

'UNDERSTANDING THE MAJOR GOVERNMENTS'

In Office. By Norman Lamont. London: Little, Brown and Company, 1999, Pp.567pp; £20.00. ISBN0 316 64707 1.

The Autobiography. By John Major. London: HarperCollins, 1999, Pp.774, £25.00. ISBN 0 00 257004 1.

In recent years few British Prime Minister's and Chancellor's of the Exchequer have been treated so unfavourably as John Major and Norman Lamont. As Prime Minister, John Major's ability to govern was hampered by deep-seated divisions within the Conservative Party, most notably on the issue of Europe. These splits climaxed in the decision to call a leadership election in the summer of 1995, which produced a majority (though by no means overwhelming) for Major. From then on his period in office was marred by the continuing presence of factions within the Conservative Party, which proved to be a significant reason behind the 1997 general election defeat. As Chancellor from 1990 to 1993, Norman Lamont played a central role in many of the policy decisions that proved unpalatable to the Conservative Party faithful and the British electorate, and from which he sought to distance himself when he returned to the backbenches. For much of this period he acted as a thorn in Major's side, being critical of past and present policy. The primary aim of these actions was to place Lamont in a more favourable public position and to cast himself into a central role amongst those MPs who were disenchanted with government policy. It was therefore not

unpredictable that the relationship between the Prime Minister and his former Chancellor soured during this period.

The memoirs of both individuals consequently provide an overdue opportunity for them to answer their critics and to set the record straight. Until now, the ups and downs of the Major governments have been primarily limited to secondary accounts, of which Anthony Seldon's biography of John Major has been widely regarded to provide the most balanced chronicle.¹ The publication of the memoirs of Major and Lamont thus provide fresh and first hand information on the political affairs that dominated Britain for much of the 1990s. These two books are of great importance to the contemporary historian as they provide the first account from anyone centrally involved in the Major premiership. And although Lamont was no longer at the centre of office from 1993 onwards, he continued to exercise a degree of influence through his opinions from the backbenches. An examination of these two memoirs therefore not only provides an opportunity to analyse the views held by Lamont and Major when they were in office, and the extent to which they worked together, but also the degree to which their views differed on key policies.

Changing style

John Major's rise to the office of Prime Minister was as swift as any in recent times, having entered the Cabinet in 1987 as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, with subsequent appointments as Foreign Secretary in July 1989 and as Chancellor in October 1989. When he entered number 10 Downing Street in November 1990 he did so as the youngest Prime Minister of the century. Just over a year later he led the Conservative Party to victory in the 1992 general election, while he successfully negotiated what was then seen as an acceptable agreement at the December 1991 Maastricht European Council. Major's predecessor as Prime Minister,

Margaret Thatcher, would almost certainly have lost the general election, whilst it would have been difficult to imagine her managing to bring the Maastricht negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion. Major was consequently cast as the new hero of the Conservative Party. Yet, over the next five years, his premiership was subjected to unremitting attacks from within and outwith government. A great number of the MPs who had supported Major in the November 1990 leadership election lost faith in his ability to govern and consequently deserted him. Many of these politicians had, of course, never been Major supporters 'through and through'. Instead, their support of Major had been based on a desire to keep Michael Heseltine out of office rather than to get Major in. Most significantly, Margaret Thatcher, who had offered patronage to Major during the leadership contest, withdrew that support in the post-1992 period and was particularly critical of the government's negotiating position on Europe. In many senses, it appeared that her vehement attacks on government policy were a way of coming to terms with her own ejection from the position as Prime Minister. But in so doing she helped to create a civil war within the Tory Party that destroyed any chances of re-election and rubbished any credibility the Party had for stable government.

As Prime Minister, John Major struggled to keep the Conservative Party together and sought to establish a set of policies that represented the views of Cabinet (and the Party) as a whole. A change in the style and method of government was both reflective of his own views and the reality that the more dogmatic stance of Thatcher had influenced her own downfall. But the change of style also emphasised that the position of the Prime Minister had changed also. Whereas Thatcher had been in power for a long time, Major was less experienced and had been dependent on the support of his colleagues for his recent appointment. But while this shift to a more consensual form of government had the principal aim of creating more stable policy-making, it was not without its faults. The Prime Minister adopted a more reactive

method of decision-making, with too much time spent considering the implication and ramification of policy decisions rather than offering a more strategic direction.

