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Neville Chamberlain

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Neville Chamberlain is one of three Conservative Party Leaders who did not contest a general election during his term of office (his half-brother Austen Chamberlain and Iain Duncan-Smith being the other two), and he is unique in being the only Conservative Prime Minister not to have led the party in an election. However, historians are agreed that he was on course for a comfortable victory if the expected peacetime election in the autumn of 1939 or the summer of 1940 had taken place – the National Government might have lost a few seats to Labour, but its substantial overall majority was not in danger. The causes of Labour's landslide victory of 1945 are to be found in the impact of the Second World War and the changing public mood after Dunkirk, especially in 1940-42. It is certainly the case that the opprobrium which was heaped by the end of the war upon the record of the pre-war National Government, and therefore of its leaders, over not only the failures of appeasement and shortcomings of rearmament but also its management of the economy and mass unemployment, played a significant part in the rejection of the Conservatives in 1945. In that retrospective sense, Chamberlain was perhaps the most prominent of those who might be blamed for the defeat, but this was a development which took place after he ceased to be Prime Minister in May 1940, and indeed mostly after his death six months later.

Neville Chamberlain came relatively late to a parliamentary career and the national stage, but – in common with his predecessor as Party Leader, Stanley Baldwin – he rose rapidly during the political turmoil of the early 1920s.¹ He had the advantages of a famous name (and the recognition and connections which this brought) and a regional power base. Born in March 1869, he was the younger of the two sons of Joseph Chamberlain, a charismatic and controversial figure who had 'made the political weather' in late-Victorian Britain, first as a radical within the Liberal Party and then by breaking with Gladstone over Irish Home Rule in 1886 and creating the Liberal Unionist Party, which moved into coalition partnership with the Conservatives in 1895 and eventually merged with them in 1912. The Chamberlains dominated the politics of Birmingham and its region, but whilst his elder half-brother Austen was groomed for leadership and became an MP in 1892 at the age of 28, Neville was originally destined for a business career to secure the family fortunes and a more modest role in local government; whereas Austen went to Oxford University, Neville's higher education was the practical curriculum of Mason College in Birmingham. His first independent managerial role,

overseeing a sisal plantation in the Bahamas from 1891 to 1896, was a failure which Chamberlain took very personally. However, the long and lonely struggle cemented his characteristics of hard work and stubborn determination; he returned to Birmingham, and by 1914 had established a prominent position in the city's business and public life. He served as Lord Mayor in 1915-1916, after which in December 1916 he accepted a national role as Director-General of National Service. However, he was left unsupported and after seven months was effectively forced to resign, a bitter experience which left him with a lasting loathing of Lloyd George.

Chamberlain entered the House of Commons for the Ladywood division of Birmingham in the post-war election of December 1918 (later transferring to the safer seat of Edgbaston in 1929). Loyalty to his half-brother Austen, who succeeded Bonar Law as leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons in March 1921, muted his hostility to Lloyd George and increasing disaffection from the Coalition. However, the latter was shared by the majority of the Conservative Party below the level of the Cabinet, and by October 1922 it was Neville rather than Austen who was firmly in the party mainstream. Chamberlain was overseas at the time of the Carlton Club meeting of Conservative MPs on 19 October which decisively rejected his half-brother's strategy of continuing the existing coalition under Lloyd George, after which the latter and Austen resigned and Bonar Law became Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader. With most of the former leaders holding aloof, the new Premier needed capable ministers in the House of Commons, and he offered Neville Chamberlain the position of Postmaster-General, outside the Cabinet. After a moment of fraternal strain, Chamberlain accepted, and his effectiveness in debate led to a swift promotion to the cabinet as Minister of Health in March 1923. Five months later, as a consequence of Bonar Law's retirement and replacement by Baldwin, Chamberlain was appointed to fill the vacancy at the Treasury.

Although he was only to be Chancellor of the Exchequer for a few months due to the Conservative defeat in the general election of December 1923, Chamberlain had most definitely arrived at the front rank of politics and a powerful position in the Conservative Party. In the 1924-29 Baldwin ministry, rather than returning to the Chancellorship, he chose the Ministry of Health, where he implemented a major series of reforms of local government which enhanced his reputation for competence and drive. By 1929, he was often spoken of as the likely successor to Baldwin, but his position as unquestioned heir apparent was confirmed during the troubled period in opposition during the second Labour government of 1929-31, and especially by his formidable performance as Party Chairman from June 1930 to April 1931. When the Labour government collapsed under the pressure of the financial crisis of August 1931, it was Chamberlain who accompanied Baldwin to the key meetings with the Labour leaders and who was one of the four Conservatives in the emergency ten-man cabinet formed on 24 August. After the decision to continue the National Government and its

massive electoral victory in October 1931, Chamberlain succeeded the former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, at the Treasury. He played a major part in the implementation of the protectionist tariffs and imperial preference first advocated by his father in 1903, and his unflinchingly orthodox control of the national finances saw the government through the height of the depression in 1932-33. His budget of April 1934 was able to restore the 1931 cuts in benefits and the pay of state employees, and by the time of the November 1935 election, unemployment had fallen below the two million mark. Chamberlain remained Chancellor during Baldwin's final term as Prime Minister in 1935-37, and during the latter's nervous exhaustion in the summer and autumn of 1936 deputised for him extensively, including giving the leader's speech at the party conference. Chamberlain was already ranging over wide areas of the government's activity – particularly in foreign policy – before Baldwin's retirement. 'Firm, unemotional and calm under criticism',² he was the inevitable successor, becoming Prime Minister on 28 May 1937 and, following coronation at a party meeting, Leader of the Conservative Party on 31 May.

