

'Our Historic Mission'  
Party Political Pasts and Futures in Contemporary Britain

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## ABSTRACT

The temporal positioning of political parties is an important aspect of their philosophical stance. This cannot simply be characterised as forward-facing progressivism and backwards-looking conservatism; since at least the late nineteenth century both progressive and conservative positions have involved a complex combination of nostalgia, obligation and inheritance. But while conservatives have emphasised a filial duty towards the past as enduring tradition, progressives have stressed the need to bear memories of past injustice forward, in order to achieve a different future. The contention of this thesis is that since the late 1970s these temporal positions have begun to dissolve. Both Labour and the Conservatives now favour what might be termed an 'affirmative presentist' approach to political time, whereby the present is viewed as both the 'achievement' of the past and the 'creator' of the future. There are strong affinities with a whig approach to history, particularly in the way that parliamentary politics are conceived as necessarily 'historic'. This is a clear departure from progressivism, which positions the present on an historical trajectory running from past oppressions to an imagined future. It is similarly removed from conservatism, which roots its pragmatic approach to the present in a sense of lived continuity with the past. Affirmative presentism is based in an eternal, liminal present. It is always *becoming* history, becoming historic. Moreover, I suggest that this temporal positioning is in tune with wider cultural trends. Since the late 1970s, commentators have noted a growth in public nostalgia, whereby historicity is coded as authenticity - from estate agents' brochures to vintage clothing boutiques. In this cultural context, a link with the past is a valuable political commodity but the taint of anachronism or being 'stuck in the past' is to be avoided at all costs. The temporal emphasis remains firmly rooted in the present.

## DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Emily Robinson

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
Ideology and Temporality	19
Structures of Memory: Parties and their Pasts	65
Against the Tide of History	
Conservatism in the 1980s and '90s	133
Breaking the Mould or Recapturing the Past?	
The SDP and New Labour in Negotiation with Labour's History	174
New Times, New Politics	
The Collapse of the CPGB's Historical Narrative	222
Conclusions	257
Bibliography	263



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## INTRODUCTION

In 1979 Henry Drucker set out his analysis of the ethos of the Labour Party (as distinct from its doctrine) under the chapter heading 'The Uses of the Past'.<sup>1</sup> This choice of words is significant and indicates the importance of the past to political positioning. It is generally accepted that Labour Party activists have, in the words of a more recent scholar, 'always had an especially strong sense of their party as a historic "movement", which must know its past in order to envisage its future.'<sup>2</sup> Their use of the past as a political resource is frequently set against Conservatives' veneration of the past for its own sake. This distinction was recently re-stated by Peter Osborne in a radio programme entitled *Conserving What?*. Looking at the question from the opposite end of the political spectrum, he characterised 'progressives' as 'contemptuous of tradition, which they see as prejudice' and 'indifferent to history, which they understand as injustice'. In contrast, Osborne explained, Conservatives have 'an overriding sense of history and tradition' and value continuity above all.<sup>3</sup>

It is the intention of this dissertation to explore the political implications of these divergent attitudes towards the past and also to indicate the ways in which they have altered since Drucker's analysis. Although it remains common to distinguish between political traditions with regard to their approaches to the past, this is often based on instinct rather than sustained and comparative analysis. The contention of this thesis is that since Drucker was writing in 1979, we have seen a temporal convergence between the parties, with both Labour and the Conservatives favouring what might be termed a 'presentist' approach to political time. 'History' is no longer viewed as a political force – providing deliverance, conveying inheritance – instead,

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<sup>1</sup> H.M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979)

<sup>2</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Labour: The Myths it Has Lived By', in Duncan Tanner et al (eds) *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 341-366, (342)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Osborne, *Conserving What?* BBC Radio 4, Wednesday 7 October 2009

it is a tool to be mastered, used to demonstrate legitimacy or to provide lessons.

This is not an attitude which is limited to party politics. Analyses of changing public attitudes towards history proliferated in the 1980s and '90s. On one hand, as Raphael Samuel noted, this was a period of increasing public interest in the past – from 'retrochic' to the Heritage Industry.<sup>4</sup> On the other, this very interest was seen to be a symptom of decreasing 'connection' with the past. These arguments were particularly explicit in France, around the bicentenary of the 1789 Revolution and the seven-volume discussion of public memory organised by the historian Pierre Nora.<sup>5</sup> In Britain, they coalesced around questions of the conservation of historic buildings and the consequent growth of a commercialised 'heritage industry', which commentators such as Robert Hewison saw as a desperate and disingenuous search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless postmodern world. Desperate because associated with the sense that the past as a living memory was disappearing and must be caught and fixed before it did; disingenuous because this was a sanitised past of quaint interiors and supposedly traditional values, in which hardship, poverty and misery became little more than tourist attractions.<sup>6</sup> The fear was that memory was becoming 'historicised' and the living past was becoming 'heritage' – closed off from the present and of interest only as a reminder of 'the way we were'. British political parties provide a particularly interesting study in this respect because although, as we will see, they are unusually interested in the means by which they will *become History* (emphatically with a capital H), they are also relatively stable as mnemonic groups. The procedures and processes of

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, vol. I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994); Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory, vol. II*, ed. Alison Light with Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones (London and New York: Verso, 1998)

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Nora (ed), *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), English language edn edited by Lawrence D Kritzman, tr. Arthur Goldhammer [*Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Editions Gallimard, 1992]

<sup>6</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987)

parliament positively encourage a sense of lived continuity with the past and the parties themselves remain recognisably consistent as political institutions.

More recently, Martin L. Davies has discussed the wider historicisation of society, whereby history has become the dominant mode of thinking, yet because it encompasses everything, it also means nothing.<sup>7</sup> This historical attitude can be seen in British party politics. The past is called upon to provide lessons (was Brown following Callaghan's mistake in not calling an election in autumn 2007?), to confer legitimacy (monetarism as 'Victorian values') and to demonstrate continuity (abandoning Marxism as itself 'Marxian' in spirit). Yet, by its very malleability, and its ubiquity, the political past has ceased to exist as either a radical or a conservative force. Instead, a rather general sense of continuity is invoked in the service of the present. In a culture in which antiquity is coded as authenticity – from estate agents' brochures to vintage clothing boutiques<sup>8</sup> – a link with the past is a valuable political commodity.

It is striking that what we might call the emotional side of political identity – both personal and collective – is often expressed through discourse about the past. History is used as a proxy for emotion. The flipside of this, as we will see in relation to New Labour,<sup>9</sup> is that references to the past can be interpreted and presented as intrinsically emotional, sentimental and hence irrational, even when they are part of a conversation about policy and ideology, focused on the options for the future. Whilst parties and politicians are expected to remain 'true' to their pasts – thus demonstrating continuity, integrity, authenticity – they must also demonstrate that they are of their time, in tune with time and have time on their side. The awkwardness of this

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<sup>7</sup> Martin L. Davies, *Historics: Why History Dominates Contemporary Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

<sup>8</sup> See Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*

<sup>9</sup> That I am using the term 'New Labour' rather than the 'sceptical' 'New' Labour preferred by Steven Fielding should not be taken to indicate that I am any more convinced of the party's claims to novelty. My position on this matter is explained in chapter four. See Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: Continuity and Change in the Making of New Labour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3

juggling act is demonstrated by the title of an event held in June 2009 by New Labour pressure group Progress: 'Focus on the fourth term: where have we come from and how can we get there?'<sup>10</sup> In many ways, the particular pasts to which parties and individuals must be 'true' matters less than a general sense of *rootedness*. In popular culture, discovering one's roots has become a means of self-authentication almost (it seems) regardless of what those particular roots are.<sup>11</sup> This rarely, if ever, imposes obligations upon the descendant but is instead a means of enhancing their sense of self, their sense of being *in history*.

### Context

The period I have chosen to examine, beginning in the late 1970s, was marked by its claims to novelty. The late 1970s and early '80s were constructed by contemporaries as a break with the past, from Stuart Hall's assessments of the new terrain of Thatcherism to the feeling of some right-wingers that changes in the Labour Party justified the founding of a new Social Democratic Party. The subsequent period is seen to mark the end of postwar Keynesianism, the rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of Communism; all of the major political parties in Britain underwent substantial organisational and political change and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) disbanded completely. Yet it has also been argued that none of these should be understood self-contained events, but rather as much longer-term processes with roots in the 1950s and – ultimately – in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The intention to 'break the mould' of politics is particularly common in this period. Stuart Hall used the phrase in relation to Thatcher in 1978 and it was

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<sup>10</sup> [http://theprogressive.typepad.com/the\\_progressive/2009/06/event-report-focus-on-the-fourth-term-where-have-we-come-from-and-how-can-we-get-there.html](http://theprogressive.typepad.com/the_progressive/2009/06/event-report-focus-on-the-fourth-term-where-have-we-come-from-and-how-can-we-get-there.html). Accessed 02.10.2009

<sup>11</sup> The most explicit example of this trend is the BBC TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* (2007-)

<sup>12</sup> See E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Fielding, *The Labour Party*

later adopted by the SDP.<sup>13</sup> This speaks of a desire to break out of the existing narrative of political history, to take a new course. Another popular phrase, 'new politics', was used by the CPGB modernisers, Tony Blair and, more recently, David Cameron.<sup>14</sup> Yet, at the same time, efforts were made to convey the historical roots of these supposedly radical departures – witness the convoluted attempts to place Thatcher within either the traditions of Conservatism or Liberalism (or both!). Even New Labour, though explicitly devised to demonstrate discontinuity with Labour's past was quick to claim the legitimacy of the 1945 government and to portray itself as a return to an older form of socialism, based on the co-operative movement and the 'historic progressive consensus' with radical Liberalism. Martin L. Davies shows how the historicised society inevitably reduces new events to 'the same old thing' by setting them in an historical framework and showing that this is really a story we already know.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Tony Blair is the youngest Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool, a moderniser like Hugh Gaitskell and a potential betrayer like Ramsay MacDonald. Likewise, the economic crisis was the worst since 1992, 1979, 1972 and – eventually – 1929. Commentators therefore instinctively looked to the past for solutions, whether Roosevelt's New Deal or postwar Keynesianism.

While for the historicised society *everything* is history, it is also the case that some things are seen to be more 'historic' than others. The language of parliamentary politics conveys a belief in its status as 'historic', as with declarations of the historic missions to tackle climate change, bring

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, December 1978. Reprinted in Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London; New York: Verso in association with Marxism Today, 1988), pp. 39-56 (44)

<sup>14</sup> See Nina Temple, 'New Times, New Politics', Report to CPGB Executive Committee (January 1990), Communist Party of Great Britain Papers (CP), Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), People's History Museum, Manchester: CP/CENT/EC/24/08; Tony Blair, *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century* (London: Fabian Society, 1998); David Cameron, New Year Message 2009/10, 27 December 2009. Available at: <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2009/09/do-you-receive-conservativehomes-daily-email.html>. Accessed 05.01.2010

<sup>15</sup> Davies, *Historics*, p. 4

democracy to Eastern Europe and eradicate child poverty.<sup>16</sup> These could be seen as attempts to pre-empt history, to project the present moment into a history not yet written. It is not, therefore, enough to make a political pledge to reduce child poverty; it must, instead be an 'historic commitment' – even if the particular target is unachievable. But the present can only be presented as historic if it is set within a temporal framework, leading from a receding past towards a still malleable future. To be historic is to be part of an ongoing historical narrative. There is also a powerful sense that *marking* history is somehow historic in and of itself. For instance, Margaret Thatcher declared the fiftieth anniversary of Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister as itself one of the many 'historic events' to have taken place in 10 Downing Street.<sup>17</sup>

Political actors are not only aware of their role in history as *what has happened*, they are also intensely aware that they will be part of history as *what is written about what has happened*. Political memory operates with a keen regard for the formalities and authority of professional history. We will see in chapter two the way in which archives are maintained through a general sense of obligation to historians of the future, rather than as a practical aspect of political operations or even a mode of identity affirmation. At the same time, however, a large number of politicians have engaged in historical research, most often biographies of their political forebears and the party history groups are well-attended. By this means they set themselves in the context of an ongoing, familiar, narrative. Moreover, Oliver Daddow describes the way in which political actors attempt to write the 'first "cut" of history' by publishing 'retrospective justifications of their opinions, decisions

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Gordon Brown, speaking to the Major Economies Forum, 19 September 2009. Available at: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page21030>. Accessed 23.10.2009; Margaret Thatcher, Speech to International Democrat Union Conference in Tokyo, 22 September 1989. Available at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=107773>. Accessed 23.10.2009; Tony Blair, Beveridge Lecture, Toynbee Hall, 18 March 1999

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Thatcher, 10 Downing Street, 9 May 1990. Available at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=108085>. Accessed 23.10.2009

and policies, in the form of diaries, memoirs and autobiographies' during the time in which official documents remain closed to scholars. Daddow believes that this puts historians 'on the back foot' as 'the texture and shape of scholarly debates' has already been determined by the way in which policy-makers are able to 'foreground' particular events and 'forget' others.<sup>18</sup>

Within the wider mnemonic activities of the parties (history groups, written histories, commemorative projects), great respect is accorded to professional historians. For instance Dianne Hayter felt that in order for her history of Labour's right wing in the 1970s and '80s to be authoritative, it needed to be a PhD project.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Professor Penelope J. Corfield described the way in which members of Battersea Labour Party's centenary DVD project were happy to allow her to shape the narrative of the Party's history because they trusted her skills as a professional historian. This is all discussed in greater detail in chapter two. It is, however, worth noting that at a Q&A event discussing the Battersea DVD Corfield asked Tony Belton, veteran leader of the Wandsworth Labour Group, how it felt seeing himself 'rendered into history on film' and thus *becoming* 'an historical personage'.<sup>20</sup> This is a particularly explicit statement of the complicated interaction between politics as present-action and politics as future-history: it is through becoming enshrined in narrative that politics becomes 'historical'. Looking at this from the other direction, Edwina Currie has justified publishing her diaries which reveal her affair with John Major on the grounds that 'It is history; it is a part of history.'<sup>21</sup> The implication, of course is that the leaders of national parties are necessarily 'part of history'; they are part of an historical narrative which is already in progress and have the advantage of attempting to shape it as they go through.