John Major was basically a more sensitive Prime Minister than Thatcher had been. He took on board the criticisms that regularly appeared in the newspapers, while a great deal of effort was spent trying to convince those politicians who were in effect unpersuadable. That is not to say that John Major did not have the necessary 'steel' to be Prime Minister. He weathered a great deal of political criticism and managed to steer the economy to a more sure-footed basis than it had been for many years. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown thus inherited one of the strongest economic foundations in recent times. This was set against a torrent of backbench criticism, a precariously low Parliamentary majority of 21 obtained in the 1992 general election and a great deal of altercation over sleaze.

Whereas John Major's appointment as Prime Minister was somewhat unexpected, Norman Lamont was fortunate to be promoted to Chancellor from his previous position as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. In many respects this was a natural progression for Lamont who had also held the post of Financial Secretary to the Treasury and was consequently familiar with the Treasury brief. Major regarded this as being especially important after the turbulence of the recent leadership campaign, during which Lamont acted as Major's campaign manager. But such a position did not mean that Lamont and Major had a close relationship. By contrast, their relationship was a working one that never matured into a close friendship.

Lamont's period as Chancellor was not a particularly prosperous one for himself, or for the nation as a whole. To be sure, he inherited and encountered a set of economic conditions that

would have tested the most able occupier of number 11 Downing Street. Of the issues that dogged his period in office, he witnessed a deep recession that was mirrored by an increase in unemployment and house repossession. He was notably also at the centre of policy-making when Britain left the Exchange Rate Mechanism. Some would say that Lamont should have resigned from office at that juncture. Yet, ERM membership was a policy that had been championed by Major when he was himself Chancellor and it was he who had overseen Britain's entry to the system. Thus, if the Chancellor had jumped ship then the Prime Minister would have been extremely exposed and may have had to follow. The ERM debacle nevertheless destroyed the remaining vestiges of credibility that the Chancellor possessed. With his confidence ravished, Lamont plodded on until his removal from the government in May 1993. This was despite Major having offered Lamont the post of Environment Secretary. John Major's decision to remove Lamont from the Treasury had been determined by two main factors. In the first instance, it was clear that the Chancellor did not enjoy the faith of the electorate, the business community or the Conservative Party. More fundamentally, Major realised that the liability of his Chancellor reflected a weakness in his own leadership and Lamont's departure was thus the diversion that Major needed.

A tall tale

Inevitably, both memoirs aim to provide the inside account of the Major years, although John Major goes much further by providing a 'full' history of his life before he entered Parliament. Such insights are often just as important as the hard political facts that are contained in any memoir. This is because it provides the reader with a degree of understanding of the environment that shaped the individual. Our understanding of Margaret Thatcher would be all the less if we were not aware of the important role that her Alderman father had in shaping her beliefs during her upbringing in Grantham. Major accordingly provides a full account of

his early years, and in so doing paints a picture of an extraordinary rise that took him from Brixton to Westminster. The importance of this path is that it provided John Major with an understanding of the difficulties that the poor and disadvantaged face, and established a genuine concern of the need for an equality of opportunity. This is all the more significant as his upbringing and beliefs contrasted with the traditional image of the Conservative Party. John Major thus presents a figure of a leader that possessed strong beliefs and someone who was concerned with the need to weigh the merits of policies before taking decisions. This is, of course, different from saying that he had no beliefs, as many of his opponents routinely suggested.

What is particularly surprising about this book is how well written it is, as well as the extent of the information it reveals. It is also an extremely detailed book and does not suffer from being turgid or repetitious. And while there will always be a degree of bias in any memoir, Major is neither churlish nor bitter in the account that he provides. He does in fact go to great lengths to provide a frank account of the 1990-1997 administration and the supporters and opponents who figured so prominently during this period, from Michael Heseltine to Richard Body. On the latter he writes: 'Richard Body was a Quaker from what in some ways was a liberal tradition. Quirky - an early environmentalist and "small-is-beautiful" campaigner - Body despised office and distrusted the big battalions - Brussels being his particular shibboleth. When the Conservative whip was taken away from a number of rebels in November 1994, Body voluntarily joined them. A comment I made of him in an unguarded moment was to become celebrated - at the mention of his name, I said, "I hear the sound of white coats flapping". In fact I was referring to his idiosyncrasy, not questioning his sanity' (p.355).