Prime Minister and Conservative Leader in peacetime: May 1937 to September 1939

The transition of power was smooth and accompanied by only a minor reshuffle to replace the promoted and retiring ministers, in which the main consideration was to keep the balance between the various component parties of the National Government.³ At the age of 68, Chamberlain came to the office of Prime Minister with a reputation established over nearly fifteen years for executive capacity and legislative achievement, and possessing the redoubtable political strengths of being 'strong of will, firm of purpose, unyielding in controversy'.⁴ A former Cabinet colleague described him as 'a man of action', whilst the Attorney-General noted in his diary in June 1937 that Chamberlain 'will be a tower of strength and consistency'.⁵ Parallels have often been made with Margaret Thatcher as a conviction politician of inflexible drive, authoritarian in Cabinet and publicly pre-eminent above colleagues, intolerant of critics and contemptuous of doubters. Certainly, in the words of one Cabinet colleague, Chamberlain 'stood out entirely above the "Yes Men" and small fry of the Cabinet'.⁶ However, this pre-eminence left him in a position of solitary exposure in the event of failures, and encouraged his characteristic tendency to regard himself as uniquely capable of resolving the problems of the day. As Headlam observed after Chamberlain's fall, he had been 'too much convinced that he could stand alone', a trait which also led to his tendency to personalise issues and differences.⁷

Chamberlain's manner in Cabinet meetings was not dictatorial; instead, he exerted control through his clarity of thought and mastery of both the wider issues and the practical details, usually expressed through his summing-up of discussion, and 'he was always ready to take a decision'.⁸ There was no room in his character for self-doubt: David Margesson, who as Chief Whip had attended

many Cabinet meetings, observed that the Prime Minister ‘has great patience and will listen without interruption to the lengthiest exposition of opinions with which he does not agree – but they never have the slightest effect on his own judgement.’⁹ Chamberlain acknowledged this himself in a public speech in 1939, in which his jest was synonymous with the reality: ‘I am the most reasonable of men and I never object to opposition so long as I can have my own way’.¹⁰ The Prime Minister certainly intended to be in control of his government, and ‘in his own Cabinet, after he had got rid of one or two tiresome members, his was the only will that ever prevailed’.¹¹ He was particularly determined in his conduct of foreign policy, the key area in which he believed he could achieve a resolution, and this led to the resignation in February 1938 of the Foreign Secretary whom he had inherited from Baldwin, Anthony Eden. However, Chamberlain was pragmatic on many domestic issues and here he left much more scope to departmental ministers. Two aspects of his character were significant factors in his eventual downfall. Firstly, his personal manner often appeared ‘aloof, with a touch of arrogance’, and ‘he could not conceal his contempt for insincerity and “hot air”’.¹² Secondly, his Chief Whip noted that ‘while he is the complete master of the clear and logical exposition of a case, he has no charm of manner or command of rhetoric’.¹³ On the other hand, Chamberlain’s stubborn determination and intolerance of opposition were the very qualities which led many MPs to see him as a strong, clear-sighted and capable leader in whom they had confidence.

When he became Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party, Chamberlain was the dominant figure on the national scene.¹⁴ The Labour leader, Clement Attlee, was unable to compete in stature and experience, and his party had made only limited progress in developing a credible or attractive programme. Chamberlain had no rivals within his Cabinet, where his most senior ministers lacked credibility and support from MPs. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, the leader of the small National Liberal contingent, was an unpopular figure thought to be lacking in conviction and he had been an unsuccessful Foreign Secretary in 1931-35. The new Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, possessed a manner to whom few warmed, and his reputation for competence and judgement had been badly damaged by the fiasco of the Hoare-Laval Plan which had led to his resignation as Foreign Secretary in December 1935, and by his over-eager quest to return to office a few months later. Chamberlain’s two Foreign Secretaries were much more respected: Anthony Eden, a glamorous figure from a much younger generation who might have become a threat but for his poorly-presented resignation in February 1938, which was followed by a deliberate avoidance of attacks on Chamberlain and a conciliatory speech in the debate on the Munich Agreement. Eden’s replacement, Lord Halifax, was widely admired for his qualities of character, but his position in the House of Lords, his conception of his role as the loyal executor of Chamberlain’s policy, and his relative lack of personal ambition made him instead a pillar of support.

The rising younger members of the Cabinet either had flaws or had yet to establish themselves. Oliver Stanley had for some time been the foremost, but there had been doubts about his resilience ever since his panic during the Unemployment Assistance Board crisis of early 1935. Walter Elliot was seen by many as a leader in future years, but his positions at the Scottish Office and then Ministry of Health gave only modest scope, and his vacillation over resignation during the Czech crisis in 1938 damaged his reputation with both pro- and anti-appeasers. Sir Thomas Inskip had been touted at one point as the possible successor to Baldwin, but was now mired in the unrewarding role of Minister of Defence Co-ordination; Duff Cooper was an effective debater, but was proving to be much less so as a departmental chief, and William ‘Shakes’ Morrison was also failing to confirm his early promise. In fact, as one junior minister told his sister, ‘we have some terribly dud ministers, both in the Cabinet and among the under-secretaries’, with the inevitable consequence that ‘the PM towers above us all and has to answer on every big debate’.¹⁵ This remained a weakness throughout Chamberlain’s government, and was due to the lack of strong rising talents as much as it was to the Prime Minister’s reluctance to include them.¹⁶ In consequence, instead of strengthening the ministry, the promotions to the Cabinet were widely regarded as ‘the nadir of mediocrity’¹⁷ and the reshuffles always tended to disappoint; in April 1940, the latter was a significant factor in Chamberlain’s downfall.¹⁸

