

The Strange Death of Tory England by Geoffrey Wheatcroft.  
Penguin Allen lane 2005.

Reading this book during the 2005 General Election was a fascinating exercise. As Conservative politicians failed dismally to knock an unpopular Labour Prime Minister off his perch, or to achieve any movement in their favour in the opinion polls, it was extraordinary to realise that a mere twenty years before Britain had had an ascendant Tory party under a seemingly all-powerful Margaret Thatcher.

Where did it all go wrong? And how did it go wrong so calamitously? These and many other questions about the current hapless plight of the Conservatives, the once vaunted “natural party of government” are answered by Geoffrey Wheatcroft in a book that is informative, entertaining, and, at times, very amusing.

Wheatcroft traces the history of Conservative politics and politicians from the post-war period to the present, paying particular attention to the senior and rising figures in the party in the 1950s and 60s. His analysis of both is astute and acute, and sometimes acerbic, but throughout it is possible to see the inexorable journey towards the party's current, irredeemably unhappy, plight.

He demonstrates how the Conservatives rode the Zeitgeist in the late 70s and early 80s, and then rode it into the ground, allowing Tony Blair's New Labour to pick up what was left and transform it into something with which, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a significant proportion of the British people could feel comfortable.

For anyone with an interest in British politics, as well as those intrigued by the apparent terminal decline of a once supremely self-confident political party, The Strange Death of Tory England is a must-read book.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh