some alarm over Labour's record or intentions, and where the Liberal Party was in disarray and was either putting up many fewer candidates than before (1924) or was in a coalition pact with the Conservatives (1931).

There are three returns to office which, for different reasons, can be placed in the category of narrower victories. The first of these is 1951, when the Party recovered power with the slim, but workable, overall majority in the House of Commons of 17. Given that this represented 111 more seats than the Conservatives held in 1945, it might seem odd to place it in this category. However, the point is that it took two elections to return to office, and whilst it was certainly a significant achievement in a relatively short period – and compares favourably with the record after the other landslide defeats of 1906 and 1997 – it was still a fairly narrow victory, and the Labour Party had a larger total of votes cast in its favour. The other two recoveries in this group have similarities, one of which is that they are in the same decade. The number of seats won back in 1970 was considerable, with 77 gains on the 1966 result. This gave the Conservatives a narrow but sufficient parliamentary majority of 20; for that reason it is in this middle category, even though it is the one occasion on which the Conservatives overturned a large government majority at the next election. In 1979 a similar number of seats gained (62) produced a larger overall majority of 43, but the barrier to be surmounted was much easier, as by the end of the parliament the Labour government was a minority dependent upon a pact with the Liberals to stay in office.

The Conservative Party entered 15 general elections as the opposition, and emerged from eight of them as the next government. This is a fair record, but hardly strong enough to suggest the possession of an innate aptitude or special skills for opposition. If the elections are counted individually, there were seven failures to recover power. In practice, three of these were closely linked to a prior defeat, and were really part of the same political cycle. The general elections of December 1910 and October 1974 are the most obvious examples of this, and 1966 is the other. In the first two cases, neither the personalities, party identities nor public mood had changed much since the previous contest a few months earlier. 1966 saw the working out of the unpopularity and decline of the Conservatives when they left office in 1964 after 13 years of government, and this was even more true of the October 1974 election, which came only eight months after the Heath government had ended in confrontation, crisis and rejection. Even so, a short interval since losing office does not make a return impossible if other circumstances are favourable, as was shown in 1886 (after seven months), 1924 (after 11 months) and 1931

(after two years and five months, about half the length of a parliament). The difference was that in 1966 the government managed its affairs effectively, at least as far as the public perception was concerned, and continued to project the modernizing and meritocratic style that had attracted support in 1964. The Conservatives, on the other hand, not only were still encumbered by the appearance of out-datedness and loss of competence that had harmed them in 1962–64, but also had a leader pushed into retiring and parliamentary disunity over Rhodesia. The new leader, Heath, was certainly a radical break in social background and manner from previous leaders, but he did not have much time to establish himself. Whilst there was an extensive policy exercise, it suffered from the blunderbuss effect – a horde of small shots, but little that really dented the target.

Having set these three cases aside, there remain four failures to recover power after more or less a full parliament in opposition: 1885, January 1910, 1950 and 2001. Of these, the position in 1885 is complicated, and in the literal sense it is actually an election in which a Conservative government loses office, rather than a Conservative opposition failing to recover it. The previous general election in 1880 had seen the defeat of Disraeli's government and the installation of the Liberals, with Gladstone taking the office of Prime Minister for the second time. However, the customary pattern of Liberal disintegration in the later part of a parliament emerged again, and in June 1885 the Liberals resigned after a losing a relatively unimportant vote in the Commons, glad to escape the burdens and frustrations of office. The recent passage of the Third Reform Act, the Liberals' one major domestic measure, meant that a general election was politically impossible on the old franchise, but the new electoral registers would not be ready until November. In these circumstances, Lord Salisbury accepted the invitation to form a minority Conservative government, known as the 'Caretaker Government' as its duration was only to last the few months until the election in November. The Conservatives therefore contested the 1885 election as the government in office, though in reality their position gave them very little power and for over five years during the parliament they had been the party in opposition.

The other complication in assessing 1885 is that the electoral system had changed greatly since the previous contest. The Third Reform Act not only extended the franchise in the county seats (a Liberal measure specifically intended to undercut the Conservatives in their stronger areas), but also radically redrew the electoral map of Britain by moving towards single-member constituencies of roughly equal population size,

whilst the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act changed the way in which elections were fought. It is therefore difficult to compare the 1885 performance with that of 1880 or the previous recovery of 1874. Given the circumstances against them in 1885, the Conservatives' net gain of 12 seats was not such a dismal outcome as it might seem, and there were particularly encouraging signs of electoral advance in the larger towns and in the key regions of Lancashire and London. Although it was only 11 seats more, as far as real progress is concerned the outcome in 1885 is in a different league from that of 2001. Nevertheless, the immediate result when the new parliament met in January 1886 was that the Liberals, with Irish Nationalist support now that Gladstone had declared for Home Rule, voted the Salisbury administration out and Gladstone became Prime Minister for the third time.