Parliamentary dissent on the government benches was minimal during the peacetime period, and its impact was almost non-existent. It was confined to the related aspects of the government’s foreign policy of ‘appeasement’ towards Germany and Italy, and the progress of rearmament. Contrary to the later heroic myth, the criticisms of the anti-appeasers were occasional and muted, often hesitant and sometimes apologetic.¹⁹ Their opposition was rarely carried to the point of abstention in a division, and hardly ever to voting against the government. The most substantial dissent was in the debate on the Munich Agreement on 6 October 1938, when 22 Conservative MPs abstained; given that the government’s overall majority was ten times that figure, this was hardly a serious threat. The Duchess of Atholl, the one critical MP who first resigned the government whip and later her seat, lost the resulting by-election at Kinross and West Perthshire in December 1938 in a straight fight with an official Conservative candidate.²⁰ During the winter following the Munich Agreement, the other anti-appeasers wisely kept their heads down, but even so several of them – including Churchill – were in some danger of deselection by their constituency associations. The pressure on the dissidents eased as the appeasement policy lost credibility after March 1939, but it still seemed to most government MPs to offer the best chance of avoiding war, and the solidity of Conservative backbench support for Chamberlain was hardly affected by the setbacks of the spring and summer of 1939. One factor in the containment of parliamentary dissent throughout the period was the efficiency and effectiveness of Margesson as Conservative and government Chief Whip. He had held this office since 1931, and had

a close working relationship with Chamberlain. By 1937, Margesson was at the height of his reputation and authority, and was delivering a high level of cohesion and discipline. This was not by dictatorial or confrontational methods; on the contrary, as Churchill later willingly admitted when retaining him in his post in 1940, Margesson had avoided deepening rifts and had aimed to contain dissent rather than stamp it out. Under him, the Whips' Office in this period was a smooth-running and effective machine.

During Chamberlain's leadership of the Conservative Party in peacetime, he was also the Prime Minister of a coalition government.²¹ However, he did not face problems and tensions similar to those of his half-brother Austen in 1921-22. Formed in the financial crisis of August 1931 and confirmed in office by general elections in October 1931 and November 1935, by 1937 the National Government was a stable and harmonious combination without policy or personality fissures on party lines. It provided the best of both worlds: there were enough remaining Liberal (and a few National Labour) figures at Cabinet level for it to retain credibility as having a broader basis than the Conservative Party alone, and therefore to attract wider electoral support, but there were no significant disagreements on principles or programme, or desire of any of its constituent parts to break it up. The Liberal element was too weak and too dependent upon the electoral pact to strike out on its own, and had no incentive to do so. Conservative MPs and grass-roots members were equally content with the arrangement: unlike 1922, the coalition was headed by an authoritative Conservative Prime Minister who was following policies that ranged from the acceptably necessary to the strongly approved, in an improving economic climate, and without substantial or supported internal party dissent. Up to the spring of 1939, the parliamentary anti-appeasers were few in number, divided between different cliques, lacked a convincing or appealing alternative policy, and faced considerable grass-roots hostility. Even after Hitler's repudiation of the Munich Agreement by the seizure of Bohemia in March 1939, the rank and file remained strongly supportive of Chamberlain, with a wide range of local associations passing resolutions of unabated confidence and support. Similarly, the depth of support from the mainstream majority of Conservative MPs – the critical core element for any party leader – remained almost undiminished, and indeed the worsening international situation worked to suppress public criticism rather than to encourage it.²² There was an unquestioned presumption that the National Government in its present form would collectively contest the next election, and the parliamentary critics of its foreign policy – including Churchill – were not opposed to this, and did not dissent from its domestic policies.

One reason for this was that the National Government had an effective domestic record which it could put forward with confidence.²³ It was presiding over a stable and secure economy which was making evident progress out of the Great Depression. Unemployment was still high, but the trend was

clearly downwards, only in part due to the rearmament programme: the yearly average fell from 2.1 million in 1935 to 1.8 million in 1936 and 1.6 million in 1937, although it rose to 1.9 million in 1938 before returning to 1.6 million in 1939. Furthermore, the worst levels of unemployment were concentrated in 'black spots' which in any case were Labour heartlands, and the government's developing regional policy since the Special Areas Act of 1934 was seeking to tackle this, creating the Special Areas Reconstruction Association in 1936. The number of people in work increased each year, and rose from 13.5 million in 1935 to 15.9 million in 1939. Most importantly for the Conservative Party, this was a decade of low middle-class unemployment which kept its core supporters contented. Even more than that, for those in work (especially white-collar and skilled manual workers), it was a period of rising living standards, with a rapid expansion in the number of private cars and in home ownership – in the latter case, it was a boom period, with 1.6 million new houses built in 1935-39, largely by the private sector. Alongside this, the slum clearance programme which had begun in 1933 was accelerated in 1938, and now affecting about 25,000 houses per month.

The National Government had not only provided fiscal stability and relatively cheap money, it also had a creditable record of domestic reforms.²⁴ Since the 1935 general election, its measures had included a major Public Health Act, a Midwives Act which established maternity services funded by local government, and the extension of National Insurance to agricultural workers, all in 1936, and legislation for holidays with pay in 1938. The Factory Act of 1937 raised health and safety standards for seven million workers and brought a further four million under its terms for the first time, and there was some progress in the depressed state of agriculture due to the development of the Marketing Boards introduced earlier in the decade, whilst by 1939 there was a system of guaranteed minimum prices for many of the main products of both arable and livestock farming. The Coal Bill s introduced in January 1938 aroused some Conservative opposition due to its apparent extension of state direction, but it was amended and was in any case the sign of an active government willing to take bold steps that were in keeping with the contemporary interest in planning, rationalisation and efficiency. Although an increase in pensions was ruled out on grounds of cost in July 1939, Chamberlain was determined to pursue further social reforms, and proposals under consideration for the manifesto for a 1940 election included the introduction of family allowances and the extension of health insurance to dependants.²⁵

The prospects for the next general election

The standing of Chamberlain personally and of his government were such that he could have called a general election whenever he wished to do so.²⁶ Some voices urged swift capitalisation upon his enormous popularity after his return from the Munich conference on 30 September 1938; relieved and

grateful crowds lined the route from Heston Airport to Downing Street, and a survey of public opinion by Mass-Observation gave 54% in favour of his actions and only 10% definitely opposed. Was this a missed opportunity to secure a victory? The fact that Conservative Central Office had some doubts encouraged hesitation, but the sound political reason why Chamberlain did not request a dissolution was that it was still too early in the life of the parliament to be justifiable on any basis except the snatching of a cheap party advantage, and so 'it would have been bad tactics'.²⁷ The moment of national unity and thanksgiving was not the time to exacerbate divisions, and exploiting public relief for such a purpose would have tarnished his image of statesmanship and have conflicted with the Conservative Party's ethos of patriotic sacrifice.

