



phenomena in terms of underlying social and economic forces, and the political analyst reluctant to suspend his critical faculties in deference to the impersonal forces of history. Perhaps ultimately for this reason, while the book more than fulfils its objective of ‘the telling of the record’, we are left with some puzzlement about what New Labour is *really* all about.

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**Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition since 1867**

Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.)

*Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, 287pp., £18.99*

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This is an impressive and potentially important book. The individual chapters are scholarly, very well written and, crucially, clearly illuminate the role that the Conservative party’s periods in opposition have played in reshaping and relaunching the party at key moments in its history. The book’s potential importance depends on its impact on Conservative tactics. It should be required reading for Tory strategists, who may thereby gain some understanding of the serious errors and omissions of recent years in time to refocus before the next general election. As David Willetts contributes a chapter on the early post-war years, one would expect the book’s arguments to receive a hearing.

Given that most of the party’s significant changes in leadership, organization and policy have followed electoral defeat, the incoherent policy agendas, ‘ill considered’ organizational reforms and lack of authoritative leadership since 1997 identified by the book’s authors suggest a failure to study and learn from Conservative history. As Stuart Ball notes, where is the defining statement of principles along the lines of 1976’s *The Right Approach?* Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon’s concluding chapter rightly argues that the party has failed to find an ‘overarching narrative’ to express what 21st century Conservatism means. Tony Blair has not only stolen Conservative clothes, he has also stolen the party’s historical hunger for office and their adaptability.

Following a fine opening chapter by Ball, which assesses key factors since 1867 to the present, the book’s chapters explore each Conservative period in opposition since Disraeli. I suspect that for most general readers the events prior to Baldwin’s leadership will be the least familiar, but the clarity of the writing helps the reader navigate through the detail. In particular, two superb chapters by David Steele covering the years 1880–1895 clarify many issues. His championing of the ‘underrated’ Salisbury (although Michael Bentley has



previously noted Salisbury's mastery of political strategy) and his outlining of Salisbury's key role in the transition of the Tories to a mass party are illustrated by some wonderful turns of phrase; the misgivings Salisbury stirred in 'the cautious mediocrities who collect at the top of political parties' could be applied today to the party's apparent mistrust of charismatic politicians who aspire to lead them.

Individual contributors are not afraid to express strong opinions. Mark Garnett's forensic examination of Ted Heath is wonderfully written and also skewers Nicholas Ridley for rewriting his own history with little regard to the facts. Dennis Kavanagh challenges the myth that has grown around the efficiency and effectiveness of Thatcher's early leadership and organization in opposition — the Winter of Discontent encapsulates Macmillan's belief that political fortunes are driven by events. Judgements on recent leaders pull few punches. Weak leadership and organizational 'confusion and chaos' typify the short reign of Iain Duncan Smith and William Hague is dismissed as seeming 'ineffectual, uncharismatic and unconvincing' when compared to Blair, 'a boy up against a man'.

My one quibble with an excellent book would be that the party's times in government are generally ignored by contributors. While I know this is a book about the Conservatives in opposition, a few pages between each chapter outlining, for example, the crucial events of 1970–1974, would have been extremely useful to provide a handy link between periods of opposition. However, this is a minor criticism. The quality of writing, research and insight make this essential reading for any serious student of British politics.

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### **The Political Thought of the Conservative Party since 1945**

Kevin Hickson (ed)

*Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, 232pp., £18.99*

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This accessible, edited collection is a timely addition to the literature on the British Conservative party given its most recent electoral setbacks and the introspection to which this will no doubt lead on the critical issue of 'whither now?' However, these essays are of uneven quality and the book's accessibility is not only its main strength — it is certainly a very useful text for undergraduates and this may be its intended audience — but it is also its main