

Review of Philip Zeigler's biography of Heath

Edward Heath did not emerge, but was elected as leader of the Conservative Party in 1965. The new leader was young, experienced, and progressive with strong contacts with the Parliamentary Party after an effective tenure as Chief Whip. Heath, the grammar school scholarship boy, personified a professional image that was accurately and purposefully non-patrician. This was the man the party hoped could beat Harold Wilson at his own game, sharing a greater commonality and image with the electorate than any previous Conservative leader. Heath could project a 'modern' image of someone who had risen through the ranks through ability not nobility. However, expectations of a new age under a new style of leader were not unanimously idealistic. Heath carried significant pressures as the new leader of a new era. *The Economist* reported at the time of his ascendance as leader a sense of Conservative realism: 'Mr Heath certainly carries radical hopes in his baggage. But in electing him, the Tories have primarily shown their instinct for power. They picked, by a narrow majority, the man they reckoned most likely to bullock their way back into power. They will remain united behind him just as long as his pursuit of power looks promising.' The Shadow Cabinet under Heath's clear leadership had created a prepared and much publicised programme at Selston for when it returned to power, which seemed to deliver the progressive hopes envisioned by 'Rab' Butler and Lord Woolton when the Party recovered after the war. This agenda of change promised a constructive programme, after the image of policy sterility of the last years of the Macmillan-Home Governments, to deal with Britain's economic and domestic issues. Against the odds Heath reclaimed the Treasury benches for the Conservatives in 1970 with a genuine gusto for reform and modernisation. As the biographer of the great and the good Philip Zeigler ably demonstrates he had the Tory party with him when he won because he at the time seemed the most 'promising' to deliver the objective of power. Almost as soon as he achieved this, however, things began to go awry.

This was a divisive era in the history of Britain and concurrently the Conservative Party. Economic and social change threatened the post-war consensus, which Heath actively represented. The Party faced fundamental issues that challenged the policies that had been the thread of past Conservative Governments. Seething discontent from the miners, trade unions and less than entrepreneurial industrial sector hampered the best laid plans. The sequential atrophy of empire and economy that had been declining at least since 1945 seemed to come to a head in the 1970s. During Heath's premiership the government facing the distasteful news that unemployment had dramatically and infamously risen to over one million. Wilson characteristically capitalised on the Conservative mortification by ominously mocking Heath as "the first dole-queue millionaire since Neville Chamberlain". This was an ignominious departure for the Conservative Party which had always presented itself as the party of prosperity, especially during the last period in office of the "never had so good" 1951-64 years.

Alas for the country and Heath Britain's economic scene was not the only area that stormed against the government. Violence in Northern Ireland, anger over Rhodesia, divisive European negotiations and an influx of Ugandan Asian refugees, strife in the Middle East and the sterling crisis confounded Heath and his ministers and their standing with the Party. As Anthony Seldon points out, this was a formidable array of crises: 'no government since 1945 has been in office at such an awkward time'. Yet this must be appended with Seldon's pertinent speculation that 'had he been a better more inspiring communicator to the country and to his own party, Heath might

have made more headway in the unpropitious circumstances'.^[1] The events were calamitous but the leadership, the style and the method did little to dilute the dissent within the Party. Philip Norton points out the 'unprecedented level of dissent expressed in the form of votes cast (or not cast) against the Government by its own backbenchers; historically high even with the Europe debates excluded, there were still dissident votes cast in one out of six divisions in the 1971-72 session' for example.^[2] The Conservatives required a leader that could provide decisive leadership to rectify decline and propagate reform with reassuring charm and creative presentation. This was not in Heath's capability.

Heath did not have a predilection towards performing and this was exasperated during any crises since he believed, from personal conviction, that the electorate and Party would follow the right course – his course. Yet unlike his successor Thatcher, who actively and forcibly sought to convince those who disagreed that she was right or Macmillan whose theatricality could elegantly cultivate followers towards his opinion, Heath showed contempt at having to convince and persuade.

Ziegler adds little thematically to John Campbell's unauthorised (1993) biography, but he does, through his access to Heath's personal papers, give greater evidence of common arguments and intriguing further information on Heath. This book furnishes the arguments with new research, pertinent observations and irreverent but nonetheless valuable detail. As Ziegler states, Heath was a man of integrity and was 'clear headed and resolute' who presided over one of the most unified cabinets in the post war era despite the circumstances and who orchestrated many difficult and courageous decisions for the country that many admired. However, even this self-proclaimed 'sympathetic' biographer cannot help wondering at Heath's personality flaws: the pettiness to any perceived slight despite giving many himself; the peddling to Communist China; the capricious handling of his largesse; the loud silences; and the arrogance of always thinking he was right.

Heath who lost three out of four elections was unresponsive, unrepentant and unkind and could not understand why his party and his country did not want him back in the harness. Perhaps it was due as Ziegler assesses that '[w]hatever they might think about his policies or his achievements as Prime Minister, the voters had reservations about him as a human being'.

[1] Anthony Seldon, "The Heath Government in History", in Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds.), *The Heath Government: A Reappraisal*, London: Longman, 1996, p 18

[2] Philip Norton, *Dissension in the House of Commons, 1945-74*, London: Hull, 1975, p 533-534