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<sup>18</sup> Oliver Daddow, 'Playing Games with History: Tony Blair's European Policy in the Press', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9 (2007), pp. 582–598 (583)

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dianne Hayter, Chair of the 1906 Centenary Group, 22 May 2009

<sup>20</sup> Penelope J. Corfield, speaking at Social History Society Southern Region Postgraduate and Early Career Workshop, 'History and Image', Goldsmiths College, University of London, 28 November 2009

<sup>21</sup> Edwina Currie speaking on *Dear Diary*, Sharon Adam (dir), BBC4, 18 January 2010



Political conceptions of 'the historic' are more in tune with popular than with academic history, retaining a taste for major events, great personalities and significant decisions. As we will see throughout this thesis, political rhetoric often perpetuates nineteenth-century grand narratives of progress and struggle (whether for political emancipation or the glory of the nation state). But it is also clear that the day-to-day memory of political parties is rooted in a more prosaic narrative of individual politicians acting within a largely continuous framework of parliamentary processes and against a shifting political and electoral scene. Thus it is seen to be possible to derive models and warnings from the successes and failures of the past. Ideologically, such an approach has rather more of a secure footing on the right of the political spectrum, where human frailty and an aversion to grand narratives are central tenets of historical thinking. Yet, in practise, the desire to learn from the experience of past politicians is just as strong on the left. The Labour equivalent is described as the 'constraints of history' model which, as Tim Bale explains, refuses to measure the party against an ideal inspired by a Marxist grand narrative. Instead, its adherents examine 'the "real world" pressures' of parliamentary politics but, according to Bale, in abandoning the desire 'to force facts into a pre-existing framework, they risk giving up the search for interpretative pattern altogether.'<sup>22</sup>

Whilst high-politics parliamentary narratives remain firmly lodged in the 'official' story of British history, it is also clear that as levels of party affiliation continue to decline, parties' institutional pasts become further removed from the mainstream cultural memory of the nation. Neither trade union banners nor Primrose League pins now resonate with large sections of the population. Indeed, it is not fanciful to suggest that in terms of narrative memory, the parties have more in common with one another than with the wider public. Although party political interpretations of the past are often in direct

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<sup>22</sup> Tim Bale, 'The Logic of No Alternative? Political Scientists, Historians and the Politics of Labour's Past', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1:2, (1999), pp. 192–204 (195)

competition with one another – both between and within parties – it is also clear that they (mostly) function within an overarching mnemonic framework; they are retellings of the same stories from different perspectives.

### Structure and Methods

In chapter one I compare conservative and progressive approaches to the past. I argue that these positions cannot simply be characterised as looking backwards and forwards, respectively. Both positions involve nostalgia and obligation, but this has different implications for conservatives and progressives: inheritance and preservation on the one hand, action and justice on the other. However, I use a number of narratives of the seventeenth century to demonstrate that the parties' attitudes to the past are becoming less distinct from each other. The divisions between the Conservatives and Labour can no longer be characterised as the party of 'national' versus 'sectional' interest, of 'elite' versus 'marginalised' history. Both parties now compete for the same place in the national story<sup>23</sup> and both have adopted a similar approach to the past. While both parties now use the language of 'progressivism', this has little in common with the sense of obligation, justice and deliverance described above. In consequence, I suggest that the dominant attitude of contemporary party politics might be better characterised as 'affirmative presentism'. Rather than progress

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<sup>23</sup> Throughout this thesis the matter of 'national' identity is somewhat questionable. As I am dealing with the parties' own conceptions of 'national history' I have tended to follow their Anglo-centrism. By and large, they use 'Britain' to refer to outward facing questions of national identity and constitutional matters of national unity. Where emotional questions of culture, tradition and heritage are at stake, the invocation is more often of 'England', or at least a very English version of Britain. That is not to say that the relations between the different parts of the United Kingdom are not contentious. All of these debates should be seen against a backdrop of increasing uncertainty over the future and status of the Union and also about the nature of Englishness., considerations of which have ranged from Simon Heffer's plea for a more assertive Englishness in *Now Shall My Sword: The Reinvention of England* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999) to Billy Bragg's attempts to 'reclaim' English patriotism for the progressive left in his *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging* (London: Bantam Press, 2006). These debates intensified in the late 1990s with the Euro '96 England/Scotland Game and the 1999 referenda on devolution. It is this uncertainty, rather than the optimism of a united 'Cool Britannia' which seems to be the legacy of the Blair years.

towards a promised future or historic destiny, it is based in an eternal, liminal present. It is always *becoming* history, becoming historic.

Chapter two is a study of the structures or technologies of memory within the parties, including party archives, history groups, commemorative events, written histories, biographies and memoirs. I use a range of research techniques including qualitative interviews and surveys, archival research and participant observation to examine the ways in which memory is formally constituted: its structures, limits and gatekeepers. Although these mainly offer a picture of the present status of party political memory, I set this in historical context, assessing how the parties' structures of memory have changed over the twentieth century. Again, the story is of convergence, with the key features of memory remarkably similar across the three main parties. This is a relatively recent development and differs from the first half of the twentieth century when Labour's mnemonic culture was markedly different from the other parties. Unsurprisingly, the parties have converged more closely at national than at local level, where differences in mnemonic culture are more clearly visible. Across the three parties, formal memory activities are undertaken by a small group of interested individuals rather than as a part of an official programme. Even the directors of the party history groups admit that there isn't always time to learn from history, due to the business of *making* history, *making* the political present. The business of present politics presses on. It is, therefore, significant that the Liberal Democrat History Group is most established within its party's political culture and by far the most active.

In chapters three, four and five I examine the uses of the past during moments of political re-positioning. In order to make comparisons across the parties, I have chosen to look at a number of moments of political crisis, when identities were called into question and imagined futures collapsed. In looking at the parties' institutional positioning, my focus inevitably falls disproportionately on leaders and national figures rather than the wider

ambit of activists, organisational structures and affiliated bodies at both national and local level. I have sought to mitigate this by making use of letters sent from grassroots members to party leaders and to the letters pages of the internal and national press. Whilst this is a self-selecting sample of members' views, it does give an idea of the internal conversations within the parties. This strategy inevitably means that I am dependent on the traces left by parties and individuals in the historical record even as I seek to understand the means by which those records (both physical and imaginary) have been constructed. Nevertheless, this approach has allowed me to get a sense of the way in which the debates were set within historical narratives and conceived as 'historic' at the time, rather than through the retrospective prompting of oral history interviews.

Chapter three focuses on the Conservative Party in the 1980s and '90s. As we see in chapter one, the Conservative Party has prided itself on being a national party, with a special affinity with the British (or more properly the *English*) past. Yet in the decades after 1945 this position was undermined by changes in history teaching as well as by the Labour Party's increasingly confident claims to national status itself. In the wake of the 1997 general election, it became unsustainable. Chapter three examines the way in which the party responded to this new situation, both attempting to reassert its own historical narrative (most notably through the wrangling over the National Curriculum for History) and developing more of a sense of its institutional past. In particular, the intense debates over Thatcher's relation to historical Conservatism indicate both the ambiguity of her own temporal positioning (described as 'regressive modernization' by Stuart Hall<sup>24</sup>) and the desire of many Conservatives to define the party's identity through a relationship to its own past.

I then look at the different ways in which the founders of the SDP and the self-proclaimed architects of New Labour presented their negotiations with

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<sup>24</sup> Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 2

the Labour Party's past and particularly with revisionism, which was by this stage a tradition in its own right. Despite the emphasis on novelty and on starting a new historical narrative outside the traditions of 'left' and 'right', both of these re-positionings also depended on reworking Labour's past. Whilst Blair used Labour's tendency to focus on its history against his opponents by presenting them as simply nostalgic for a dead past, he also tried to portray himself as the figure who could reach back to the party's older and therefore more authentic pre-1918 past. Whilst the narrative of an historic 'progressive consensus' with liberalism had long been an important strand of social democratic revisionism it gained fresh meaning in the context of the SDP's merger with the Liberals. However, I argue that there was a significant difference in the way that the SDP and New Labour positioned themselves in relation to this past. Most of the founders of the SDP (with the exception of Roy Jenkins) were determined to demonstrate that they remained loyal to Labour's heritage, justifying their re-positioning as a necessary response to the direction the Labour Party had taken in the recent past. For them, the social democratic narrative was a means of maintaining a sense of personal continuity as they broke with Labour and eventually merged with the Liberal Party. New Labour was far less of a genuine break with the party's past but was deliberately constructed as a statement of a new temporal attitude, valorising novelty and presentism for their own sake. Yet, its spokespeople used the alternative historical narrative of the 'progressive consensus' to position themselves within a legitimating historical framework and as a further claim to *national* status – to reaching past the Labour Party and speaking for the country beyond.

Finally, I examine the collapse of the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) historical narrative in 1989-91. Some of the themes of this chapter are reminiscent of those in chapter four – the clash between modernisers and their opponents who feared betraying the past and losing their ideological bearings in the process. What made these negotiations different was that, first, Marxism had placed far more faith in the redemptive March of

History, so abandoning this notion was more painful than for Labour members. And second, the changes were necessitated by the loss of a stable past in the wake of revelations about Soviet Communism. This was not a new development and had been in progress since 1956, but the fall of the Eastern European regimes made the process both unavoidable and urgent. This was fundamentally an historical and mnemonic crisis: every certainty upon which members had founded their identities crumbled. But not only the past was under revision, the future also looked incredibly uncertain: if communism had failed, how much of Marxism and Marxist historical theory could be salvaged? The only options were to adopt an 'affirmative presentist' approach towards the future – finding ways to progress socialism without relying on a discredited grand narrative – and to take advantage of the new freedom to bring the light of 'history' to bear upon what had too often been a politically delineated 'past', despite the efforts of the Communist Party Historians' Group.

The dominance of this presentist trend across all the parties indicates more than a 'betrayal' of roots or of traditional temporal positioning. It is a cultural shift, informed by popular approaches not only to time and progress, but also to high politics, national heritage and historical narrative. History is still primarily seen to relate to a linear and knowable past, which is validating because it sets present action (and particularly high-political action) in a longer context, giving it a 'place' in history and in the unfolding national story. At the same time a cultural and political premium is placed on novelty, modernity and timeliness and the taint of anachronism or being 'stuck in the past' is to be avoided at all costs. The play of these competing strands within contemporary party politics is the subject of this thesis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Ideology and Temporality

In this chapter I compare conservative and progressive approaches to the past. I argue that these positions cannot simply be characterised as looking backwards and forwards, respectively. Both positions involve nostalgia and obligation but this has different implications for conservatives and progressives: inheritance and preservation on the one hand, action and justice on the other. However, I use a number of narratives of the seventeenth century to demonstrate that the parties' attitudes to the past are becoming less distinct from each other. The divisions between the Conservatives and Labour can no longer be characterised as the party of 'national' versus 'sectional' interest, of 'elite' versus 'marginalised' history. Both parties now compete for the same place in the national story and both have adopted a similar approach to the past.

