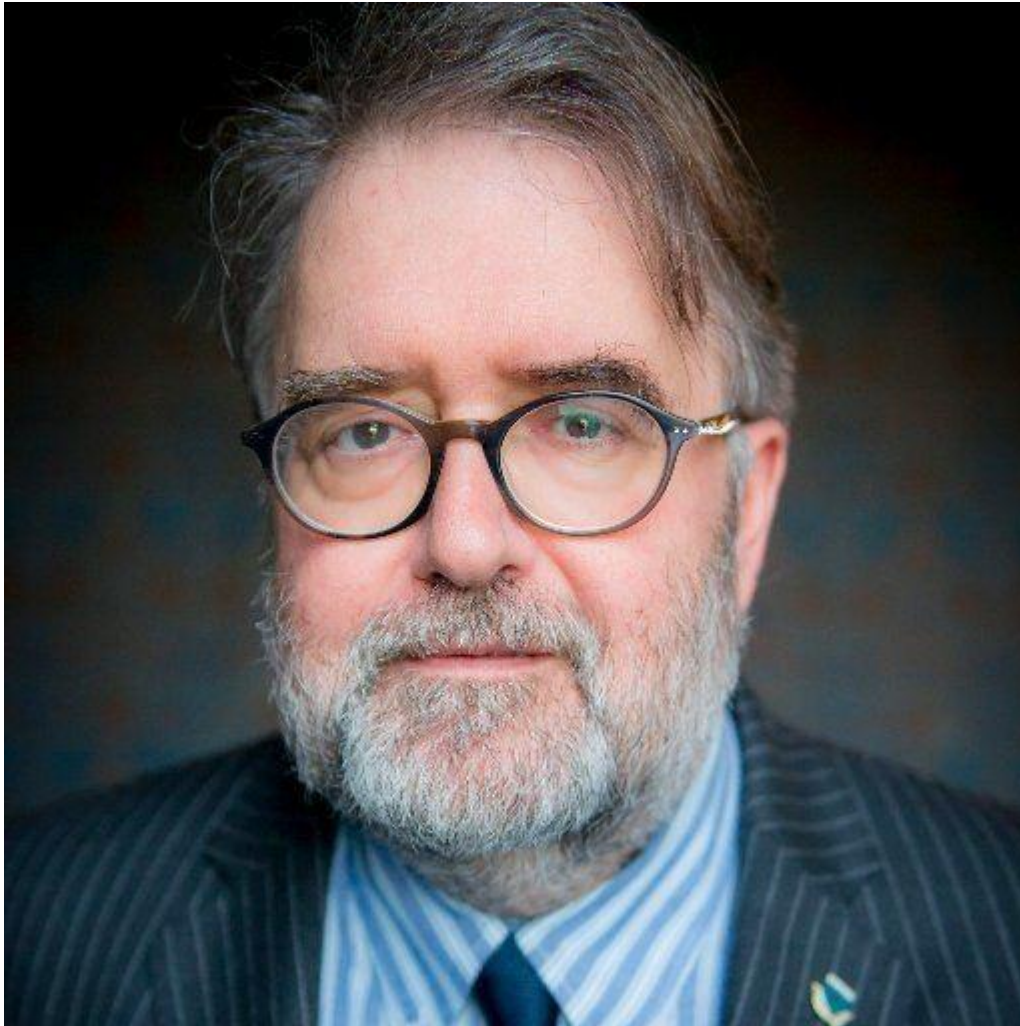


Professor John Charmley (1955-2025).



It is with sadness that I report the passing of Professor John Charmley, at the comparatively young age of 69. He died after a very brief illness on 12 May 2025. Indeed, his demise was so unexpected that friends and colleagues have reported receiving emails and texts from him on that day which displayed no cause for alarm. John joined the Department of History at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, in 1979, where he later became Professor of Modern History and was Head of Department for many years. In 2016, he took up the post of Pro Vice Chancellor at St Mary's University, Twickenham.

No one who met John ever forgot the experience; he was in life as charismatic a figure in person as he was a scholar. I have always been quietly proud of the fact that we were both Merseysiders by birth and we often referred to that in the twenty-five years or so of our professional association. I was one of many scholars of British diplomacy that he both helped and encouraged, especially when I was what today would be referred to as an Early Career Researcher. On the face of it, John did not fit the stereotype that many people have of people from the northwest of England, being rather patrician, very consciously middle class, as well as being a supporter of the Conservative party. But his warm, friendly, approachable manner, as well as his ready wit and bonhomie bore all the hallmarks of his north of England ancestry and also made him hugely popular with his students. John was educated at Rock Ferry High School

on the Wirral and then went on to read History at Pembroke College, Oxford, from where he also received his DPhil.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, John was one of the most important and dynamic historians in the field of British political and diplomatic history from the mid nineteenth century up to the Cold War. He was one of only a few historians active during my career whose work was so important that its author gave his name to entire branches of the historiography. He was, more than anything, a fearless challenger of popular academic, cultural and societal sacred cows. His polemic book on Neville Chamberlain, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace*, published in 1989, mounted a passionate defence of a British prime minister and his government's decision to appease the fascist dictators during the late 1930s. What alternatives did Chamberlain actually have, John asked? And a generation of scholars of British foreign policy in the 1930s were suddenly forced to appraise most of their assumptions about a man whose decision making and judgement had been almost universally maligned for more than forty years. As with all books of this nature, John's work had its detractors; some said that he went too far in his defence and that he overlooked or underestimated other forces at work etc etc. But good history is about debate, about putting the intellectual cat among the pigeons.

