The Parties in Transition, 1903–22

Introduction

In May 1903 Joseph Chamberlain made a speech in Birmingham calling for the end of free trade in the interest of consolidating the British Empire. The speech was a great sensation and it opened up a wide split in the Conservative Party. In the same year, Captain Middleton, the guiding force behind the Conservative Party organisation since the 1880s, retired. The party was to suffer three consecutive defeats in general elections and would not win an election independently of other parties until 1922. In February 1903 the ‘Newcastle Resolution’ passed at the Labour Party conference stated that members of the party should not identify themselves with or forward the interests of the Conservative and Liberal Parties. Yet in the same year a secret agreement with the Liberals was a recognition that the Labour Party, for all its independence, would need the co-operation of the Liberal Party to return members to the House of Commons. In January 1906 the Liberal Party scored one of the greatest electoral triumphs in modern times.

Yet in 1922 the Conservative Party, winning the general election with an absolute majority over the other parties, was about to dominate party politics for the next eighteen years. At the same election the Labour Party became the second largest party and the official Opposition in the House of Commons. The Liberal Party, split into two halves, was con-
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demned to third-party status and was to enter a period of decline.

The contrast is stark, yet the outcome not inevitable. The Conservative recovery owed as much to its opponents as it did to its own recuperative powers. The party could have lost its separate identity and merged into an anti-socialist centre party after 1918. It is possible that the Liberal Party could have transformed itself into the permanent majority party of the left, leaving the Labour Party as a small parliamentary pressure group on the flanks of the Liberals. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the three political parties in turn to discover why neither of these possibilities materialised.

The Conservative Party, 1903–22

The history of the Conservative Party between 1903 and 1922 is only partly dominated by the tariff question; the opposition to the Liberal government's budget of 1909 and the subsequent Conservative defence of the House of Lords constitute a second theme. There was also the issue of Irish Home Rule and the party's support for the Protestants in Northern Ireland, support which was to carry the Conservative Party close to the borders of unconstitutionality in the years 1910–14. Again, the experiences as part of the coalition governments from 1915 to 1922 under Asquith and Lloyd George allowed the party to appear in the guise of the national party that was most concerned by the threat of socialism. Finally, to understand the nature of the party in these years, we will have to examine the party leadership and the state of the party organisation.

Free Trade vs Tariff Reform

The origins of the tariff reform movement in the Conservative Party can be found in the alarm felt at the decline of British industry around the turn of the century. In terms of total industrial output, Britain had been overtaken by Germany and the USA; and if the key industries of coal and steel are singled out, the decline was even more pronounced. Britain's share in world trade in industrial goods had also declined