Instead, it was the sign of a strong and confident government that it was evident that the general election would be held either in the autumn of 1939 (after four years in office, following the same interval as in 1935) or in the late spring or early summer of 1940.²⁸ All the evidence points in the same direction: if peace had been preserved, the Conservative Party would have been in a very strong position to contest this election, in terms of both its internal condition and the external political environment. Chamberlain had a long-standing connection with the party organisation: he had been Party Chairman in 1930-31, during which time he had secured the loyal support of the leading officials, and especially of the General-Director, Robert Topping. He had also been Chairman of the Conservative Research Department effectively since its establishment in 1930, and had a close relationship with its Director, Joseph Ball, who in the late 1930s was engaged in both manipulation of the press and the monitoring of dissenters on behalf of his chief. The Party Chairman, Douglas Hacking, had been in his post since March 1936, and had the support of a cohesive and experienced team of senior headquarters officials. Whilst there had been spending cuts in the early 1930s, much of this had eliminated waste and produced a fitter and more efficient and focused organisation. Some previous services had been devolved to the local associations which could now stand on their own feet, and certainly there were no complaints from the grass-roots about a lack of support or efficiency. In 1936-39, national party expenditure stabilised at around £125,000 annually; in 1938, there were 145 staff at Central Office and a further 24 in the 12 regional Area Offices in England and Wales. The Conservative Party's finances were in good shape nationally, and there was not likely to be difficulty in raising a substantial election fund. The local membership was remaining steady and has been estimated at around 1.25 million; in most areas, the constituency associations were functioning effectively as a long-accustomed part of local public and social life.²⁹

Chamberlain and appeasement enjoyed strong support across the spectrum of the Conservative press, particularly in *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* (with which the *Morning Post* had merged in 1937). He did not suffer as Baldwin had from the antagonism of the press lords, whose mass

circulation newspapers gave strong support. The influential Conservative regional press was also firmly behind Chamberlain, apart from some criticism of appeasement from the *Yorkshire Post*, which duly suffered a backlash from aggrieved Conservatives. The Liberal press was in decline and its two popular titles merged into the *News Chronicle*, which took a more neutral stance. The Labour Party did have the support of the *Daily Herald*, now widely popular due to an injection of trade union funds and effective marketing, but it was still heavily outsold by the combined circulations of the *Daily Express* (owned by Lord Beaverbrook) and the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* (both owned by Lord Rothermere). The National Government's time in office does not appear to have turned opinion against it, whilst Labour was still identified with failure and the economic crisis of 1931, together with the alarming aspects of its shift to left in 1931-35. The National Government had weathered the economic storms of the early 1930s and had turned corner towards recovery; it also appeared to have the most credible strategy and clear will for peace, whilst prudently proceeding with rearmament.

By 1939, the National Government had become an accepted fact of life; not only most Conservatives, but also most of the public, saw no need to make a change and run risks at home and abroad; indeed, the threatening international situation enhanced the need for a strong leader and a stable government. Chamberlain himself was physically fit, mentally sharp and eager for the fray; he had also become an effective communicator through the new mass media of cinema newsreels and radio broadcasts. Despite his age, there was no doubt in his followers' minds that he was the best possible leader for both the approaching general election and the next government, or about his willingness to continue.³⁰ Although there were setbacks in his foreign policy, Chamberlain retained undisputed command over his government and the Conservative Party, and had the vigorous support of a very large majority of its MPs, especially on the right wing and in the mainstream centre.³¹ A young and newly-elected MP attending the dinner in Chamberlain's honour given by the 1922 Committee in March 1939 found his leader's address 'a great speech and very heartening', and Chamberlain enjoyed debating successes in the House of Commons up to the very eve of war.³²

There were no signs of a significant further advance for the Labour Party in the period between the 1935 general election and the declaration of war, either at local government level – where, after gains in 1932-35, the party seemed to have reached a plateau of support – or in parliamentary by-elections. During Chamberlain's peacetime premiership, the National Government defended 43 seats, of which it retained 34. One of the losses (at Bridgwater in November 1938) was in special circumstances to an 'Independent Progressive' candidate, and the other eight were to Labour. However, all of the latter were constituencies which Labour had previously won in either 1923 or 1929 (or both), when the party had achieved minority government but fallen short of an overall majority. Furthermore, four of the eight Labour gains were in London and a fifth (Dartford) was on its

periphery, but elsewhere in the south of England Labour made no gains in the other 14 contests; in the Midlands and East Anglia it made two gains in 11 by-elections, and in the north of England and Scotland it did not gain any of the seven government seats being defended. Crucially, the Labour Party did not win a single seat that would have expanded on its high-water mark of 1929 and thereby indicated even a faint chance of defeating the National Government, which in 1935 had enjoyed a majority of 254 MPs over the Labour and Liberal parties combined.

To have overturned this would have required a massive swing, of which there was no sign either electorally or in the early opinion polls. The very first Gallup survey of voting intentions in October 1937 excluded the undecided and simply stated 'for the Government, 68 per cent; for the Opposition, 32 per cent'.³³ Their three later polls did include a 'don't know' category; the first of these in February 1939 found the narrowest gap, with 50% supporting the government and 44% the opposition, but thereafter the opposition fell back, with an increase in the proportion of undecided eroding its support and not the government's. The poll in December 1939 recorded 54% for the government and 30% for the opposition, whilst in February 1940 both government and opposition dipped by three points, to 51% and 27% respectively.³⁴ In all of the samples, support for the National Government remained remarkably close to its 53.3% share of the poll in 1935. In October 1938, Gallup began asking electors whether they were 'satisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with the Prime Minister, and continued to do so monthly until July 1939. During this period, Chamberlain maintained a positive lead of between nine and seventeen percentage points, with a higher rating in the months after the German seizure of Bohemia (the figures for April to July 1939 ranging between 52% and 55% satisfaction) than in the winter after the Munich settlement (the figures for October 1938 to March 1939 varying from 48% to 54%).³⁵