While both parties now use the language of progressivism, this has little in common with the sense of obligation, justice and deliverance described above. In consequence, I suggest that the dominant attitude of contemporary party politics might be better characterised as 'affirmative presentism', whereby the present is viewed as both the 'achievement' of the past and the 'creator' of the future. As I suggest at the end of the chapter, this attitude has strong affinities with a whig approach to history. Affirmative presentism is a clear departure from progressivism, which positions the present on an historical trajectory running from past oppressions to an imagined future. It is similarly removed from conservatism, which roots its pragmatic approach to the present in a sense of lived continuity with the past. Affirmative presentism is based in an eternal, liminal present. It is always *becoming* history, becoming historic.

### Conservatism and Progressivism

Although the distinction between 'conservatism' and 'progressivism' tends towards an association with 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' political positioning, respectively, it cannot be reduced to it. While the broad political categories of 'conservative' and 'progressive' are used to indicate positions on equality, civil rights and social justice, they are also explicit statements of temporal positioning. Encapsulated in the words 'conservative' and 'progressive' is above all an attitude towards time, with progressivism being forward-looking and conservatism backward-looking. However, this characterisation is itself inherently 'progressive', seeing time as a linear construct, along which we must either progress or make a futile attempt to retreat. By this reckoning, the dice is always loaded in the progressive's favour: historical time moves on and we must move with it or be left behind. Hence Conservatives' fear of not being 'on the side of history', discussed in chapter three.

It was this temporal meaning of progressivism which Tony Blair used in his 1999 declaration that 'the 21st century will not be about the battle between capitalism and socialism but between the forces of progress and the forces of conservatism.'<sup>25</sup> He referred seventeen times in this Conference speech to the battle against the 'forces of conservatism', but included in this description not only the opponents of female suffrage and the NHS but also those who opposed rewriting Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution. His invocation of the Labour Party's 'historic mission' was now recast as a desire to 'liberate' the country from an imagined past, which seemed to be based in the values of 'Old' Labour: 'the old class divisions, old structures, old prejudices, old ways of working and of doing things, that will not do in this world of change.'<sup>26</sup> As has been recognised by many commentators on New Labour, Blair placed a high premium on novelty, modernity and

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<sup>25</sup> Tony Blair, speech to Labour Party Conference, 28 September 1999. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/460009.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/460009.stm). Accessed 23.10.2009

<sup>26</sup> Ibid



timeliness.<sup>27</sup> Yet this attitude did not suddenly appear in 1994; Henry Drucker noted in 1979 that the social democratic tendency in the Labour Party stressed the need to be “modern”, “up-to-date”, “*au fait*”. This was, he felt, ‘in harmony with the dominant time-perspective of our age’.<sup>28</sup> It is my argument that this temporal perspective has now come to dominate not only the Labour but also the Conservative party.

Elements of ‘conservatism’ and ‘progressivism’ are present in both the Conservative and Labour parties. A great deal of conservative (and Conservative) thought has been dedicated to the question of whether or not conservatism can embrace change: from Keith Feiling’s embrace of ‘industrialism and its financial and commercial infrastructure as the best means of maintaining a hierarchical, but principled, society’<sup>29</sup> to David Cameron’s emphasis on ‘modern’ Conservatism which ‘must be in tune with modern Britain, because we believe that our best days lie ahead’.<sup>30</sup> Even if such declarations can seem forced, from another perspective conservatives could be naturally best placed to embrace change, and particularly unexpected change. In the third Keith Joseph Memorial lecture, John O’Sullivan defined conservatism as a ‘system of ideas employed to defend established institutions’ until they are fundamentally overthrown, whereupon the new status quo must be absorbed and should itself be preserved. These challenges had previously included the Reformation, French Revolution and nineteenth-century campaigns for universal suffrage and the abolition of slavery.<sup>31</sup> As we will see in chapter three, Thatcherism (including of course the ideas of Keith Joseph) represented not so much a break in the Conservative Party’s political ideology as in its temporal positioning. Far from

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<sup>27</sup> See particularly Nick Randall, ‘Time and British Politics: Memory, the present and teleology in the politics of New Labour’, *British Politics*, 4:2 (2009), pp. 188-216

<sup>28</sup> Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos*, p. 35

<sup>29</sup> Reba N. Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America: The Great War to Thatcher and Reagan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 90

<sup>30</sup> David Cameron, 1 September 2005. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2005/sep/01/conservatives.toryleadership20051>. Accessed 29.10.2009

<sup>31</sup> John O’Sullivan, *Conservatism, Democracy and National Identity*, the third Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture, 16 February 1999 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1999), p.6

absorbing and conserving the recent past, it wanted to undo it. As Thatcher declared in 1977: 'We see nothing as inevitable. Men can still shape history'.<sup>32</sup>

It is significant that this desire to shape history was accompanied by an attempt to develop an explicit Conservative ideology rooted in a specific historical moment – Victorian entrepreneurialism. Unlike conservatism, socialism is always explicit in its ideology and remains inextricably tied to the historical moment at which it was developed. The various phases of social democratic revisionism in the Labour Party have explicitly attempted to loosen the party's links to the socialist commitment it had made in 1918. As we will see in chapter four, Tony Blair used the accusation of nostalgia in order to condemn his opponents by an association with a conservative reverence for the past. Yet, even at the height of this debate, an unashamedly nostalgic 'Rolling Rose' roadshow celebrated Labour's victory of 1945 and Blair was quick to associate himself with older notions of progressivism and even New Liberalism. The tension between forward-facing social democracy and historically rooted socialism has long been present on the left. Walter Benjamin highlighted in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* that social democracy places its hope in the possibilities of progress and assigns 'to the working class the role of redeemer of future generations'. This was, Benjamin felt, 'cutting the sinews of its greatest strength': the hatred and sacrifice which 'are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren'.<sup>33</sup> A similar point was made by Henry Drucker who described the way in which 'social democrats urge that Labour is a party of the future' in opposition to Labour's 'sense of a common past' which serves as the party's "'organisational glue'".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret Thatcher, 'Dimensions of Conservatism,' Iain Macleod Memorial Lecture, delivered to the Greater London Young Conservatives, 4 July 1977  
<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=103411>. Accessed 09.10.2009

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico 1999 [1955]), pp. 245-255 (252)

<sup>34</sup> Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos*, p. 35

These tensions have also long been visible in the Labour Party's internal culture. For instance, in 1962 as Labour prepared to challenge Macmillan's Conservatives the London party staged a large 'Festival of Labour'. As a party circular made clear, the theme was "'Labour in the 60's" [sic] – a forward looking movement.' Local parties and trade unions branches were warned that their tableaux should be mindful of this theme and that 'the historical aspects should be avoided unless they can be geared to the future.' The 'danger' as the party conceived it was that 'in the short time the public see an individual tableau, they might get the impression that the Labour movement is only concerned with the past and not the future.'<sup>35</sup> Great emphasis was placed upon modernity: a national competition was launched to encourage constituency parties to modernise their premises and publicity for an exhibition of 'New Art – 1962' boasted that although 'It might have been easier to stage a show of work by universally esteemed and established artists' their emphasis was on 'the future of art in Britain'. This exhibition was held in Congress House: 'one of London's most notable examples of modern architecture'.<sup>36</sup> It could be argued that this was protesting too much, that the need to warn local parties and trade unions not to look backwards is proof enough of their tendency to do so.

However, the official festival publications speak of the contradiction at the heart of Labour's temporal attitude more clearly than this. The (presumably publicly available) Festival Programme had an assertively contemporary design and a relentless emphasis on modernity. In addition to notices about the 'Modern Art Exhibition', its commercial advertising also kept on message, with the Co-op, for example, stressing its self-service facilities under the slogan 'Shop the modern way at London Co-op'.<sup>37</sup> The internal brochure

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<sup>35</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), ACC 2417/G/98, Circular, 'Festival of Labour – June', 1962

<sup>36</sup> LMA: ACC 2417/G/97, letter from A.L. Williams to Affiliated TUs and Socialist Societies advertising 'Brighter Party Premises Competition', 4 November 1962; ACC 2417/G/99, May 1962 'Festival Fanfare!'. Original emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> LMA: ACC 2417/G/117, Festival of Labour Programme, p. 19

given to party members however, told a very different story. Welcoming members to London, it assured them that 'You are among friends. Friends who share your hopes, your attitude to living, your tradition.' The inside spread of this four-page brochure was entitled 'History is past politics and politics is present history' and ran through the centuries-long 'movement of protest which flowered into our Labour Movement', beginning with the Peasants' Revolt running up to 'the great dock strike and the pioneer match girls' strike' – all accompanied with woodcut style drawings. It even encouraged members to make a 'pilgrimage' to the Memorial Hall where the Labour Party was founded. The only other text in the brochure was a short run-through of Labour's successes on the London County Council since 1934, but this was relegated to a secondary position overleaf.<sup>38</sup> The division between outward-facing, confident, progressivism and inward-looking, reassuring, nostalgia could not be starker.

### Inheritance and Preservation

The conservative tendency towards pessimism, to believing that 'progress is an illusion'<sup>39</sup> and that mankind may very well be regressing, leads to a humbleness with regard to the past, a refusal to accept the progressive assumption that the present is (or even should be) better and more enlightened than the past. The onus should be on reformers to prove that change is necessary, rather than the other way around. Leading from this is the obligation to preserve what has survived up until the present so as to pass it on to the future. This mindset sees the present generation as merely the temporary steward of a nation which is far greater than the individual. Conservative history also stresses the contingent, the messy, the personal. Just as the future cannot be plotted according to ideological schema, so the past cannot be tidied into theories and structures. As John Charmley has explained:

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<sup>38</sup> LMA: ACC 2417/G/105, Brochure: 'Welcome to Labour London from the London Labour Party'

<sup>39</sup> John Charmley interviewed by Helen Szamuely, 'A Conservative Historians Speaks...', *Conservative History Journal*, 5, Autumn 2005, pp. 2-6 (4)

The thing that no-one has quite recreated probably because it would be monumentally boring to do it, but nevertheless we need to have it in mind is that when, say, the Marquess of Salisbury is dealing with British foreign policy [...] he doesn't have the luxury of simply sitting down and looking at a bunch of position papers, deciding that this is what we are going to do and doing it. All the time he is reading whatever is before him, other stuff is constantly coming in. At the same time he has, if you like, his day job as a landowner and leader of the Conservative party to do and stuff is coming in there. So, what hits me as an historian is the messiness of the past.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, this has now been recreated, not for Salisbury but for Thatcher. The Margaret Thatcher archive has been very keen to 'recreate [...] a sense of what's crossed her desk on a particular day.'<sup>41</sup> In particular this operates through the Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, where the documents are tagged so as to allow them to be cross-referenced in this way.<sup>42</sup> As Andrew Riley, Senior Archivist of the Thatcher Papers, explained to me, it is hoped that this will provide a counter-balance to historians' tendency to concentrate in a 'one-dimensional' way on their particular subject of interest, without seeing it as part of a much wider range of subjects competing for her attention.<sup>43</sup>

The conservative approach to the past could be classified as Rankean in that it sees each age as immediate to God and worth preserving for its innate qualities. It is the differences between historical periods which matter. One of the indicators of this positioning might be attitudes towards apologising for the past, for instance over slavery. This could be seen as a difference in political positioning: that socialists are more likely to oppose oppression and conservatives to defend the established order. While such considerations

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Andrew Riley, Thatcher Papers Senior Archivist, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, 27 November 2008

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/search.asp>. Accessed 06.11.09

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Riley interview

play their part, I would suggest that over and above that, we see a difference in the *temporal* positioning of the parties. This is a disagreement over the relation of past and present. On the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, Ken Livingstone attacked both the Labour government and the Conservatives' belief that 'an apology is unnecessary because this happened a long time ago'. For Livingstone, 'This would only apply if there had been a previously apology – there hasn't been.'<sup>44</sup> This, however, is to misunderstand the implications of David Cameron's statement that he didn't believe that 'one generation can meaningfully apologise for something that a previous generation did.'<sup>45</sup> To the conservative, such an apology would be temporally illogical. While Cameron did feel able to apologise for the Thatcher governments' support of apartheid and their imposition of the poll tax in Scotland, the difference is in the temporal distance. The Thatcher governments are still part of the political present in a way that 1807 is not. Tony Blair's rather equivocal statement of regret rather than apology indicates the ambivalence of his own ideological and temporal position. Blair's 1997 'apology' for the Irish Potato Famine in fact blamed 'Those who governed in London at the time', rather than apologising on their behalf.<sup>46</sup> A presentist view may condescend to the past; it does not take on its responsibilities.