The remaining cases of failure, significantly, are the parliaments which followed the three massive defeats of the twentieth century in 1906, 1945 and 1997. On none of these occasions, despite having had at least four years in which to restore their fortunes, did the Conservatives win the next general election. The best result was in 1950, with 88 seats regained and – more importantly – the government's overall majority reduced to only six. Not only was this small enough to rule out any major new legislation from the government and make a further full term almost impossible, but there was also the comfort that the Cabinet were clearly exhausted both physically and politically, in visible contrast to the reinvigorated and confident opposition. Whilst there had been something of a crisis of confidence in 1949 due to the failure to make any by-election gains, the extent of the ground made up in the 1950 election was more than enough to calm the Party's nerves and give it encouragement and purpose. It was followed by one of the most effective opposition periods as far as tactics and policy were concerned, with a disciplined Party making full use of its parliamentary opportunities and an important public commitment on housing, a major issue of the day on which the government had under-performed. In the earlier case of the January 1910 election, although the Conservatives won back 116 seats and drew almost level with the Liberal Party in the House of Commons, in the sense that really matters they remained a long way short of recovering office. This was because as long as the Liberals retained the support of the Irish Nationalists, who had 82 seats, and to a lesser extent the new Labour Party, which had 40, their parliamentary position was unassailable. As they had also broken the power of the House of Lords to prevent bills being passed, and were beholden to the Irish to bring in a Home Rule bill, the Conservatives after January 1910 could only contemplate utter frustration, and not

surprisingly some of them cast round for any methods that could be used against the government.

The 2001 result was unarguably the worst of all in electoral terms and for party morale; there was nothing to take encouragement from at all, and the loss of some seats to the Liberal Democrats was a worrying complication. Based on the experience of not only 1906, 1945 and 1966, but also 1924, 1931, 1959 and 1983, it had been assumed that any sweeping victory depended upon temporary factors, some of which were bound to have diminished by the next election. It was therefore thought to be almost a law of political gravity that some inroads would be made upon a government majority which was by nature ephemeral, and by the time of the next election somewhat unreal. The question was only how extensive the opposition's recovery of its former territory would be, not whether it would occur at all. So, when it did fail to happen, the shock and dismay were all the greater, especially as the electoral mountain of Labour's 1997 majority still remained to be climbed. It had already been accepted by most observers, whatever the Conservative front-bench felt required to say for the sake of maintaining confidence and motivation, that a landslide victory like 1997 would take more than one parliament to overturn. This view was based on what happened after 1906, 1945 and 1983, although it discounted 1966 as less of a victory and ignored the 1924 example as somehow not applicable (despite the parallels frequently made with the Edwardian era). It now seemed that this slow process of erosion still all lay ahead, and that it could no longer be taken for granted. However, a consideration of some other examples of opposition fortunes would deprecate the view that this was a novel and unprecedented departure. Despite all the economic and political problems of the Heath government, in February 1974 the Labour Party only recovered 13 seats, and in 1987 it did not do much better with 20 gains. In 1955 and 1959 the Labour opposition actually lost ground to the government, ending up with 107 seats less than the Conservatives. The closest parallel is with the Liberals in 1900; suffering from even more parliamentary disunity and paralysis in leadership and policy-making than Labour in the 1950s, they won only six more seats than in their landslide defeat of 1895.

There is a myth of recovery in opposition to which the Conservative Party particularly subscribes, being still in thrall to the heroic image of 1945–51. In reality, a much more common pattern is the metaphor of climbing a mountain that is too large to be tackled in a single stage. Only once since 1900 have the Conservatives returned to office against a government in possession of a workable majority – and that was under

Heath in 1970, after the most forgotten and derided of the opposition periods. The victories of 1924, 1931 (as part of a coalition) and 1979 were all over minority governments, and Labour's majority of six in 1950–51 was clearly unsustainable. The only other examples are all in the very different party and electoral environment of the nineteenth century. In 1874, 1886 and 1895 Liberal majorities were replaced by Conservative ones, but in all three cases the unity of the Liberals had collapsed and they had suffered parliamentary defeat before resigning office; in that sense, whatever the apparent numbers, they no longer possessed a workable majority.

Table 1.3 Electoral Recovery at the Next General Election

Date of election defeat	Date of next election	Interval (years months)	Change in no. of seats	Change in % vote	Return to office?
17 Nov. 1868	31 Jan. 1874	5.2	+ 79	+ 5.5	YES
31 Mar. 1880	24 Nov. 1885	5.8	+ 12	+ 1.5	NO*
24 Nov. 1885	1 July 1886	0.7	+ 144	+ 7.9	YES
4 July 1892	13 July 1895	3.0	+ 98	+ 2.1	YES
12 Jan. 1906	15 Jan. 1910	4.10	+ 116	+ 3.4	NO
6 Dec. 1923	29 Oct. 1924	0.11	+ 154	+ 8.8	YES
30 May 1929	27 Oct. 1931	2.5	+ 210	+ 16.9	YES**
5 July 1945	23 Feb. 1950	4.7	+ 88	+ 3.9	NO
15 Oct. 1964	31 Mar. 1966	1.5	*– 51*	*– 2.4*	NO
28 Feb. 1974	10 Oct. 1974	0.7	*– 20*	*– 2.1*	NO
1 May 1997	7 June 2001	4.1	+ 1	+ 0.4	NO

* The Conservative Party returned to office in June 1885 due to the resignation of the Liberal government, but were defeated in the election in November 1885.

** The Conservative Party joined the National Government on 24 August 1931.

Note: This table considers the outcome of the first general election to be held after the Conservative Party enters opposition, whatever the interval; this is not necessarily the occasion at which the Conservatives return to power. The comparison of seats is with the previous election defeat, and does not take into acount any by-election gains that have been made since then.

In all of the opposition periods, the economic fortunes of the government were important, but – unless dire – they were not alone a guarantee of opposition success. This was a less significant factor before 1914, as governments then were not regarded as having primary responsibility for this area. A link could be made if there were government actions which could be portrayed as unsettling for trading conditions or business confidence, as Gladstone successfully suggested when assaulting