When to this picture is added the mixed messages of the Labour Party in 1937-39 over foreign policy and rearmament,³⁶ and its internal disunity over the idea of a 'Popular Front' that would include Communists (which led to the expulsion of Sir Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan in January 1939), it is hard to see how the opposition could have made up ground in peacetime.³⁷ Equally crucial was another factor: the weakness of the independent Liberal Party, which nominated candidates in only 12 of the 53 by-elections from June 1937 to September 1939. In three cases, it did not contest seats which it had fought in 1935, when it had stood in only 161 constituencies and won a mere 21. The further decline of the Liberals since then ensured that there would no repeat of the pattern of 1923 and 1929, when a reinvigoration of the party had led to many three-way contests and consequent Conservative losses. In May 1939, the Home Secretary considered that 'if there was an election, it looks as if the majority would not be much altered',³⁸ this was after the German seizure of Bohemia, and there were no further serious setbacks for the government during the remaining months of peace.

The likely scenario for 1940 therefore lay in the range between a close repeat of the 1935 result and the recovery by Labour of some of the seats which it had held in 1923 or 1929, perhaps taking its total to around the two hundred mark but leaving the government with a majority of between 100 and 150 at the worst. There seems to be no reason to doubt that the judgement expressed by the experienced senior officials at Conservative Central Office in February 1939 also applied to the whole of Chamberlain's peacetime premiership: 'if we went to the country now we should romp in'.³⁹

The fall of Chamberlain: September 1939 to May 1940

Neville Chamberlain's fall from office as Prime Minister was due to the factor which has caused the departure of the largest number of Conservative leaders since 1900: the erosion of confidence and support in the parliamentary party. This has also led directly to the dismissals of Austen Chamberlain, Heath, Thatcher and Duncan Smith, indirectly but clearly to Balfour and Douglas-Home deciding to quit, and contributed at least as much as the immediate trigger of health to the resignations of Eden and Macmillan. It is only with Major in 1997 that the practice began of falling upon the sword immediately after electoral defeat, which is now a customary expectation after emulation by his successors in 2001 and 2005. Age and illness have been a more frequent cause than electoral failure, and accounts for the remaining four leaders – Salisbury, Bonar Law, Baldwin and Churchill – as well as facilitating the removal of Eden and, to a lesser degree, Macmillan. However, in Neville Chamberlain's case there are three distinguishing features to his departure: firstly, he did not lose the crucial vote in numerical terms, although he had clearly done so in the political context that mattered – a distinction which he shares with Thatcher; secondly, whilst Chamberlain lost the office of Prime Minister this did not entail his resignation as Conservative Party leader; thirdly, and uniquely amongst Conservative leaders, this took place in wartime.

Chamberlain's party leadership is divided into two contrasting parts by the outbreak of war in September 1939.⁴⁰ In peacetime, he was the dominant director of a cohesive ministry, exuding drive and clarity. In wartime, his touch often appeared hesitant or maladroit, with complacency replacing assurance and his inflexibility and imperviousness to criticism transformed from an asset to an anxiety. Within a few months, to an increasing number of his supporters Chamberlain no longer looked like the right man for his job: uncomfortable with the demands of war, unimaginative in response to them, and uninspiring to a nation nervously apprehensive of the coming onslaught.⁴¹ The Chief Whip noted in October 1939 that 'his manner is dry; his speeches cold; his prose colourless'.⁴² The outbreak of war damaged Chamberlain's position, although this was due less to the evident failure of his policy of appeasement and more to mishandling the immediate situation and misjudging the mood of the House of Commons and the country. The delay in declaring war after the German attack

on Poland was due to French requests (which could not be revealed) for time to complete their mobilisation, but together with other mixed signals it appeared that Chamberlain was willing to negotiate with Hitler at Polish expense in manner similar to the now-discredited Munich Agreement. The Prime Minister's lacklustre and noncommittal speech on the evening of 2 September 1939, 36 hours after the invasion began, 'left the House aghast',⁴³ with 'all except a few ultra-Government men utterly dismayed and disgusted'.⁴⁴ Members of the Cabinet were 'horrified', and it was followed immediately by a virtual Cabinet revolt which demanded the issuing of an ultimatum to Germany which would expire before the House of Commons met the next day – otherwise the government might fall.⁴⁵

There was some recovery after this, and Chamberlain retained a strong basis of support amongst Conservative MPs until the end of his Premiership.⁴⁶ This appears to have been the case with the public as well, although allowance must be made for the crude sampling methods of the early opinion polls. It was perhaps natural for the Prime Minister's support to increase in the first months of war, from both a rally of patriotic sentiment and an abatement of opposition attacks. According to Gallup's monthly survey, satisfaction with Chamberlain rose to 68% in November 1939 and although it then slightly diminished, in March 1940 it was still at 57%, with only 36% dissatisfied.⁴⁷ However, there was no poll in April, and the May figures revealed a striking collapse, with only 33% satisfied and 60% dissatisfied; whilst there is no evidence that this directly influenced Conservative MPs, the synchronicity of timing is striking. During the tense but anti-climactic months of 'phoney war' from September 1939 to April 1940, in which British land and air forces barely engaged the enemy, parliamentary confidence in Chamberlain was eroded by poor debating performances, ineffectual reshuffles which retained or even promoted weak and unpopular ministers,⁴⁸ and misjudged assessments, such as his declaration in a speech on 4 April 1940 that Hitler had 'missed the bus' – which was swiftly followed by the German seizure of Denmark and Norway.⁴⁹ The dismissal of the high-profile Secretary of State for War, Hore-Belisha, in January 1940 may have become unavoidable but it was poorly presented; Chamberlain and Margesson 'did the right thing in the clumsiest way',⁵⁰ and left the impression of sacrificing an energetic reformer to the hostility of hidebound generals. After less than two months of war, one Cabinet minister noted in his diary that 'one hears little else but criticism of the government wherever one goes'.⁵¹ Alongside this, the government's Home Policy Committee considered 'that the political situation was deteriorating rapidly from the government point of view' due to the opposition parties continuing to hold public meetings, whilst the Conservative Party forbore from responding due to their much stricter interpretation of the wartime political truce.⁵² Whilst naturally the standing of the government rose and fell according to events, much of the news

was discouraging and there was growing concern over ministerial complacency and the continuation of peacetime methods.