### Obligation and Justice

Livingstone's emotional response to the bicentenary was rooted in the socialist association between history and justice. For the left, history carries a double obligation: to recover and remember past struggles and oppressions and to carry forward the outrage necessary to reshape the

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<sup>44</sup> Ken Livingstone, 'Why I am saying sorry for London's role in this horror', *Guardian*, 21 March 2007. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/mar/21/comment.society>. Accessed 02.11.2009

<sup>45</sup> Hugh Muir, 'Livingstone weeps as he apologises for slavery', *Guardian*, 24 August 2007. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/aug/24/london.humanrights>. Accessed 02.11.2009

<sup>46</sup> Kathy Marks, 'Blair issues apology for Irish Potato Famine', *Independent*, 2 June 1997. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-issues-apology-for-irish-potato-famine-1253790.html>. Accessed 28.11.2009

present and future. This is, as we will see, problematic for a left which has itself become the political establishment and which is concerned with generating a high-politics, monumental legacy. Rather than an historicist attitude, which seeks to understand the past on its own terms, this is a political attitude which uses past struggles as inspiration in the present. The African-American anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that we cannot be either true or false to a world in which we did not live but that what we know about the history of slavery or colonialism should 'increase our ardor in the struggles against discrimination and oppression' in the present because, in his words, 'No amount of historical research about the Holocaust and no amount of guilt about Germany's past can serve as a substitute for marching in the streets against German skinheads today.'<sup>47</sup> This is primarily an argument about authenticity – about the appropriateness of particular responses to the past. For example, Trouillot decries plans for an amusement park designed to convey the horrors of slavery, not on the grounds of its historical accuracy but because it would evoke inaccurate or inauthentic emotions in its visitors. He goes on to say that 'Ironically, a visit by a Klan member actively promoting racial inequality would have stood a better chance of authenticity. At least it would not have trivialized slavery.'<sup>48</sup>

This concern with authenticity has been a key feature of socialist history. For instance, Dave Renton has discussed the difficulties facing the professional historian in trying to maintain both scholarly standards and a political response to the subject. He describes his experience of working on a public history project on Liverpool's labour history. One of his co-authors was concerned that while the pamphlet had 'a role in documenting the unwritten history of Liverpool's [sic] class struggle', its main focus should be to produce 'something we can use in order to organise workers now'. Renton, on the other hand, 'was more concerned to convey the totality of what happened.' He felt this was a matter of 'professional pride' which depended upon

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<sup>47</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p.150

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148

allowing readers 'access to a range of accounts'. Yet this did not diminish his political investment in the project.<sup>49</sup> Peter Glazer tells a similar story of the need to do justice to the past through action in the present. His study of Spanish Civil War commemoration in America led to him becoming a dedicated participant in commemorative events himself. He sees contemporary political action as a way to 'somehow avenge the loss in Spain by refusing to forget it'.<sup>50</sup> His central organising concept is the idea of 'radical nostalgia', which he believes 'revises what Jay Winter has called a "traditional vocabulary of mourning" by insisting on a concomitant language of politics'.<sup>51</sup>

The connection between memory and justice or obligation also connects with a wider trend in memory studies. For instance, Ross Poole has argued that 'The role of memory is not, or not only, *epistemological* [...]. It is also *normative*; that is, it informs us of the obligations and responsibilities we have acquired in the past, and that ought to inform our behavior in the present'.<sup>52</sup> He initially presents this notion of obligation as the distinction between memory and history as memory is primarily concerned with 'unfinished business': 'For memory, an event only becomes past when the responsibilities associated with it have been satisfied. Making an event past is always a project; never a given'.<sup>53</sup> However, Poole goes on to acknowledge that 'the distinction between memory and history is not nearly as straightforward as [he has] been pretending' because history 'often strives to speak in the third person and to achieve a certain value neutrality. In its public role, however, it adopts the first person, and cannot escape the values and commitments implicit in this identification'.<sup>54</sup> Postmodern

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<sup>49</sup> Dave Renton, 'The Historian as Outsider: Writing Public History from Within and Without a Group', *Journal of the North West Labour History Group*, 25 (2000/01), pp. 48-54 (52-3)

<sup>50</sup> Peter Glazer, *Radical Nostalgia: Spanish Civil War Commemoration in America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), p. 37

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220

<sup>52</sup> Ross Poole, 'Memory, History and the Claims of the Past', *Memory Studies* 1:2 (2008), pp. 149-166 (152). Original emphases.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 160; 161



historians, such as Keith Jenkins, also argue that *history* can keep the past open, keep it alive, by refusing to seek closure through claims to epistemological certainty – or the possibility of an epistemology about the past at all. Therein lies the opportunity for radical politics as it 'is this recognition that no subject or political system is ever totally *closed* that gives radical democracy a chance.'<sup>55</sup>

Yet the obligations of the past are not limited to radical politics. An editorial in the first edition of *The Salisbury Review* following the 1997 general election, remarked that conservatives now had a duty to 'preserve for the future as much as they can of our nation's past – to keep alive the work of memory.' The author felt that 'Remembrance [...] is indispensable to social continuity, and goes to the heart of our loyalty.'<sup>56</sup> In a 1978 collection of essays intended to 'suggest respects in which Mrs Thatcher's stance might be open to improvement',<sup>57</sup> John Casey presented a defence of an active political engagement with the past. Importantly, Casey felt that his sense of the past was closer to Marxism than to liberalism as it 'avoid[ed] the view of customs and institutions as either on the one hand instrumental or on the other merely associative and nostalgia and hence irrational.'<sup>58</sup> Instead, he insisted that the past has 'authority' over the present. For the Marxist, this is established through 'general causal laws', whereas the conservative prefers 'tradition', expressed through customs and institutions.<sup>59</sup> It is these two attitudes to the past which, I argue, have been largely replaced with a presentist whiggish approach, similar to that which Casey links with liberalism.

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<sup>55</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4. Original emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> *The Salisbury Review*, 16:1 (Autumn 1997), p. 3

<sup>57</sup> Maurice Cowling, 'The Present Situation' in Cowling (ed) *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), pp. 1-24 (19-20)

<sup>58</sup> John Casey, 'Tradition and Authority' in *ibid*, pp. 82-100 (88)

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 98; 88

It is instructive to compare Casey's views with those of Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson who argued (the following year) that 'it is not we who sit in judgement on the past, but rather the past, [...], which judges us'. For Jameson this seems to be a radical departure because 'the very dynamics of the historical tribunal are unexpectedly and dialectically reversed.'<sup>60</sup> Yet, for the conservative this is the *natural* relation of past and present. For both, 'our concrete relationship with the past remains an existential experience, a galvanic and electrifying event'.<sup>61</sup> Yet while Jameson is concerned with 'disturbing and unsettling' the present through confrontation with 'the radical difference of other modes of production', Casey advocates an attitude of '*pietas*' towards the past whereby, 'individuals can be enlarged in their relation to customs, institutions and the state'.<sup>62</sup>

### The Politics of Nostalgia

The idea of 'radical nostalgia' highlights the connection between remembering and justice which is associated with the socialist side of the political spectrum. This feels surprising because, as David Lowenthal documents, much of the literature on nostalgia sees it as a wholly reactionary – or, at best, a regressive – activity.<sup>63</sup> Svetlana Boym draws a distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia, which might be useful here. The first 'stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.' It 'does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition.'<sup>64</sup> It is this type of nostalgia which lends itself to the creation of national and political identities. The second type 'thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately'. Reflective nostalgia 'dwells on the ambivalences of human

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<sup>60</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Marxism and Historicism', *New Literary History*, 11:1 (Autumn 1979), pp. 41-73 (70)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid; Casey 'Tradition and Authority', p. 100

<sup>63</sup> See Lowenthal's discussion of this in 'Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't', in Shaw and Chase (eds), *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 18-32

<sup>64</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xviii

longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.<sup>65</sup>

Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of the monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dream of another place and another time.<sup>66</sup>

Boym's distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia has resonances with the distinctions between 'conservative' and 'progressive' nostalgia. While the right might view the nation in decline and wish to restore elements of the past, for those on the left the socialist dream remains on a distant horizon. Progressive nostalgics remember the struggles and martyrs of the past precisely because they have *not* won, because they have *not* achieved their ends. They wouldn't want to return to the past but instead stress the need to bear it forward with them, to achieve what their forbears could not. This distinction can be reduced to the question of political optimism, namely, has the high point of history already passed or is it still to come?

However, I would suggest that conservative nostalgia is not wholly reactionary or restorative. While some conservatives may be attracted by the idea of turning back the clock,<sup>67</sup> I argue that it is the attractions of pastness itself, the distance, the exoticism of it which underpins a great deal of conservative imagining in this area. Enoch Powell once described his childhood and adolescent perception of England and Wales as 'always somehow in a fourth dimension, the dimension of time, as if they were the stage and scenery of the long epic of the English kings.' Although his political position on the monarchy and Parliament changed in adulthood, Powell

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. xviii

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 41

<sup>67</sup> For instance, a *Salisbury Review* article in the run-up to the 1997 election lamented that 'We are now at last seeing the results of a century of democracy: namely a political elite which is no more qualified to govern than those who vote for it.' *The Salisbury Review*, 15:3 (Spring 1997), p. 3

claims that he never lost 'the old sense of the symbolic, numinous kingship'.<sup>68</sup> The sense of history as a terrifying but spiritual presence is almost religious and it depends upon the past *as past*, not as a recoverable reality.

Rather than the notion of justice, of righting past wrongs, the conservative obligation to the past could perhaps be more easily characterised as one of filial duty. The respect for inheritance simply *as* inheritance is very strong. In his contribution to Maurice Cowling's 1978 *Conservative Essays*, John Casey bemoaned the attempts of Conservatives to justify their attachment to the nation's historic institutions on the basis of rational judgements, such as the House of Lords' ability to scrutinise legislation. By disguising sentiment behind rationality, they undermined the very value of those institutions.<sup>69</sup> This amounts to a rejection of Whig teleology. The British state has not been developed as a result of rational judgements and progressive improvement; we do not owe allegiance because of its structural attributes. Rather it comes to us through the accidents of history and our allegiance should be unconditional, based on the power of tradition and heritage. This quintessentially conservative approach to the past is emotional and ineffable. By its very nature it can be neither effectively explained nor theorised. It is a structure of feeling, an inherited state. Yet the pessimism at the heart of conservative thought comes not from a fear of the future in itself, but a fear that these spiritual links with the past will be lost in the process. Tradition and heritage only have meaning within a concept of temporal change. There is more than a hint of 'reflective' nostalgia in the conservative mindset.

An interesting account of Conservatives' relation to their political inheritance was provided by Alasdair Morrison in a *Swinton Journal* article of 1969. He pointed out that many of the causes upheld by previous generations of conservatives had not only been losing causes – the medieval barons, the

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<sup>68</sup> Enoch Powell, 'Patriotism', in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), pp. 1-8 (2-3)

<sup>69</sup> John Casey, 'Tradition and Authority', pp. 82-100

King's side in the Civil War, the opponents of the 1832 Reform Act and of universal suffrage – but were also not in tune with the principles of modern Conservatives. History was, in his words, 'littered with dead issues, and also with the wreckage of conservative stands on those issues.' Yet, in contrast to the progressive veneration of lost causes and dead martyrs, Morrison counselled that Conservatives must accept that 'one is on, after all, a sort of moving staircase in history – time passes, circumstances change.' And not only have circumstances changed before, but they will again. Conservatives then must 'remain confidently open to the possibilities of change, while at the same time treasuring continuity.'<sup>70</sup> This is, in many ways, the direct opposite of the progressive view, which sees itself as fighting for the same causes in generation after generation, remembering and honouring its forbears whilst struggling to bring about radical change. The conservative, on the other hand will jettison past causes once they are 'dead' for the sake of a more fundamental 'continuity'.

As this suggests, socialists also have a strong emotional attachment to a concept of inheritance and lineage. Participants at the History Workshop 20 National Conference suggested that nostalgia involves a special way of being involved in the past through a connection such as kinship or class affiliation. It requires a sense that '[t]hese were in some way *my* people and my present therefore was bound up in their past. Had they acted differently, then my present would be other than as it is now.'<sup>71</sup> Eric Hobsbawm has noted the paradoxical 'search for ancestors (Spartacus, More, Winstanley) by modern revolutionaries whose theory, if they are Marxists, assumes their irrelevance.' He adds, 'Clearly the sense of belonging to an age-old tradition of rebellion provides emotional satisfaction, but how and why?'<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Barbara Taylor has described how 'in resurrecting the feminist aims of the

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<sup>70</sup> Alasdair Morrison, 'The Historic Basis of Conservatism', *Swinton Journal*, 15:1 (Spring 1969), pp. 22-29

<sup>71</sup> Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, 'The Dimensions of Nostalgia', in Shaw and Chase *The Imagined Past*, pp. 1-17 (2). Original emphasis.

