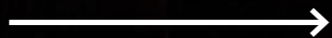


Institutional memory

For five decades, **Lord Lexden** has been at the heart of Conservative politics. The party's official historian tells **Francis Elliott** what lessons Kemi Badenoch should learn from the past and why she should resist the siren call of Nigel Farage. Photography by Tom Pilston



“No aged person should be pessimistic,”

says Lord Lexden. The Conservative Party’s official historian, a man who has served it for five decades, assesses its future.

On the one hand, Tories have governed 102 years since the Great Reform Act of 1867. On the other, the last election result was its worst since the 1740s.

“This is a very considerable mountain, indeed,” he says of Kemi Badenoch’s mission to renew the Conservatives. “Foolish to despair, but foolish not to recognise the magnitude of the task.”

The term “senior Conservative” has lost meaning, so often and so inaccurately is it applied, but generations of senior Conservatives have been schooled by Alistair Cooke, Baron Lexden.

David Cameron and George Osborne both learned at his feet, as did scores of others who served in the Conservative Research Department, which he ran with Robin Harris until he became director of the Conservative Political Centre. Under their watchful eye, aspirant Tories learnt the basics of the political craft, how to marshal arguments and the sanctity of facts.

Boris Johnson applied for a job the month after Cameron – but turned down the post when it was offered because, says Lexden, Johnson believed with good reason that some of the work would be boring.

Had the young Johnson submitted to its discipline and joined Cameron at the CRD, the history of the Conservative Party would have been very different. “Now that would, of course, have been an interesting combination,” he agrees. “But there was never any chance, his character is such, that he would ever have been turned into an all-round politician of real use.”

Judicious, measured and exact in expression, when Lexden attacks he takes no prisoners. “I think Boris Johnson exhibits one of the perils of democratic arrangements,” he says of the former prime minister. It was the first time, he claims, British voters fell for a politically magnetic but administratively incompetent character.

“I can’t think of any other occasion [of] an election winner who is totally, totally unsuited to running a government. He couldn’t run a whelk stall – he’d knock it over.”

It was Airey Neave that brought the young academic into the Conservatives to serve as his adviser as shadow Northern Ireland secretary. After Peterhouse, Cambridge, he had been working to his parents’ increasing dismay in Belfast as a lecturer in modern history at Queen’s University. He had wanted to stay in academia, but his parents prevailed and he took the job. “The 1970s in Northern Ireland were not a quiet time.”

On the morning of 30 March 1979, Lexden went to see his boss in the “scruffy rooms” then reserved for the shadow cabinet off Speakers’ Court. “The ostensible reason for my visit to him on that Friday morning was to finalise the Northern Ireland passage

for the forthcoming election manifesto. But this had been done a considerable time before. It was simply a matter of looking at it and saying we don’t need to make any changes. And it was a fairly brief visit in the mid-morning and then I went off to have lunch at the St Ermin’s hotel St James’ Park.”

Neave, a war hero and favourite of Margaret Thatcher, was murdered by the INLA – the Irish National Liberation Army – who had placed a bomb beneath his car. It detonated as he drove up the ramp from the car park beneath New Palace Yard. The sound of the explosion carried across Westminster. “I heard the dreaded sound. I heard the sound while I was having lunch and then discovered the full horror after I returned.”

Lexden doesn’t pretend to have had any great connection with Neave. The first British officer to escape Colditz was “less formidable” than he had imagined and needed frequent reassurance. It was the murder of Ian Gow, also by a car bomb this time planted by the IRA, 11 years later that really shook him, he says. That such a “fine man... ebullient, extraordinary, old-fashioned, given to self-parody” should die in that manner was “very, very distressing indeed”.

He was wrong about devolution, he admits, when asked to identify something in his long political career where he was proved to be mistaken. Wrong, in any case, to believe that voters could be attracted to a determinedly British agenda. “I thought under Mrs Thatcher we could proceed in a way that wouldn’t require the establishment of devolved institutions in Scotland and in Wales, and I hoped that it wouldn’t be necessary to restore them.”