When the first serious military clash resulting from the German invasion of Norway revealed a lack of resources and failures of co-ordination, ending in failure and withdrawal, these doubts crystallised and the ‘underlying feeling of considerable anxiety’ found expression in the ensuing parliamentary debate on 7 and 8 May 1940.⁵³ Chamberlain’s opening speech was ‘a very obvious flop’⁵⁴ and the War Minister, Oliver Stanley, was ineffectual and unconvincing, although the Chief Whip ‘thought we had had a reasonably good first day in an admittedly difficult situation’.⁵⁵ At the start of the second day of the debate, sensing that support for the Prime Minister was crumbling, the Labour Party announced that they were making it a vote of confidence. In reply, Chamberlain immediately declared he would rely on his ‘friends’ for support, a personalisation of a national issue and ‘a tactless performance’ which ‘greatly annoyed many of our people’.⁵⁶ Once again, when under pressure, Chamberlain equated party cohesion with loyalty to himself in a confrontational manner which suggested that he regarded himself as infallible and irreplaceable.⁵⁷ Although questions could have been raised about Churchill’s decision-making in charge of the navy during the Norwegian debacle, the government’s critics were primarily concerned not with operational detail but with the attitudes and methods of the government as revealed by the first major clash of arms. The unstated text of the debate was that it was about the future more than the past, and specifically the need for a broader coalition including the Labour Party which could establish a genuine national consensus and possess the authority to mobilise both capital and labour, direct the workforce, plan the economy and increase production.

The division at the end of the debate on the evening of 8 May 1940 was a victory for Chamberlain by 281 votes to 200, and it must be remembered that the large majority of Conservative MPs continued to support him – in some cases, passionately. However, the fall in the government’s normal majority was fatally damaging: 39 National Government MPs (of whom 33 were Conservatives) had voted against, and approximately a further 40 had attended the debate but abstained.⁵⁸ Crucially, the rebels extended beyond the predictable critics and included previously loyal MPs in the party’s mainstream such as Quintin Hogg, defender of appeasement in the Oxford by-election after the Munich settlement of 1938. During the months since the outbreak of war, many younger Conservative MPs had joined their reserve units and had become aware of deficiencies in readiness which were at variance with Ministers’ complacent reassurances; 16 of the MPs who voted against the government had pointedly attended the debate in uniform.⁵⁹ Ultimately, as in 1916, the fall of the Prime Minister was due to military setbacks and not failures of party leadership. Indeed, it was Chamberlain’s fatal weakness in May 1940 that he was too much of a party figure: his maladroitness

appeal for support to his 'friends' had seemed narrow and polarising, whilst crucially the Labour Party would not serve under him and so he could not form a government of all-party national unity, which was now an imperative necessity.

For the first time, there was also a credible alternative in Churchill, who since his unavoidable readmittance to office at the outbreak of war had been the one minister to impress both the House and the public with his aggressive quest to take the war to Germany by all available means and his determined commitment to the pursuit of victory.⁶⁰ After consultations over the following two days, including a final confirmation that Labour would not join a government which he headed, Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister on 10 May. However, this did not entail his resignation as Conservative Party leader, and he retained that crucial role until the onset of terminal cancer – wholly undetected in May 1940 – led to his resignation on 3 October and death on 9 November 1940. If this entirely unforeseeable development had not occurred, there was no reason why Chamberlain could not have continued as Conservative leader for the duration of the war and indeed beyond (as Asquith did of the Liberal Party after 1916 – although that is not a very comforting precedent). Chamberlain retained the support of a large majority of Conservative MPs, as they vocally demonstrated when he first entered the House of Commons after resigning the Premiership.⁶¹ Churchill was well aware of this political reality, and immediately after becoming Prime Minister he wrote to Chamberlain acknowledging that 'to a very large extent I am in your hands'.⁶² However, he was reassured by the effective partnership which they had forged during the previous few months, by Chamberlain's sense of honour and loyalty, and by his crucial commitment to continuing the war despite the fall of France – it was Halifax, not Chamberlain, who wavered over Hitler's peace offers.

Conclusion

At first glance, Neville Chamberlain is atypical of Conservative leaders and Prime Ministers, never having contested a general election and falling from power in wartime. However, there are themes and circumstances which he has in common with other leaders, and not only during the peacetime period.⁶³ The first and most obvious of these is the part played by an improving economic picture – especially in the midlands and the south of England, and for the middle class and the skilled (particularly the self-employed) working class. Combined with a broadly centrist social programme, such a climate will maximise the Conservative Party's appeal. It is possible for the party to win substantial majorities without one of these two factors, as in 1924 (Baldwin's moderate 'New Conservatism') or 1983 (economic recovery), but retaining office when in government generally requires both: compare the successes of 1935, 1955, 1959 and 1992 with the defeats of 1906, 1923, 1929, 1964, February 1974 and 1997. Of course, attaining power from opposition is most likely to

succeed when there is an inversion of the economic factor – a recession, or at least the perception of stagnation – but success is still most likely with a more inclusive agenda: hence recovery in 1931, 1950, 1951, 1970 and 2010, but further defeat in 1966, minimal progress in 2001 and little better in 2005. It might seem that Thatcher's victory in 1979 conflicts with this, but the economic factor was very strong and the party's programme was still quite moderate and far from fully-fledged Thatcherism.