<sup>72</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, 'The Social Functions of the Past: Some Questions', *Past and Present*, 55 (1972), 3-17 (13)

Owenites [she] was giving [her]self back [her] own radical ancestry.' She describes 'weeping bitterly' as she narrated the death of her subject and claims, I *knew* Emma Martin, she was my Welsh communist grandmother or maybe even my mother [...] I claimed and mourned her, and wrote my book for her.<sup>73</sup>

In a polemic against the assumption that nostalgia is necessarily predicated on a reactionary longing for a bygone, safer past, David Lowenthal suggests that 'what we are nostalgic for is not the past as it was or even as we wish it were; but for the condition of *having been*, with a concomitant integration and completeness lacking in any present.'<sup>74</sup> However, it is the very injustice of the 'having been', of the lack of opportunity for genuine redress which could be seen as the motivating feature of the 'radical nostalgia' described by Peter Glazer and felt by Barbara Taylor. However, this is not only a vicarious experience, by which injustice is felt on behalf of the long-dead. As Hobsbawm, Glazer and Taylor all make clear, there is also an element here of 'emotional satisfaction' on the part of the nostalgic.

### Labour History

Socialist history is predicated on the hope of progress, but not necessarily the expectation of it. Like conservative history, it has a note of pessimism and an emphasis on the reality of lived experience. Unlike conservative history, however, this lived experience is rooted in the daily life of working-class communities, not in the day-to-day business of the cabinet minister's office. Socialist and labour history has been the history of exclusion from high politics. So what are the implications when Labour history itself becomes high politics?

According to its director, the Labour History Group was set up to assert an institutional Labour Party identity within the broader field of working-class

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<sup>73</sup> Barbara Taylor, 'Heroic Families and Utopian Histories', *historein*, 3 (2001), pp. 59-74. Original emphasis

<sup>74</sup> David Lowenthal, 'Nostalgia tells it like it wasn't', p. 29. Original emphasis.

and labour movement studies.<sup>75</sup> Rather than structures, processes and conflicts it is focused on events, personalities and outcomes. Its meetings usually highlight aspects of the history of the Parliamentary Party and often include contributions from high-profile parliamentarians, from Denis Healey to Tessa Jowell. The group has borrowed from the methodology of social history by collecting oral history accounts on its website. Yet, to date, the Group's oral history project includes only the accounts of high-profile politicians, speaking about their early inspirations.<sup>76</sup> While tribute is always paid to working-class roots, struggles and heroes, this is very much a 'high political' narrative. The reclamation of the stories of those overlooked by history focuses on national figures such as Lawrence Daly, 'the lost leader of the NUM'.<sup>77</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to Aneurin Bevan's description of his arrival in Parliament as an MP, at a time when Labour politicians still felt themselves to be excluded from the grand narrative of national life:

Here he is, a tribune of the people, coming to make his voice heard in the seats of power. Instead, it seems he is expected to worship; and the most conservative of all religions – ancestor worship.

The first thing he should bear in mind is that these were not his ancestors. His forbears had no part in the past, the accumulated dust of which now muffles his own footfalls. His forefathers were tending sheep or ploughing the land, or serving the statesmen whose names he sees written on the walls around him, or whose portraits look down on him in the long corridors. It is not the past of his people that extends in colourful pageantry before his eyes. They were shut out from all this; were forbidden to take part in the dramatic scenes depicted in these frescoes. In him his people are there for the first time, and the history he will make will not be merely an episode in the story he is now reading. It must be wholly different; as different as the social status which he now brings with him.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Greg Rosen, Director, Labour History Group, London, 9 June 2008

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.labourhistory.org.uk>. Accessed 6 May 2009

<sup>77</sup> Greg Rosen interview

<sup>78</sup> Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London; Melbourne; New York: Quartet Books, 1998 [1952]), p. 26

It is worth noting that although Bevan disparages 'ancestor worship', his account is in itself suffused with nostalgia for 'his people'. It is the memory of these people which inspires his commitment to the future, his declaration that it must be 'wholly different'. Labour politicians no longer carry such an intense awareness of cultural and class difference, of the sense of being out of place which informed Bevan's politics. Since 1945 and particularly since 1997, they have been at home in Westminster, they have made it the site of their political action, of their own narrative of past and future. This project has been so successful that, as we will see in chapter three, Conservatives have come to doubt their own claim to the title of 'national party'.

Yet Jacques Rancière suggests that this very sense of being 'out of place' may be the foundation of radical history. He castigates on the one hand the high political narrative of 'events', and of the epistemologies of kings and diplomats which he terms 'royal-empiricism'. On the other hand, he criticises the scientific aspirations of social history which have subsumed myriad experiences into a history of 'the masses' or of 'social processes'. Rancière's model for a true people's history, for a history which can fully represent the unheard voices of the past is Michelet's brand of 'republican-romanticism' which 'invents the art of making the poor speak by keeping them silent, of making them speak as silent people.'<sup>79</sup> Just as Michelet made the French peasantry 'visible' by speaking for them, so Bevan conjures an image of 'his people' in their very exclusion from history, from the corridors of power and from the chambers of recognised speech.

Critics of New Labour would say that under Blair the party willingly traded its radical heritage for power. While past struggles may still be referenced within Labour discourse, they are no longer active sites of conflict requiring political action. Interestingly, much of the hope which the Labour left attached to Brown during Blair's premiership was able to ignore his own

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<sup>79</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History*, tr. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994 [1992]) p. 45



crucial role in the founding of New Labour and in its subsequent conduct by virtue of the fact that he was a historian and specifically that he had written a PhD on James Maxton, ILP MP. Brown's connection with Labour's distant past obscured his actions in its present and his (lack of) plans for its future. However, a more generous description would note that Labour is now able to speak for and to the nation, rather than a particular section of it, because the progressive story has now become mainstream. While black history is still in many ways a marginalised narrative, requiring particular emphasis, working-class and labour history is now resolutely part of the national story, present in its history books, classrooms and museums. It is the success of this project which underpins a great deal of Conservative unease.

### A Conservative Nation?

While both the left and the right draw political and emotional strength from a sense of history, narrative continuity and inheritance, there has been a distinct difference in the way that this inheritance is conceived. While the right have claimed the *whole* past and attempted to speak for British (or English) history itself, the left have carved out a particular niche, an oppositional, self-consciously 'alternative' narrative to set against this all-encompassing hegemony. Patrick Wright has explained how 'Conservative interests have an easy time' as their claim to the past rests 'not so much on any idea as on the overwhelming presence of the "national past" – its Traditions, Monuments and Institutions.' Writing at a time when the Forward March of Labour seemed to be at a permanent standstill, Wright examined the left's somewhat melancholy perpetuation of long-dead symbols, slogans and causes. He saw this as an unsuccessful and misguided attempt to reclaim part of the national past, but felt that it was 'at best a celebration of defeat'. Wright explained that this very 'tendency towards the comforting simplicities of evocative and simplistic nostalgia' allowed the agencies of public meaning to contain the labour movement within an overwhelmingly

conservative vision of the “national past”.<sup>80</sup> The very fact that socialists could not ‘claim’ British history as easily as can conservatives led to more explicit and more defensive attempts to do so:

Because socialism does not conceive of historical development as a process which is in any full sense achieved or accomplished in the present as we know it, it cannot work up an easy public presence for its sense of history.<sup>81</sup>

This divergence of political approaches to the national past is very well illustrated by two anthologies, published by MPs within four years of each other: Tony Benn’s 1984 *Writings on the Wall: a radical and socialist anthology 1215-1984* and Kenneth Baker’s 1988 *The Faber Book of English History in Verse*. As is clear from the titles, the first presents itself as an oppositional, radical narrative, the second as an all-encompassing national collection. Benn describes his anthology as representative of an ‘alternative political tradition’, which is not a matter of purely historical interest; it is part of an ongoing struggle. Unlike Baker’s text, Benn’s uses modern spelling; it also includes entries up to the present day where Baker’s stops mid twentieth century. For Benn this is politics not history. He is eager to prove ‘that we are engaged on a campaign for justice and freedom that has gone on, in varying forms, for nearly two thousand years.’<sup>82</sup> He describes his selection as opening up ‘direct communication between generations’, which will have the power to ‘reawaken in us some of the anger experienced by those who have gone before and help fuel the present pressure for change, accelerating the process of reform here and now.’<sup>83</sup> This is a clear illustration of the left-wing use of the past as a political resource. In contrast, Baker is proud to proclaim his non-partisan credentials. While ‘At one level the story is of kings and queens, of wars and battles, of famous victories like Trafalgar

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<sup>80</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [Verso, 1991]), p. 140

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 153-4

<sup>82</sup> Tony Benn (ed), *Writings on the Wall: a radical and socialist anthology 1215-1984* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 17

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16

and near disasters like Dunkirk', at another, it is driven by 'the lives of the ordinary people of England':

These must form part of any serious account and so I have included an extract from *Piers Plowman* in 1370 in which William Langland pleads for the numerous poor of his time; a ballad from the Peasants' Revolt; the thoughts of a Berkshire farmer on Napoleon's invasion plans; the poems of George Loveless, the leader of the Tolpuddle Martyrs; the humour of Lancashire textile weavers from Bury; the pride of an East End schoolboy wearing a red tie during the General Strike; and the sadness of a father who has lost his son in the Blitz. This sea of men and women flows through our history, shaping and defining our national character.<sup>84</sup>

Baker does not hesitate to draw on a whole range of voices, traditions and events, which contribute to his story of Englishness. Many of his selections would sit quite happily in Benn's collection. Yet there are no odes to kings and queens, to military victories or to national triumph in Benn's anthology.

Conservative claims to the *entire* national past are made considerably easier by the way in which they revel in the contradictions of the legacies of a diverse range of Great Individuals, rather than adhering to a single philosophy or – worse – ideology. In a speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, Paul Johnson argued that Conservative leadership 'is not shaped primarily by ideas and certainly not by any one stream of ideas'. Instead, he cited the importance of attitudes, personal predilections and events.<sup>85</sup> There is, Johnson, assures us 'no archetype, no workable definition' of a Conservative; Conservatism is a faith, a set of beliefs which should not be subjected to scrutiny, as illustrated by his anecdote:

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<sup>84</sup> Kenneth Baker (ed), *The Faber Book of English History in Verse* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), p. xxii

<sup>85</sup> Paul Johnson, *The Spring Address: What is a Conservative?* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, May 1996), p. 12

Recently I sat at lunch next to a lady who had been married all her adult life to a Conservative peer. She told me that there were three things she would never change under any circumstances: her nationality, her religion and her Conservative allegiance. I asked her to define 'Conservative'. She replied: 'That is a question no true Conservative should ever be expected to answer'.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, John Vincent insisted that 'Conservatism is, always has been, and forever should be, a place where enriching contradictions meet'. He was happy to include Whigs and Liberals in his list of the voices of Conservatism, 'for as a historical Party we know that history cannot be undone, and for two centuries the English inheritance was not expressed through a Tory governing Party. We do not argue with the history of England: instead we absorb our national past.'<sup>87</sup> It is striking that Vincent saw Conservatism as so rooted in the national past that it should 'absorb' even those figures, events and philosophies which are antithetical to its basic ideals. If they are part of history, so they are part of Conservatism. This recalls Ian Gilmour's description of the Party as 'layer upon layer of structure and remains'.<sup>88</sup>

### The Past as Pageant

The same dynamic of all-embracing-right and oppositional-left presentations of Britain's history can be seen in two pageants organised in the 1930s by the Conservative and Communist parties. The Communist Party's March of History took place in the summer of 1936, through the streets of London. It included 'tableaux showing the history of working-class and revolutionary movements throughout the centuries, from the signing of Magna Charta [sic] to the present day'.<sup>89</sup> Staged against the background of the Spanish Civil War, the march was a clear attempt to demonstrate a narrative of native English communism in opposition to a vision of foreign and sinister fascism.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>87</sup> John Vincent, *The Seven Voices of Conservatism*, CPC Pamphlet No. 0510/821 (London: Conservative Political Centre, February 1991), p. 14

<sup>88</sup> Ian Gilmour, *Inside Right: A Study of Conservatism* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), p. 144

<sup>89</sup> *Daily Worker*, 18 September 1936, p. 5

It aimed to 'wash away all the stupid and lying statements that Communism is "foreign," "alien," "un-English" and instead to demonstrate that 'Communism springs from England's very soil, from its glorious progressive traditions.'<sup>90</sup>