Sadly, the same style is absent from Norman Lamont's account of his period as Chancellor and his life after leaving the government. To be sure, he merely wanted to describe the events that shaped his period of high office and not to provide an autobiography. But although his book suffers from the absence of an account of his formative years, it also does not contain the degree of detail that might have been expected. Lamont's memoirs equally suffer from a bitterness that spoils the work, as he is all too quick to note those whom he considered plotted against him, especially in the months after Black Wednesday.

From reading the 1341 pages of these two books it is clear that Europe was a core divide between Major and Lamont, though the extent of this was not so evident when Lamont was in office. Major was himself surprised by these developments. On Lamont he writes: 'I was surprised by the speed of his movement to the Euro-sceptics' cause, since never in the years he had worked with me had he even hinted at such a proposition' (p.587). With the constraints of office removed, Lamont thus attempted to cast himself in more Euro-sceptic clothing than was the case when he was in office. There were of, course, cunning reasons for this change of tact. The former Chancellor could both distance himself from many of the policies that he had been centrally linked with, while at the same time being able to enact a degree of revenge by means of criticising the government. It is consequently not unsurprising that there are notable differences in the accounts that each provide of the Maastricht Treaty negotiations and Britain's exit from the ERM.

In the case of the Maastricht Treaty talks, there now exists a considerable body of literature devoted to this negotiation that culminated in the Maastricht European Council of December 1991.² A key negotiating objective for Britain at that meeting was the attainment of an opt-out from the third stage of economic and monetary union and ergo not being committed to

having to accept a single currency. To this end the British government had been working on an opt-out text since June 1991, which it intended to present at Maastricht as a non-negotiable objective. But when Lamont at the Maastricht Finance Ministers meeting advanced the text, the rest of the Finance Ministers decided to examine the text, a tactic that angered the Chancellor. His response to this development was to dramatically walk out of the Finance Ministers meeting so as to clarify the British position with Major. The effect of this gesture by Lamont was to jeopardise the attainment of the opt-out. Yet, whereas Major reflects that 'it was an extraordinary way for Norman to behave' (p.284), Lamont notes that 'at no stage did John Major express the slightest concern' (p.132). Indeed, Lamont also writes that 'far from endangering the negotiations, I am quite sure the walk-out had exactly the desired effect' (p.132). But what Lamont omits is that Major in fact secured the opt-out in a side meeting with the Dutch Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers, and the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl (p.287). This therefore highlights the way in which memoirs have a tendency to present a more favourable portrait than otherwise might be the case.

Britain's exit from the ERM provides a similar opportunity to compare both books. What is surprising from these accounts is how little knowledge Lamont had of Britain's entry to the ERM. To be sure, as Chief Secretary, he was not involved in the tactics over the date or level of entry, but his appointment as Chancellor took place just over one month after Britain entered the system in October 1990 and a greater command of this important subject could have been expected. Of the two books, Major's account of Britain's exit from the ERM is impressive in the degree of detail. Lamont too provides a thorough account, though this is tinged with a sceptic tone and bitterness that often clouds the picture that he paints. This is somewhat to be expected as the period marked the end of his political career, after which he limped through until his exit from the Cabinet in May 1993. Nevertheless, the overall

impression obtained from both books is the desire by Major to ensure that all decisions concerning the ERM involved the agreement of key Cabinet colleagues. Lamont was unsympathetic to such a strategy, noting that Major was 'slow to take the difficult decisions that we needed' (p.250).

In both the case of the Maastricht Treaty talks and Britain's exit from the ERM, John Major provides the more solid and detailed account and reviews the events as they transpired as well as the key individuals that took part in them. As such his book is that much more valuable to the researcher who wants to find out about the workings of government and negotiating tactics. That is not to say that Lamont provides a shallow account of his period in office. But while his book allows the reader to obtain an understanding of how events unfolded on various policy issues, there is a genuine lack of information concerning the nuts and bolts of government policy-making. This is particularly so for the secretive world of Cabinet Committees, the way Britain negotiates in the European Union, and the manner in which the European Union has affected British policy-making at the domestic level.