Secondly, the leader's pre-eminence in the government is an asset when things are going well: it gives coherence and clarity, and the leader is a recognised and generally respected figure, even when arousing above-average antagonism amongst the opposition parties. However, when the government hits turbulent waters, it leaves the leader exposed in solitary eminence, and likely to become a lightning rod for popular frustration. What had seemed strengths are now perceived as flaws: determination becomes inflexibility, command becomes arrogance, confidence becomes complacency, and decisiveness becomes a failure to listen. This was the almost identical process which also undermined the leaderships of Austen Chamberlain, Heath and Thatcher, and several of its features also appear in the decline of Macmillan's position in 1961-63. Thirdly, there is the importance of keeping control of the parliamentary party. The defeat which the rebel MPs of the Norway debate feared that the continuation of Chamberlain's premiership would lead to was the much graver one of national defeat in war, but the impulse was similar to the anticipation of electoral defeat which removed Thatcher and Duncan Smith, and encouraged the departure of Macmillan and Douglas-Home. This might seem an obvious point, but the record shows how easy it is for a Prime Minister to lose touch with the party: Macmillan in 1961-63 Heath in 1972-75 did so fatally, and Baldwin came close to grief in 1929-30. Finally, there is the personal factor of physical health and stamina and mental resilience. Although 68 years old when he became Prime Minister, Chamberlain was seen as the most vigorous figure in the Cabinet, possessing a mental acuity which made him both the master of his brief in debates and able to range widely across the government's work and both co-ordinate and expound it. Although Chamberlain would be 71 in the spring of 1940, before the outbreak of war no one had any doubts about his capacity to lead the government to an election victory and continue as Prime Minister for most of the next Parliament. He shared these personal characteristics with Bonar Law in 1911-21, Churchill in 1940-51, Macmillan in 1957-61, and Heath and Thatcher for nearly all of their leaderships – a list which includes most of the Conservative Party's most successful twentieth-century leaders, and thus company in which Neville Chamberlain might not often be thought to be placed.

¹ The authoritative life of Chamberlain is R. Self, *Neville Chamberlain* (Aldershot, 2006). There are also shorter biographies by N. Smart, *Neville Chamberlain* (2009); H.M. Hyde, *Neville*

Chamberlain (1976), and I. Macleod, *Neville Chamberlain* (1961), whilst the original authorised life remains useful: K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1946).

Chamberlain's career is also discussed in G. Stewart, *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (1999); P. Clarke, 'The businesslike approach: Neville Chamberlain', in *A Question of Leadership: Gladstone to Thatcher*, 107-124, and A. Beattie, 'Neville Chamberlain', in J.P. Mackintosh (ed.), *British Prime Ministers in the Twentieth Century: Volume 1* (1977), 219-71; for the historiography, see D. Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (2001).

2 The view of the wife of a long-serving backbench MP: Margaret Beamish diary, May 1937, East Sussex Record Office, Chelwood MSS, CLW/3/1/1/1.

3 Amery diary, 27 May 1937, in J. Barnes & D. Nicholson (eds.), *The Empire at Bay - The Leo Amery Diaries, Volume 2: 1929-1945* (1988), 441-2; Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, 262-4.

4 Unpublished memo by Margesson, 'Chamberlain – A Candid Portrait', n.d. but c.October 1939, Churchill College Archives Centre, Margesson MSS, MRGN/1/5/1-5.

5 Amery to Beaverbrook, 13 July 1938, Parliamentary Archives, Beaverbrook MSS, BBK/C/7; Somervell journal, June 1937, Bodleian Library, Somervell MSS, Eng.c.6565, f.90.

6 Comment of Winterton in Amery diary, 8 October 1938.

7 Headlam diary, 1 July 1940, S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: the Headlam Diaries 1935-1951* (Cambridge, 1999), 210; Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 April 1939, in R. Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4, The Downing Street Years 1933-1940* (Aldershot, 2005), 406 [hereafter *NCDL*].

8 Somervell draft memoirs, Somervell MSS, Eng.c.6565, f.246.

9 Margesson, 'Chamberlain – A Candid Portrait'.

10 *The Times*, 10 June 1939; Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 4 December 1938, *NCDL*, 366.

11 Margesson, 'Chamberlain – A Candid Portrait'; Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 27 March 1938, *NCDL*, 311; M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policies 1933-1940* (Cambridge, 1975), 262-4.

12 Somervell draft memoirs, Somervell MSS, Eng.c.6565, f.246-7.

13 Margesson, 'Chamberlain – A Candid Portrait'.

14 Cowling, *Impact of Hitler*, 257-9.

15 Bernays to Brereton, 16 March 1938, in N. Smart (ed.), *The Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays 1932-1939* (Lampeter, 1996), 346-7.

16 Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 11 December 1938, *NCDL*, 367-8.