“I hoped that a broad British appeal would be more successful in Wales and in Scotland,” he says. But the fact that Thatcher was “so English a figure” and Labour decided to back the devolution cause meant that hope was forlorn.

The Conservative Party is a national party or it is nothing, said Benjamin Disraeli. Devolution makes it much harder for the Tories to construct a programme that speaks to all its constituent parts, adding to its difficulties, Lexden says.

He sidesteps the question of whether the Tories should embrace or reject Nigel Farage but says Badenoch ought to rediscover the art of engaging the membership as she prepares her policy platform.

“One of the great strengths of the Conservative Party in my time is it had an apparatus – I happened to run it for a bit – called the Conservative Political Centre, through which there was what’s called a two-way communication between the leadership and the constituencies; through which the leadership made clear what was in its mind, and the constituencies responded with their views.”

Thatcher produced a strategy document around 18 months after



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“I think of myself as a kind of middle order figure. Plenty of people do much more than I do”

becoming leader – a timescale he thinks about right. “Certainly, I wouldn’t want to rush it, particularly in these circumstances where there’s so much to reconsider, but it would be perhaps a little unwise to leave it too long.”

Badenoch should resist the temptation to borrow too heavily from the Reform agenda as she seeks to win back support, he says, but she must somehow return the party to its natural state of uniting the right.

“One of the successes of the Conservative Party has been to contain the right within its ranks, apart from Mosley. Other than then, the Conservative Party has had the right within its own ranks and able to mediate and to do what was necessary to prevent it becoming a separate force.” He takes comfort that Reform has done little to develop a policy programme beyond its core issue of immigration or to do much to counter the claim that it is a “one-man band”.

The essence of Conservatism is, he says, “pragmatism, adaptability, a willingness to amend and alter as circumstances dictate”. Within the set of Conservative values – “low taxes, defence of the realm, law and order, that sort of thing” – Conservative leaders have an “enormous scope” to fashion a programme and approach.

Lexden says he keeps his distance from his former charges in the CRD. “I feel no sense of possession whatsoever. These people have done what they have done. I would be very, very surprised if any of them thought that their time in the research department, though important to them, had represented some turning point, and that their careers would be very different if they hadn’t [served there]. There is no sense of having a flock of protégés in whose subsequent careers I am deeply invested.” The exception is Lord Black of Brentwood, a friend since his days as a director of the political section of the CRD, now a media executive.

He may keep his distance but it was Cameron who ennobled him in 2010 – a “huge stroke of good fortune to have this coda to

my career”. Cameron for his part has said his old boss “combines an understanding of the past with a considerable, but not uncritical, affection for the Conservative Party”.

“I was only the second person to come into the Lords on the basis of having been a senior party official. This never featured in my set of aspirations, the thought of coming here. I mean, I think of myself as a kind of middle order figure. Plenty of people do much more than I do,” says Lexden, a deputy speaker. (As a contributor to *The House*, he is at the very top tier. None come close to his 110 articles in the last 13 years.)

He says the Lords don’t get sufficient credit for the work they do improving legislation but concedes there is an appetite for wholesale replacement.

The peer hints that the previous Conservative government flunked a chance to wind down the hereditary peers by stopping the by-elections that refresh their number at the 92 figure agreed by Tony Blair. That would have allowed a more gradual – and to some tastes more humane – approach than the abrupt termination of the arrangement proposed by the Starmer government.

“There will be many Conservatives commending that approach, when the bill [ending the inclusion of hereditary peers in the House of Lords] is discussed, raising the question, ‘Well, you had a chance to do that but didn’t.’ It is a very, very sad thing. You will see the strength of feeling on the Conservative benches.”

There is time for one more pearl of wisdom as the sun sets over the Thames in the River Room, part of the old Lord Chancellor’s apartment suite.

“One often doesn’t see institutions at their best where they discuss their composition or their powers in public and at great length.”

Lord Lexden’s contributions to The House can be found on his website: alistairlexden.org.uk/articles-and-reviews