The march was designed to emphasise that 'the workers of to-day march, taking their place as the rightful successors of the British workers of yesterday'.<sup>91</sup> It was a physical embodiment of the belief that the past was still alive as a site of political action, that it was not closed down, not simply of antiquarian interest. The message of continuity was reinforced by the banners themselves; one bore the slogan 'LILBURNE'S LEVELLERS PREACHED EQUALITY' accompanied by an image of the Diggers and the caption 'The Diggers practised primitive Communism on Tower Hill'. Immediately underneath was another slogan: 'HANDS OFF RUSSIA', a picture of three dockers and the caption 'London Dockers stop Jolly George's war against Russian Revolution'.<sup>92</sup> As well as the impression of an unbroken line of radicalism, the organisers of the march also claimed the 'approval' of 'those old defenders of liberty', the 'ghosts of stalwarts, dead and gone' who 'must have nodded approval' as the Chairman insisted that communists 'not only cherish the glorious traditions, but we seek to carry them on to the end.'<sup>93</sup>

The Communist Party was making an overt claim to the national past but it still took the form of a consciously oppositional narrative – asserting that this tale of struggle and radicalism deserved to be told, *as well as* the more familiar narrative of industrial progress or of international dominance. Where the party narrative overlapped too closely with that of national history, the press was quick to point out that their claims would not stand up. The *Daily Telegraph's* Peterborough questioned the communists' grasp of history and

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<sup>90</sup> *Daily Worker*, 23 September 1936, p. 4

<sup>91</sup> *Daily Worker*, 18 September 1936, p. 5

<sup>92</sup> *Daily Worker*, 19 September 1936, p. 1

<sup>93</sup> *Daily Worker*, 21 September 1936, p. 1

pointed out that 'The barons who forced King John to sign Magna Carta were doing so less out of a love of liberty and the proletariat than in order to be free to increase their own power without royal interference.' Similarly, 'Sir Thomas More [...] went to the block for his Roman Catholicism, and would have had little in common with the forces in Spain on whose behalf the Communists were demonstrating.'<sup>94</sup> Even the socialist *Daily Herald* mocked the attempt 'to prove that they were the true heirs to British democracy' and hinted at the bathos of 'a two-mile-long pageant of British history, from the signing of Magna Charta [sic] down to the election of Willie Gallacher as M.P. for West Fife':

The role of "Ye Olde Englishe Communists" is so new that the Party members must have been surprised at finding themselves in company with Baron Simon de Montfort (1264 A.D.), Sir Thomas More, Oliver Cromwell, John Wilkes, Charles Fox (paraded as "The Beloved Whig"), Richard Cobden, William Morris, H. G. Wells, Sidney Webb, Bernard Shaw, George Lansbury and John Burns.<sup>95</sup>

The uneasiness about the *type* of heritage claimed by the Communists was not limited to outside critics. Lewis Day felt that 'carrying posters of Cromwell, Thomas More and others' amounted to nothing more than a 'deliberate flattery of bourgeois susceptibilities'. He was particularly scathing about the printed programme's appeal to 'English Tradition and Democracy', epitomised in slogans such as 'We Communists march with the very essence and spirit of the English Tradition' and 'Democracy holds within it the essence of a new social order.'<sup>96</sup> Instead, Day urged Communists to be true to their aim of 'a workers' democracy based upon the dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>97</sup> This could not be represented by a parade of 'Dead notabilities [...] irrespective of whether they represented the fight against kings by

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<sup>94</sup> 'London Day by Day', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 September 1936

<sup>95</sup> *Daily Herald*, 21 September 1936, p. 3

<sup>96</sup> Lewis Day, 'March of History', Correspondence, *Discussion*, January 1937, pp. 31-32. Clipping available in Raphael Samuel Archive (RSA), Bishopsgate Institute, London

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 31-32

feudal barons no less autocratic than their masters, or the struggle by business interests for the right to enslave the working class under Liberal slogans'.<sup>98</sup> Day rejected the Communist claim to a Liberal, Whiggish view of the national past and instead insisted upon their difference, their separation from this triumphant narrative. They were, he claimed, in danger of losing their visions of the future, their very *politics* by appropriating the symbols of a widely accepted national story. Their 'alternative' history was not alternative enough.

The Communist March of History was drawing on a tradition of pageants and marches, often with a political edge. For instance, St George's Day 1929 was marked by a Conservative Empire Procession and the *Daily Express* sponsored Empire Day pageants in Hyde Park in 1930 and 1932. These tended to show scenes from the imperial past, from Walter Raleigh to Cecil Rhodes.<sup>99</sup> Two years before the Communist March of History, the Conservative Party staged its own pageant in the Royal Albert Hall. Yet, rather than proclaiming its partisan loyalties, this pageant seems to have played them down, eliding the Conservative story with the story of British politics itself. The pageant was advertised as the Pageant of Parliament and did not emphasise its Conservative connections. Neither the review in the *Times* nor in the *Manchester Guardian* mentioned it. A small *Times* diary piece the previous month on the St Marylebone Conservative Association AGM recorded that 'in common with [the Conservative Associations] of other constituencies' it would be taking part in the pageant.<sup>100</sup> However, the previous summer, when plans for the pageant were first announced, the CCO involvement was very much to the fore. Correspondence between the organisers also makes clear that there were two objectives of the pageant: to 'increase the prestige of the National Government and at the same time [to] remind the apathetic public what it owes to British Parliamentary

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<sup>98</sup> Lewis Day, 'England Expects', Correspondence, *Discussion*, November 1936, p.26. Clipping available in RSA

<sup>99</sup> Arthur Bryant Papers (AB), Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Kings College London: J/4

<sup>100</sup> *Times*, 18 April 1934, p.15. Clipping available in AB: J/4

Institutions.<sup>101</sup> The *Northern Whig* described this latter objective as 'a great anti-Communist move.'<sup>102</sup> Letters between Miss Maxse, the Chief Organisation Officer at Conservative Central Office and Arthur Bryant, the initial choice of Pageant Organiser, reveal a possible reason for the later reticence regarding CCO's involvement. Bryant was concerned that the cost of holding the Pageant at the Albert Hall would act against the intention of raising funds for the party. Maxse responded that 'it would be a pity to give prominence to the fact that this appeal is being run for party funds' and suggested that 'it would be quite possible to avoid all mention of the financial objective of the Pageant in all publicity'.<sup>103</sup>

It is interesting to compare the content of the Conservative pageant with that of the Communist Party. Both began with Magna Carta but from there the March of History highlighted Simon de Montfort's 1265 summoning of a parliament which included representatives of the Boroughs, whereas the Pageant of Parliament moved straight to Edward I summoning the 'Great Parliament' in 1295. In fact, there is surprisingly little overlap between the figures and events mentioned in reports of the two pageants, and this seems to be only partly attributable to the parliamentary bias of the latter. Judging by its newspaper reviews, the Conservative Pageant of Parliament was a rather whiggish tale: a 'picture of freedom broadening gradually down', according to the *Manchester Guardian* and 'the chequered but insistent growth of the birth of liberty' for the *Times*. In fact, the *Times's* review goes on, 'this is rather a pageant of Liberty than of Parliament.'<sup>104</sup> It therefore presented a mixture of antiquarian quaintness, leading into political triumphalism: the Wars of the Roses, William Caxton, Drake and the Armada, Elizabeth I and the succession crisis, the Gunpowder Plot, 'Charles I and

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<sup>101</sup> 'Conservatives Plan a Pageant of Parliament Throughout the Ages to Increase the Prestige of the National Government', *Evening Standard*, 5 September 1933. Clipping available in AB: J/4

<sup>102</sup> 'Parliament Through the Ages', *Northern Whig*, 6 September 1933. Clipping available in AB: J/4

<sup>103</sup> AB: J/7, 5 July 1933

<sup>104</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 30 June 1934, p. 13; *Times*, 30 June 1934, p. 9



Cromwell in turn infringing the privileges of the House of Commons', the crowning of William and Mary, Nelson at Trafalgar, Pitt, the Factory Act, Great Reform Act, liberation of the slaves and struggle of the suffragists, topped off with a scene at Ascot. Walk-on parts in this version were played by Robin Hood, Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Samuel Pepys, Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens.

Despite Day's criticism, the communists' story avoided this parliamentary, whiggish narrative and focused on moments of struggle: the Peasants' Revolt, the Civil War, including the Levellers and Diggers, the 'black days of early industrialism' and the 'Early Socialists': the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Chartists and victims of Peterloo. Other struggles include 'the Hands off Russia movement', 'Pearse, Connolly, and the fighters of Easter Week', the General Strike, the Shop Stewards' Movement, Taff Merthyr, the Invergordon Mutiny and the Hunger Marches. One of the few overlaps were the 'fighters for women's suffrage'. Named heroes here included Thomas More, John Milton, John Burns, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Marx and Engels, William Morris, Robert Owen, Ernest Jones, William Blake, John Wilkes, Charles Fox, Richard Cobden, H. G. Wells, Sidney Webb, Bernard Shaw, George Lansbury and John Burns. The closing scene in this drama was Felicia Browne's recent death in the Spanish Civil War. The predominance of lost causes and martyred heroes supports Patrick Wright's criticism of the labour movement's defeatist view of history. Yet, the perpetuation of these causes suggests a refusal to close down their radical potential. The fact that the suffragettes are one of the few points of similarity is significant. Having won their fight, the suffragettes become part of whig history, the stream of events by which we arrived at our present situation.

It is worth noting the similarity between the communist narrative and that taken up more recently by the far right in their attempts to claim lost English freedoms. The following section is taken from a BNP manifesto and is worth quoting at length:

This country is the birthplace of modern democracy. This is no surprise; it is clear from what is known of the way in which free men and women among Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norse ancestors had a significant say in the running of their societies that personal freedom has deep and strong roots among the native peoples of our islands.

Even when those freedoms were suppressed, as under the time of feudal Darkness that followed the Norman Conquest, and again during the pauperisation of the yeomanry and creation of an urban proletariat during the Enclosures and Industrial Revolution, our people have always fought and even died to secure them again. From Magna Carta to the Peasants' Revolt, through the Levellers, the Chartists, the early Labour movement and the suffragettes, we have defied the executioner, the rack, and the prison door to wrest liberty of conscience, speech, action and political association from monarchs, barons and bosses, and from popes, priests and censors.<sup>105</sup>

For the communists, the Englishness of this vision was important as it helped neutralise the image of communism as an 'alien creed'. Although the BNP arguably face similar problems in accusations of German Nazism, as a *nationalist* party, it is precisely this Englishness (and it is Englishness, not Britishness) which forms the basis of the narrative's appeal. This story of liberty of conscience and the struggle against the ruling elite allows them to claim English exceptionalism in a story recognised not only by the far left but also by the liberal centre. This is now the acceptable story of English progress and national achievement, based on the struggles of the 'common man', rather than of imperial oppression. For a movement born from largely working-class frustration, powerlessness and political exclusion, the narrative of resistance and of the fight for both freedom of conscience and political

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<sup>105</sup> *Rebuilding British Democracy*, BNP General Election Manifesto, 2005, p. 7. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/BNP\\_uk\\_manifesto.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/BNP_uk_manifesto.pdf). Accessed 14.02.2008

recognition now has a particular resonance on the far right, just as it has always done on the socialist left.

### Remembering 1688

The attempt to create an alternative, radical narrative of a British history has been a long-term project. Ariel Hessayon has suggested that 'though radicalism lacks a connected history the imagined relationship between radicals of the English Revolution and their predecessors and successors has served as a powerful substitute'.<sup>106</sup> Marxist historians, most notably Christopher Hill and A. L. Morton, have been particularly keen to 'create the history of a popular democratic tradition in English history and culture'.<sup>107</sup> The roots of this tradition were traced back to opposition to the Norman Yoke, and led forward through the Peasants' Revolt, English Revolution, Chartists and Suffragettes. More recently, Tristram Hunt led a *Guardian* campaign to commemorate key moments in Britain's radical past, culminating in the exhibition and public events surrounding the 360<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Putney Debates.<sup>108</sup> Within all of these projects, the political resonance of the seventeenth century is hard to ignore. It figured prominently in both the Conservative Pageant of Parliament and the Communist March of History. Yet the emphases were markedly different. The former focused on the tyrannies of Charles I and Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution, while the latter drew inspiration from the clash of the Civil War and particularly the Levellers and Diggers. These unresolved disputes haunt our political conversation. On the one hand lies the foundation of modern constitutional monarchy; on the other floats the spectre of the unrealised republican future. In another, increasingly less common, version of events,

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<sup>106</sup> Ariel Hessayon, 'Fabricating Radical Traditions', in M. Caricchio, G. Tarantino (eds), *Cromohs Virtual Seminars: Recent Historiographical Trends of the British Studies, 17th-18th Centuries*, 1-6 (2006-2007). Available at:

[http://www.cromohs.unifi.it/seminari/hessayon2\\_radical.html](http://www.cromohs.unifi.it/seminari/hessayon2_radical.html). Accessed 28.09.2007

<sup>107</sup> J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 130

<sup>108</sup> See for instance Tristram Hunt, 'A Jewel of Democracy', *Guardian*, 26 October 2007

the Restoration takes pride of place as the resolution to the aberrant period of regicidal chaos.