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- ¹⁷ Crookshank diary, 16 May 1938, Bodleian Library, Crookshank MSS, Eng.Hist.d.359, f.205; although this judgement came from a junior minister resentful of being passed over, it was widely shared.
- ¹⁸ Amery diary, 15 March 1939; Euan Wallace diary, 4 April 1940, Bodleian Library, Wallace MSS; Zetland to Linlithgow, 1-2 May 1940, British Library, Zetland MSS, D609/12.
- ¹⁹ N.J. Crowson, 'Conservative Parliamentary dissent over foreign policy during the premiership of Neville Chamberlain: myth or reality?', *Parliamentary History*, 14, no. 3 (1995), 315-36; N. Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1971), 7-26.
- ²⁰ S. Ball, 'The politics of appeasement: the fall of the Duchess of Atholl and the Kinross & West Perth by-election, December 1938', *Scottish Historical Review*, 69 (1990), 49-83.
- ²¹ N. Smart, *The National Government 1931-1940* (1999), 148-223.
- ²² S. Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain 1918-1945* (Oxford, 2013), 216-7, 236-9, 364-7.
- ²³ G. Fry, *The Politics of Crisis: An Interpretation of British Politics 1931-1945* (2001), 68-80.
- ²⁴ J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902-1940* (1978), 362-3.
- ²⁵ J. Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Party Policy: The Conservative Research Department since 1929* (1980), 91-2.
- ²⁶ Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 3 April 1938, 12 February & 23 April 1939, *NCDL*, 313, 381, 410.
- ²⁷ Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 October & 11 December 1938, *NCDL*, 356, 368; Ramsden, *Making of Conservative Party Policy*, 91.
- ²⁸ Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 12 February 1939, *NCDL*, 381; Bernays to Brereton, 5 January 1939, *Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays*, 385-6; Hoare to Astor, 12 June 1939, Cambridge University Library, Templewood MSS, X(4).
- ²⁹ Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 165-6, 195-6, 283, 297-9.
- ³⁰ Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 12 March 1939, to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 July 1939, *NCDL*, 392, 429.
- ³¹ Thomas, copy of letter, 12 April 1938, Carmarthenshire Archive Service, Cilcennin MSS, Cilc.coll.40.
- ³² Christopher York diary, 28 March, 24 & 29 August 1939, courtesy of Edward York, Hutton Wandesley Hall, Long Marston, Yorkshire; Hoare to Astor, 1 August 1939, Templewood MSS, X(4); note by Beamish on Chamberlain's speech of 1 September 1939, Churchill College Archives Centre, Beamish MSS, BEAM/3/3.

33 A. King & R. Wybrow (eds.), *British Political Opinion 1937-2000: The Gallup Polls* (2001),
1.

34 These three polls are omitted from the compilation of Gallup data in King & Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, but are given in D. Butler & A. Sloman (eds.), *British Political Facts 1900-1979* (London, 1980), 234, although curiously the December 1939 poll is absent from the later edition: D. Butler & G. Butler (eds.), *Twentieth Century British Political Facts 1900-2000* (Basingstoke, 2000), 265.

35 King & Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, 183.

36 Bernays to Brereton, 21 October 1938, *Diaries and Letters of Robert Bernays*, 376.

37 Neville to Hilda Chamberlain, 19 February 1939, *NCDL*, 384; J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis: Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition 1931-1940* (2001), 151-2.

38 Hoare to Sassoon, 13 May 1939, Templewood MSS, X(4).

39 Neville to Ida Chamberlain, 26 February 1939, *NCDL*, 387.

40 Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 492-7.

41 Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, 391-3; Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (1975), 63-71.

42 Margesson, 'Chamberlain – A Candid Portrait'; Nicolson diary, 20 & 26 September, 2 November 1939, in N. Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939-1945* (1967), 35, 37, 45.

43 Crookshank diary, 2 September 1939.

44 Amery diary, 2 September 1939, 571; Zetland to Linlithgow, 4-6 September 1939, Zetland MSS, D609/11; Nicolson diary, 2 September 1939, in N. Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1930-1939* (1966), 418-20.

45 Wallace diary, 2 & 3 September 1939; Amery diary, 3 September 1939.

46 Croft to Chamberlain, 2 September 1939, Churchill College Archives Centre, Croft MSS, CRFT/1/8/ch56; Wallace diary, 22 November 1939 & 19 March 1940; Nicolson diary, 19 March 1940, *Diaries and Letters 1939-1945*, 63-64.

47 King & Wybrow, *British Political Opinion*, 183-4.

48 Inskip diary, 16 December 1939, Churchill College Archives Centre, Inskip MSS, INKP/1/2; Nicolson diary, 3 April 1940, *Diaries and Letters 1939-1945*, 65-6; Wallace diary, 31 March & 4 April 1940; Zetland to Linlithgow, 1-2 May 1940, Zetland MSS, D609/12; Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, 413-4.

49 This was not the first example of Chamberlain's tendency to make complacent statements which were swiftly proven wrong: a year previously he had given an over-optimistic interview

to the Lobby press only a few days before the German seizure of Bohemia; Amery diary, 15 March 1939.

50 Bracken to Cooper, 15 January 1940, Churchill College Archives Centre, Duff Cooper MSS, DUFC/3/6.

51 Wallace diary, 24 October 1939.

52 Wallace diary, 15 November 1939.

53 Zetland to Linlithgow, 9 May 1940, Zetland MSS, D609/12; Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 366-7, 496-7, 503, 505; Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, 420-5; N. Smart, 'Four days in May: the Norway debates and the downfall of Neville Chamberlain', *Parliamentary History*, 17, no. 2 (1998), 215-43; K. Jefferys, 'May 1940: the downfall of Neville Chamberlain', *Parliamentary History*, 10, no. 2 (1991), 363-78; Addison, *Road to 1945*, 93-8.

54 Amery diary, 8 May 1940; this was not only his view, but also that of the pro-Chamberlain lobby correspondent of the *Birmingham Post*.

55 Wallace diary, 7 May 1940.

56 Amery diary, 7 May 1940; Wallace diary, 8 May 1940.

57 Nicolson diary, 8 May 1940, *Diaries and Letters 1939-1945*, 78; Chamberlain had taken a similar attitude on previous occasions, such as the issue of adjourning the House of Commons for the recess in August 1939: Nicolson diary, 2 August 1939, *Diaries and Letters 1930-1939*, 407-8.

58 Although 88 government MPs did not vote, it has been established that 15 were paired and a further 32 were unable to attend the debate, so the number of deliberate abstentions by MPs who were present can be no more than 43, and was probably slightly less: J.S. Rasmussen, 'Party discipline in wartime: the downfall of the Chamberlain Government', *Journal of Politics*, 32 (1970), 385.

59 By January 1940, 62 government MPs were serving in the armed forces: Addison, *Road to 1945*, 69.

60 Wallace diary, 26 September 1939.

61 Channon's diary, 13 May 1940, in Robert Rhodes James ed., *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (1967), p. 252.

62 Churchill to Chamberlain, 10 May 1940, Birmingham University Library, Neville Chamberlain MSS, NC/7/9/80.

63 For a comparative discussion of the nature of Conservative Party leadership, see Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 459-76.