John's other polemic study, certainly succeeded in doing that – his critical appraisal of Winston Churchill's second period as Prime Minister, and with that, aspects of his wider historical reputation, in *Churchill: the end of glory* (1993). A sacred cow of a diametrically opposite nature to that of Chamberlain. He portrayed Churchill as a stubborn old man, whose judgement and feel for British politics in the years following the Second World War, as well as his waning influence on the international stage, meant that he was increasingly seen as a liability to his Cabinet colleagues. The qualities that had made Churchill such an effective war leader proved to be out of place, even harmful during the decade following the Second World War. John's work on Churchill led him to receive hate mail for many years, but he remained unbowed. And, indeed, current thinking on that topic has tended to vindicate most of John's argument.

John was, as has already been noted, something of a traditionalist when it came to writing history. His metier was the type of political and diplomatic history that focussed on the decision-making elites and those who advised them. Always with an elegant turn of phrase – one could almost hear his voice when reading his work – his finest work is in the contextualisation of those elites within the larger canvasses of Britain's role as a Great Power and British party politics. He gave all the men, and, indeed, the women, he wrote about, individual agency. And he encouraged his readers to do so. That was central to his approach, trying to free historical figures from the constraints and limitations imposed on them by their historical reputation, be that positive or negative, and allowing their own voices to emerge unchecked. While his most famous attempt at historical rehabilitation was his work on Neville Chamberlain, his book on the Conservative politician and diplomat, Lord Lloyd, written two years earlier was his first sortie into this type of historical writing. Most would argue that John was less successful in his defence of Lloyd, but then, his starting point was very different than it would have to be with Chamberlain. Lloyd had not been Prime Minister, nor had he made an ill-advised pact with a fascist dictator that promised peace but delivered war. Chamberlain was simply a more important and also a more complex historical subject; and the depth of his negative historical reputation was very much greater. As a result, the consequences of that were so much wider reaching and impacted our entire understanding of the events that led up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

John's enthusiasm for debate also contributed to his effectiveness as a teacher. He was a demanding task master; his students were expected to have done the weekly readings and be au fait with the finer nuances of the topic. His lectures were entertaining as well as informative and often included amusing anecdotes and stories that reflected well his talent as a raconteur. He was pivotal in making the Department of History at the University of East Anglia into one of the best in the country.

That said, many people today would say that John's 'type' of history is now considered rather old fashioned. And, also rather white, Anglo-Saxon and male dominated in its subject matter as well as in its commentators. But while John himself gave the appearance of being the epitome of exactly that kind of traditional, socially and intellectually elite and often chauvinistic type of historian, the reality could not have been further from the truth. I have already paid tribute to the way he encouraged me – and, importantly, took me seriously, when I was at the start of my career. I saw that pattern repeated in his dealings with other female scholars. Indeed, his egalitarianism in that respect extended to his own work, his last book, published in 2005, being about the Princess Lieven. In John's professional and intellectual world, women had agency too, and not simply that afforded to them by men, and when deployed, was of equally effective as that of a man in a similar role.

John was a man of prodigious energy as well as academic talent. Never one for half measures, he threw himself into the causes he believed in with passion and vigour. He did not restrict himself to writing about the British Conservative Party and its principal leaders, he was also an active member of the party. While never wishing to seek political office himself, he was a hard-working ally to those who did, acting as an election agent for at least two of the parliamentary constituencies near to his Norfolk home. And like many members of the Conservative Party, John was a committed High Anglican and converted to Anglicanism when an undergraduate at Oxford. But his childhood engagement with religion and ideology was much more complex and thus more intellectually challenging. John's father, who worked on the docks in Birkenhead and Liverpool, was an atheist, while his mother was a Primitive Methodist. Having parents of a similar eclectic mixture of beliefs myself, I know that such a combination teaches you many things about faith, and one of them is how personal it is to the individual. In later years, John's own Christian faith led him to embrace Roman Catholicism, again evidence of the fluidity that religious faith and belief systems can have as life progresses. We also see one explanation for his willingness to challenge entrenched academic orthodoxies in his professional life. He was very much his own man in all areas of his life.

John was certainly not without his detractors. He could be stubborn, fickle and somewhat overpowering, especially as a colleague. But it is inevitable that a polemicist scholar will divide opinion on his work – that what it means to be a polemicist and that that level of criticism could be equally as critical of him as a person. However, we need more historians of John's acumen and intellectual courage, not fewer, especially as our subject area and our universities come under increasing threat from rampant, managerialist philistinism. Consequently, the academic world is much the poorer for John's passing; and one can only guess how much more his family will mourn him.

Gaynor Johnson, May 2025.