The Restoration was a particular favourite of Conservative historian and pageant-master, Arthur Bryant. The records of his celebrated 1932 Greenwich Naval Pageant make clear that the Restoration scene was the emotional crux of the show.<sup>109</sup> He also entered into a correspondence debate with Isaac Foot following the latter's parliamentary question regarding the exclusion of Cromwell and other Commonwealth luminaries from the Pageant.<sup>110</sup> Whilst Bryant protested that it was simply the Greenwich naval focus of his Pageant that led him to exclude Cromwell, his historical preferences are also apparent in his three-volume *A History of Britain and the British People*. In a single twenty-five page chapter taking him from the accession of Charles I to the Restoration, Bryant devoted one page to Charles I's character, another to the Civil War and trial of Charles and a further one-and-a-half to the regicide and Commonwealth. The next nine-and-a-half pages tell a detailed and highly romanticised story of the young Charles' flight to the coast ('As complete darkness fell, romance spread her cloak over the king and hid him from the thousand eyes that sought him'<sup>111</sup>). The rest of the chapter builds up to the Restoration, ending with words taken from the chapel register of Maid's Moreton rejoicing that 'by the wondrous goodness of God, his Sacred Majesty King Charles II was peacefully restored to his martyred father's throne [...]. And from this day ancient orders began to be restored.'<sup>112</sup>

However, Bryant is rather an exception. Most modern Conservatives have tended to emphasise the parliamentary narrative of 1688-9 rather than the monarchical-religious overtones of the doomed Restoration. This is taken to be the foundation moment of the constitutional settlement, an emotional

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<sup>109</sup> AB: J/6 (1-3)

<sup>110</sup> *Times*, 21; 22; 26 July 1933

<sup>111</sup> Arthur Bryant, *A History of Britain and the British People, vol 2, Freedom's Own Island: The British Oceanic Expansion* (London: Grafton Books, 1987), p.232

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, pp.252

touchstone which deserves respect and preservation. James Vernon has shown how 1688 was very quickly absorbed into the Conservative narrative and used to demonstrate that in fact nothing had changed. He quotes Sir Thomas Acland, Tory MP for North Devon, speaking at Totnes in 1837. To 'Loud cheers', Acland remarked that, 'The miscalled revolution of 1688 was no change whatever of their fundamental laws of the British constitution, but rather a protest that the existing laws should not be changed.'<sup>113</sup> In an Institute for Economic Affairs article entitled '1989: 1688 or 1789?' the economic historian William Chaloner asked despairingly why inverted commas had begun to appear around the adjective in writings about the Glorious Revolution 'as though to cast doubt on the description' and lamented that the French Revolution of 1789 seemed to hold greater attractions for left-wing intellectuals.<sup>114</sup>

As we have seen, the coronation of William and Mary featured in the Conservative Pageant of Parliament but not (seemingly) in the Communist March of History. The 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 has politically ambiguous connotations, speaking to both the progressive, Whig, narrative of reform, liberty and democracy and the Tory, Burkean, narrative of the defence of the status quo and preservation of political institutions. However, it is striking that the most high-profile tribute to 1688 came from the left. Crucially, it was not a memorial to things as they had been but a desire to channel the spirit of 1688 whilst demanding further reforms. What began as a petition organised through the *New Statesman* became the campaign organisation, Charter 88. Again, we see the emphasis on taking forward the radical spirit of the past, rather than simple commemoration of its achievements. The *New Statesman* article launching the Charter 88 campaign noted that there was no cause to celebrate the tercentenary at a time when 'In the name of freedom, our political, human and social rights are being curtailed while the

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<sup>113</sup> *Western Luminary*, 23 January 1837, 2. Quoted in James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 298

<sup>114</sup> W. H. Chaloner, '1989: 1688 or 1789?', in *The Coming Confrontation: Will the Open Society Survive to 1989?* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 1978) pp. 33-40

powers of the executive have increased, are increasing and ought to be diminished.' More than simply noting a gap between the ideals of 1688 and the reality of 1988, Charter 88 laid much of the blame for the current situation on the failure of the Glorious Revolution to guarantee citizens' freedoms through a written constitution. Instead, it 'only shifted the absolute power of the monarch into the hands of the parliamentary oligarchy.' The current administration was thus able to 'exploit the dark side of a constitutional settlement which was always deficient in democracy.'<sup>115</sup>

The same feelings came to the fore in a parliamentary debate over the tercentenary of 1688. On 7 July 1988, Margaret Thatcher moved a Humble Address expressing:

[...] our great pleasure in celebrating the tercentenary of these historic events of 1688 and 1689 that established those constitutional freedoms under the law which Your Majesty's Parliament and people have continued to enjoy for three hundred years.<sup>116</sup>

Thatcher connected the stability ensuing from the 'bloodless' revolution with the great Tory themes of respect for the law and for private property. However, she also sketched out two distinctly whiggish narratives. The first was a story of parliamentary reform, democracy and progress which 'made the revolution of 1688 the first step on the road which, through the successive Reform Acts, led to the establishment of universal suffrage and full parliamentary democracy.' The second was the tale of 'establishing Britain's nationhood' through opening the way for 'that renewal of energy and resourcefulness which built Britain's industrial and financial strength and gave her a world role.' The lesson was that 'that a free society will always be more durable and successful than any tyranny.' In this combination of 'respect' for authority, economic liberty and mass democracy, Thatcher managed to tie together historical narratives from radical left, liberal centre

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<sup>115</sup> 'Charter 88', *New Statesman and Society*, 2 December 1988, p. 10

<sup>116</sup> Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 1987-88, vol.136, 7 July 1988, cols 1233-1263 (1233)

and conservative right and plot them all onto her own policy preferences in the present. The revolution of 1688 thus appears to have laid the way for a steady and ordered progression to her own government: a truly whiggish, presentist use of history.

However, the left of the Labour Party was not prepared to let Thatcher gloss over historic differences so easily. In a debate lasting over two hours, speakers including Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn, Eric Heffer and Bob Cryer sought both to discredit the 1688 Revolution itself and to use the legacy of the past to undermine the Thatcher government's policies on a host of contemporary issues. Predictably, these included the powers of the Executive, the House of Lords, Anglo-Irish relations, civil liberties, the Oath of Allegiance, electoral reform and the need for a modern Declaration of Rights. More surprisingly the debate also covered nuclear weapons, the European Community, female priests, the miners' strike, trade union legislation, the abolition of the Greater London Council and the presence of US troops on British airfields. Tony Benn even drew a parallel between the Enclosure Acts and Thatcher's policies on privatization. These speakers insisted on the need to honour the past through bearing forward its struggles, not closing it down with self-satisfied commemoration. In Graham Allen's words, it would be a travesty 'to pickle that Bill of Rights, to put it into aspic and to say, "It is a marvellous thing. We should have a drink and a bit of a sing-song."' Instead, he stressed the need to assess the current state of civil liberties and to make plans for the future. Otherwise, 'in 300 years' time we may not be celebrating even those few rights that are enshrined in the 1688-89 settlement.'

One of the striking features of the debate was the way in which the critics of the motion tried to hold the government accountable for the injustices of the past. We see again the sense of temporal continuity and of the continuing political potency of the past. Eric Heffer turned on Julian Amery, declaring that 'The fight for democracy had to be wrung out of the class of which the

right hon. Gentleman's party has been representative since the days of the 1640 revolution.' The debate showed the extent to which the divisions of the past still contain real political power. In Benn's words, 'If one blows on the embers of any old controversy, the flames come up quite quickly.'

Unsurprisingly, it was the position of Ireland which felt the most raw. David Alton spoke of his own experience of western Ireland's 'ravaged homes, hamlets and small villages' and declared the motion to be 'deeply offensive'. The debate also raised many alternative claims for worthy objects of commemoration, from the 1649 Revolution and Levellers to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Chartists, Peterloo victims, anti-slavery activists and suffrage campaigners. Yet while the debate was heated, it was far from evenly matched. The opponents of the address dominated the debate, yet gained just eighteen votes, compared with 139 in favour. This was an angry outburst from a small number of MPs trying to nullify Thatcher's appeal to the easy authority of the past. The majority were happy to go along with her.

In a sense, this could be seen as playing dress-up with the past. By treating the tercentenary as a simple historical commemoration, Thatcher tried to wrap herself in the colours of liberty, progress and also (crucially) heritage. Her opponents objected that this outfit didn't fit her, that she had no right to wear it and that it was not, in any case, something in which she should be proud to be seen. The very malleability of historical symbols demonstrates the way in which they are used not in a historicist sense, for what they mean in themselves, but as a set of shorthand signifiers in a contemporary political context with its own web of meanings. These labels can be used to stand for a whole range of political positions. This debate could be seen as a clash between a progressive view of history and Margaret Thatcher's affirmative presentism.

### Roundhead or Cavalier?

Despite Chaloner's fears, the British left do not have to look across to Channel to find a foundation moment. They have their native revolutionary



moment in 1649. The English Civil War provides a particularly useful point of reference because loyalties were sharply divided and, with the blurring of temporal distance, it becomes easy to 'take sides'. 'Cavalier' and 'Roundhead' are still seen to be our natural divisions, or at least a useful shorthand for them. Michael Foot's father Isaac reportedly told him that on meeting someone for the first time it is wise to ask yourself which side he would like his ancestors to have fought on at Marston Moor. During the 1984-5 miners' strike Billy Bragg revived Leon Rosselson's *World Turned Upside Down*, celebrating and commemorating the Diggers, originally written as part of the 1970s drive to rehabilitate seventeenth-century radicals as part of a national past which chimed with the ideals of 1968. More recently, the Red Rag website at the heart of Labour's 2009 email scandal was registered under the code name 'Ollie Cromwell'. On the one hand, the Cavalier can be seen to stand for tradition and history: the forces of conservatism, while the Roundhead represents the spirit of progress: radical and iconoclastic. Yet, the symbolism of each of these images needs to be unpicked a little. See for instance Jackie Ashley's *Guardian* article at the start of Gordon Brown's premiership:

In essence, we will see the Roundheads taking over from the Cavaliers. The parallels are clear, from Brown's puritan-style work ethic and emphasis on duty, to Blair's Catholic sympathies and taste for the high life [...]

[...] Yes, he's a puritan. A bit grim? Sometimes. Serious? Certainly. Brown's people don't mind the Roundhead tag. Why not? Because they know enough of their history to remember who won.<sup>117</sup>

Ashley's characterisation of modernising Blair as Cavalier and historian Brown as Roundhead shows that the symbols are malleable. This reading

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<sup>117</sup> Jackie Ashley, 'The Roundheads have taken over from the Cavaliers', *Guardian: Comment is Free*, 25 June 2007. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/jun/25/comment.labour>. Accessed 11.02.2007

places the Roundhead at the heart of an historical tradition of rebellion. The Cavalier then comes to inhabit only the decadence of the present moment, with no regard for past or future. While this characterisation could be set within a left-wing critique, allying Blair with the forces of political conservatism, it is striking that Blair has also been imagined as a Cavalier by some on the right of the Conservative Party. Daniel Hannan MEP devoted a blog post in June 2007 to claiming the Roundheads for the right, arguing that although 'Many contemporary Tories imagine, without giving the matter much thought, that they would have fought for the King. They are almost certainly wrong. The causes they hold dearest personal liberty, small government, parliamentary supremacy, patriotism, localism, Euro-scepticism would in fact have inclined them to Old Ironsides.' He even went so far as to claim that Queen Elizabeth II's sympathies lay with the Roundheads, against the decadence of the outgoing, Cavalier Blair Government.<sup>118</sup>

Cromwell occupies a particularly problematic place in the national psyche. In his critique of the March of History, Lewis Day bemoaned the fact that 'Cromwell, who suppressed the Levellers, the Communists of his day, must now [...] be fêted on our banners.'<sup>119</sup> In contrast, Jack Lindsay argued that Cromwell 'was a rebel against feudal fetters and a liberator of the productive forces of his day.'<sup>120</sup> On the annual commemoration of Cromwell's execution of three Leveller mutineers, these two modes of thought do not exactly clash, so much sit uneasily beside one another. In his speech to the first Levellers' Day in 1976, Tony Benn's reverence for the memory of Cromwell was clear, he found it 'exciting' to be 'in Burford where Cromwell himself spoke' to the Levellers 'after they had been forced to witness the execution of three of their comrades.'<sup>121</sup> The excitement at standing in