Deep divides

What is evident from both books is the sheer extent to which the Conservative Party was divided for much of the Major premiership. This was particularly true for the Euro-sceptics whom Major notes 'were undermining everything we did' (p.608). In an effort to placate this division of views, the Prime Minister steered government policy in an evermore Euro-sceptical direction, as evidenced by vetoing the candidacy of the Belgian Prime Minister, Jean Luc Dehaene, for the post of President of the European Commission. But such gestures did little to ease the division within the Conservative Party. By the summer of 1995 Major

had had enough, announcing that he would resign the leadership of the Conservative Party so as to assert his position in the subsequent leadership election. As he noted, it was time to 'put up, or shut up' (p.612). To this challenge, John Redwood resigned from the Cabinet to face up to Major. The effect of this was to alleviate any pressure on Lamont to stand, who now concluded that 'there was no point in my thinking any longer about the matter' (p.438).

Lamont is somewhat generous to himself in considering that he would have put up a challenge, though his stance of supporting Redwood demonstrated the extent to which he had drifted away from Major, for whom he had once acted as campaign manager in the 1990 leadership contest.

The outcome of the 1995 contest was a two-to-one majority for Major. Although convincing, it nevertheless demonstrated the degree of opposition to him. Both books provide a stimulating account of this period in the history of the Conservative Party. To this end, Lamont provides us with the amusing story of how the Conservative backbencher, David Evans, drove Redwood and Lamont to dinner in his Rolls Royce after an evening of campaigning. Lamont recalls that 'As we drive down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace, David said, "Just imagine, John, this is what you will be doing next week, driving to see the Queen". I wondered whether he really believed it? I certainly did not' (p.442.)

The outcome of the leadership election was nonetheless a symbolic event. Both Lamont and Major had viewed the campaign as an opportunity to transform their careers. Yet, Major's victory had not resolved the conflict in the Conservative Party. The Prime Minister appeared unconvinced that his position was now secure and did not set out to dominate policy. Lamont also found that the leadership contest had not resurrected his position. If anything, it only further demonstrated his bitterness at having been removed from the Treasury. The overall

outcome was that from 1995 onwards the fortunes of the Conservative Party plunged ever deeper towards defeat. The issue of Europe continued to divide the Party, which increasingly became ungovernable as MPs lost any concern for Party discipline. At the same time the Prime Minister offered little strategic policy direction and instead resembled something of a weather vein. The effect of this was to further remove Britain from the centre of policy-making within the European Union and after 17 years of Conservative government the nation was not at the 'heart of Europe', as Major had once desired.

In the battle of the memoirs it is evident that John Major is likely to be declared the winner. His book is by far the better-written and more comprehensive account of the Major years. Lamont's book is nonetheless a significant contribution to our knowledge of this period of our history. But while Lamont is an important politician, the fact remains that his book is spoilt by the bitterness that he obviously feels towards many of his former colleagues. Both books do, however, contain many amusing anecdotes, with Lamont being perfectly aware of the standing that he had within the Conservative Party and among the public. To this end, he recounts how he was spotted by a small boy shortly after his departure from the Treasury. Turning to his mother, the boy announced, 'Mum, it's that man who has ruined the country' (p.374). This was certainly something of an overstatement and Norman Lamont was in fact a better Chancellor than he has been credited for. Yet, his own views of Europe have clouded this record. And while the Conservative Party of today shares many of the policies held by Lamont, it is perfectly clear that there is an ongoing battle between the Europhiles and Euro-sceptics for the soul of the Party. Watching this from the sidelines, John Major can observe a Tory Party that has attempted to remove the 'Major years' from its memory.

Alasdair Blair

¹ Anthony Seldon, *Major: A Political Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).

² See Anthony Forster, *Britain and the Maastricht Negotiations* (London: Macmillan, 1999), and Alasdair Blair, *Dealing with Europe: Britain and the negotiation of the Maastricht Treaty* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).