

A tale of two nations

Disraeli is wrongly credited with the strand of conservatism that seeks to unify the two nations of rich and poor.

As **Lord Lexden** reports, Stanley Baldwin was the original one-nation Tory

People will keep on referring to Benjamin Disraeli's one-nation conservatism. A new Tory peer, thought to be quite well-versed in history, made much of it in his maiden speech in July. In the same debate another Tory called for policies "within the frame of Disraeli's one nation". Disraeli would have been astonished. He never uttered a word about one-nation conservatism.

Why is it attributed to him? His novel, *Sybil*, published in 1845, is responsible. At one point its hero declares that there are in England "two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy: the rich and the poor". After his death in 1881 the words were made famous by his many admirers, who said they showed that he deplored social divisions and wanted to heal them. But not once during his lifetime did he say that the two nations should be brought together in everlasting unity and peace.

He did a little by way of some half-dozen pieces of low-key legislation to help the second of the two nations. The most important reforms gave trade unions

rights to picket that Margaret Thatcher would revoke a century later. Local authorities acquired powers to build houses, but few were actually built because that would have meant putting up the rates paid by the first nation. Disraeli was not much interested, snoozing gently while these measures were being discussed in cabinet.

His priorities lay elsewhere. He won great diplomatic victories in Europe in the 1870s and made the Conservatives the party of Empire. The second nation was wholly unwelcome in the corridors of power. As one of his closest confidants put it, "he had no notion of allow-

on their own without coalition allies. Assisted by the Zinoviev letter (about which I wrote recently in *The House*), the October 1924 election swept them back to power after a brief period of opposition with a majority of 223.

New MPs and the party faithful packed the Royal Albert Hall on 4 December 1924 (something way beyond the dreams of the party today). Baldwin spoke not of the importance of national prestige and glory as Disraeli had often done, but of the duty and service which his party – then known as the Unionist Party – owed to "our fellow countrymen who trusted us and have given us their confidence, and who believe in their hearts that we have come to London to do what we can

to right those things that are hard and difficult for them".

Baldwin offered a new vision of Tory politics: "I want to see the spirit of service to the whole nation the birthright of every member of the Unionist Party – Unionist in the sense that we stand for the union of those two nations of which Disraeli spoke two generations ago: union among our own people to make one nation of our

own people at home which, if secured, nothing else matters in the world."

In government he mobilised the resources of the nation to extend the welfare state that David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill had begun. One-nation conservatism had arrived. 🏰

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



Disraeli and Baldwin with background image from *Sybil*

ing political power to be divorced from the principle of birth and property".

"Baldwin offered a new vision of Tory politics"

One-nation conservatism was created not by Disraeli in the Victorian age but by Stanley Baldwin in the 20th century. The famous phrase was first heard exactly a century ago in the aftermath of the greatest election victory the Tories have ever won