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<sup>118</sup> [http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/daniel\\_hannan/blog/2007/06/11/picking\\_sides](http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/daniel_hannan/blog/2007/06/11/picking_sides). Accessed 15.04.2009

<sup>119</sup> Lewis Day, 'March of History', pp.31-32. Clipping available in RSA

<sup>120</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Correspondence, Discussion*, December 1936, p.31. Clipping available in RSA

<sup>121</sup> Tony Benn, 'The Levellers and the English Democratic Tradition', text of a speech delivered in Burford, 15 May 1976 (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2000), p. 13

Cromwell's footsteps lent a slightly odd note to the commemoration of his brutality. Benn tried to hold both legacies intact, declaring that 'Cromwell's Commonwealth represented a formidable advance' even though 'it did not – [...] and probably could not – adopt the principles' of the Levellers.<sup>122</sup>

To Conservatives, Cromwell and the Levellers seem most obviously to represent dangerous insurrection, but as Hannan shows, they can also be seen as ancestors in the fight for civil liberty against an overweening state. The former position was epitomised in 1976 by Douglas Hurd's opposition to the Levellers' Day event taking place in his constituency and opened by Tony Benn, then Minister for Energy. Hurd wrote to the Labour Secretary of State for Education protesting at both Benn's presence and at the publicly funded WEA's support for a 'party political occasion'. He particularly objected to 'the use of a church for this political purpose [and] the curious reading of history which promotes these mutineers into martyrs.'<sup>123</sup> It is clear from Hurd's objection to the event that he felt the Levellers' deaths to be a still-contentious topic. There are echoes here of Hobbes' warning that learning of old rebellions could stir men to insurrection.<sup>124</sup> This discussion was revisited in 1988 during a debate on the Security Services. Benn used Hurd's objection to Levellers' Day against him, claiming that it showed that he was 'consistent in his opposition to dissent in any century by anybody.'<sup>125</sup> However, in 2001, David Cameron, Hurd's successor as MP for Witney, spoke about the constituency in his maiden speech. He mentioned the birth and burial places of Winston Churchill, then cast his net a little wider:

West Oxfordshire's political history extends to all traditions. The Levellers, who are now regarded as heroic early socialists, rebelled during the civil war because they believed that their leader, Cromwell, had betrayed the principles for which they fought. I am sure that Labour Members who might

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>123</sup> Quoted on: <http://www.levellers.org.uk/levellersdayhistory.htm>. Accessed 22.05.2008

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1991]), pp.225-6

<sup>125</sup> Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 23 November 1988, col.158

sometimes feel the same way do not need reminding that the leaders of that rebellion were rounded up and shot in Burford's churchyard. William Morris, the socialist visionary, lived and is buried at Kelmscott manor in my constituency, and I have no hesitation in urging all hon. Members to visit that beautiful village on the banks of the Thames which time seems to have passed by.<sup>126</sup>

There are a number of layers to this statement. On the surface, it seems to be a simple piece of party-political humour. Cameron opens out the field apparently in the spirit of political generosity before making a joke at the expense of the Labour leadership. However, the immediate juxtaposition of the next line on the burial place of William Morris, followed by the anodyne encouragement to visit Burford, hints at something more complicated. In joining together Conservative luminaries and two separate parts of what are seen to be the Labour tradition, Cameron also makes an appeal to history *in general*. This has the effect of closing down the political potential of the particular pasts in question. The radical past becomes part of the national heritage.

In contrast to Douglas Hurd, the Conservative MP for Putney, Justine Greening, was a guest of honour at the events marking the 360<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Putney Debates in November 2007. It may well be that as a post-Thatcher Conservative, Greening wanted to celebrate the Levellers as part of a libertarian, meritocratic tradition. However, it now seems impossible to untangle the Levellers' story from the way it was told by Christopher Hill and the Communist Party Historians between the 1940s and 1970s. The exhibition in St Mary's Church, Putney featured video interviews with both Tony Benn and Billy Bragg. Yet, the threat and political potency which lay behind the first Levellers' Days seems to have all but dissipated today. No longer a freshly resurrected tradition designed to 'stir men to insurrection', the Levellers' story is now as quaint in its evocation of '60s radicalism

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<sup>126</sup> Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 28 June 2001, cols 867-8

and '70s class conflict as in its seventeenth-century associations. Levellers' Day has now become something of an institution itself, with a somewhat nostalgic, even 'small c' conservative atmosphere. In 2008, one member of the audience asked a question 'in memory of Brian Hodgson, the late Chair of the Witney Constituency Labour Party, who many of you will know and who always came to Levellers' Day and always asked a question, usually about land tax.'<sup>127</sup> This was greeted by warm laughter. Although the subject of the question may have been radical, the fact of its being asked seemed in many ways safe and comforting. With its cake stalls and plant sales, the entire event had something a retro air. It seems that Levellers' Day not only commemorates events in the seventeenth century but also displays elements of nostalgia for more recent history – particularly the 1970s and '80s, when the divisions between left and right were still clear-cut. This could be seen in the warm reception given to guest speaker Giles Fraser's joke that as a vicar, he 'may be the last member of a nationalised industry up here [on the platform]'.<sup>128</sup> The 'History' section on the Levellers' Day website finishes in 1990 and clearly revels in the tales of local Conservative opposition to the early events.<sup>129</sup> The narrative does not seem to have moved on to accommodate a time when Conservative MPs would pay tribute to, still less attend, events organised to commemorate the Levellers.<sup>130</sup>

### Progressive Conservatism?

It isn't only that Conservatives have absorbed aspects of the socialist narrative into their own tale of national history; they have also undergone their own change in temporal positioning. And, like Labour, this has led them to a presentist position. We have already seen Thatcher's embrace of the whiggish narrative of the Glorious Revolution. The disputes over her uneasy position between Conservatism and Liberalism will be explored further in

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<sup>127</sup> Levellers' Day, Burford, 17 May 2008. Personal recording.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> <http://www.levellers.org.uk/levellersdayhistory.htm>. Accessed 22.05.2008

<sup>130</sup> It does not even dwell on the implications of the fact that in 1979 no one in the parish objected to the WEA fixing a plaque commemorating the Levellers to the wall of Burford Church.

chapter three. Yet it was Thatcher's desire to undo, rather than to absorb and preserve, the recent past, which marked her divergence from conservatism. She strongly believed that it was necessary to go back in order to progress forwards. More recently, David Cameron has adopted the language of progressivism, particularly with regard to environmentalism. As we will see in chapter five with the Communist Party of Great Britain, environmentalism is often taken as a marker of the modern, of the progressive. It necessitates a looking-forward and a desire to act on behalf of future generations, not through obligation to the past. Its entire rhetoric is founded on a vision of the present as the past of the future – a past which has the potential to be heroic or catastrophic. Cameron's repeated refrain of the need for 'a new politics' also has resonances with the repositioning of the *Marxism Today* group in the CPGB, with the SDP and with New Labour. All of those projects were based on forward-looking optimism and Cameron reaches for the same language: 'let's make 2010 the year for a new politics. Let's be positive about our own policies'.<sup>131</sup>

Whether this translates into social democratic policies is a different matter. Cameron's 2009 Conference speech was audacious in its claim to the progressive legacy, angrily asking 'what is progressive about spending more on debt interest than on helping the poorest children in our country?'<sup>132</sup> Like Blair before him, Cameron tried to separate ends from means. Specifically, he sought to uncouple Labour's traditional concerns from their favoured policy solutions. He decried Labour's 'arrogance' in thinking 'that they are the ones who will fight poverty and deprivation' and declared that 'it falls to us, the modern Conservative Party to fight for the poorest who you have let down'. There is, of course, nothing new in Conservative concern with alleviating poverty; it is the fact that he chose to do this in the language of progressivism rather than 'one nation' Conservatism that is striking –

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<sup>131</sup> David Cameron, New Year Message 2009/10

<sup>132</sup> David Cameron, 'Putting Britain Back on her Feet', Speech to the Conservative Party Conference, Thursday, October 8 2009. Available at: [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/David\\_Cameron\\_Putting\\_Britain\\_back\\_on\\_her\\_feet.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/David_Cameron_Putting_Britain_back_on_her_feet.aspx). Accessed 13.09.2009

Cameron even proposed a 'progressive reform plan for Europe'. Yet the solutions he proposed were unmistakably Conservative: smaller government, personal responsibility, entrepreneurialism, family values and reclaiming powers from Brussels. It is also worth noting that Cameron's claim to be the rightful defender of the NHS was foretold by Drucker, who warned that while the memories of 'May Day Rallies, Miners' Galas, Burns' Suppers and the like' were frequently renewed, the NHS was allowed to slip into the *national* memory and thus ceased to be 'the exclusive political property of the Labour Party.'<sup>133</sup>

While Cameron's language still bears significant traces of conservative pessimism (Britain is in 'decline', society is 'broken' and traditional answers, such as marriage, will provide solutions), his temporal outlook remains overwhelmingly presentist. The Conservative Party may claim that Britain is worse off in 2010 than in 2007 but this is framed as a case of mismanagement. Cameron went far beyond absorption of the status quo in his statement that 'Devolution; the minimum wage; civil partnerships' are 'good things' which would be retained by a Conservative government.<sup>134</sup> The story is of specific political actions leading towards an improved future:

Let's be honest that whether you're Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat, you're motivated by pretty much the same progressive aims: a country that is safer, fairer, greener and where opportunity is more equal. It's how to achieve these aims that we disagree about [...]<sup>135</sup>

It is significant that Cameron also used this statement to declare that 'between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats there is a lot less disagreement than there used to be' over the means to achieve those 'progressive aims'. While there are clearly immediate electoral considerations here, given the possibility of a hung parliament, the deeper resonance of the

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<sup>133</sup> Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos*, p. 37

<sup>134</sup> David Cameron, 'Putting Britain Back on her Feet'

<sup>135</sup> David Cameron, New Year Message 2009/10

'progressive consensus' cannot be overlooked. As discussed in chapters three and four, this is a description of the occasional co-operation between Labour and Liberals / Liberal Democrats. When Conservatives and Liberals have worked together, most notably in 1946-50, this has been under the banner of anti-socialism rather than progressivism.

#### Conclusions: Temporal Convergence?

Since the late 1970s we have seen a convergence in temporal attitude between the parties that is more marked than a convergence in their positions on social and economic policy. This convergence can be summarised as a presentist use of the past and privileging of the future in a way which is at odds with both socialist and conservative privileging of the past as, respectively, radical obligation and venerated inheritance. In essence, the parties have coalesced around a form of historical whiggism. Butterfield's exploration of *The Whig Interpretation of History* emphasised the extent to which it derives not only from a particular political narrative which favours the forces of progress, the Protestant radicals who formed Parliament in its current shape; it is also the inevitable consequence of a history which works backwards from the present. This is a history which favours the winners, seeing the past as the means by which we arrived safely at the present moment. It is therefore not surprising that such an approach continues to shape party political perceptions of the past.<sup>136</sup> It is often argued that although the Liberals lost the parliamentary battle in the twentieth century, their ideas – from Keynesianism to the Beveridge Report – continue to shape the political scene.<sup>137</sup> I suggest that the same analysis could be applied to the historical positioning of whiggism.

In 1969 J.H. Plumb expressed the liberal hope that 'history' would replace what he called 'the past'. This was, in Plumb's words, 'always a created

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<sup>136</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1931])

<sup>137</sup> See for instance *It's About Freedom*, The Report of the Liberal Democrat Working Group, Policy Paper 50 (June 2002), p. 11



ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes.<sup>138</sup> Henry Drucker was doubtful about Plumb's thesis, arguing that 'people whose identity is threatened by history-books do not cease believing as a result of what has been written.'<sup>139</sup> He felt that this was particularly true of the working-class communities upon which Labour politics were founded. As Drucker recognised, there is a clear connection between the institution of professional history, the development of public or 'clock-time' and the dominance of parliamentary politics. Moreover, he noted that Plumb's faith in the rational triumph of history was rooted in his own professional background in eighteenth century political history. Whilst I agree that the political 'past' is very far from being replaced by researched and authenticated 'history', there has been a clear shift in the kinds of 'pasts' which the parties remember. The parliamentary story of Labour as a political party has largely replaced that of labour as a movement and – albeit at a slower rate – the Conservatives are developing an institutional sense of self to compensate for their loss of status as the party of the national past. But this is not 'history' in Plumb's sense. As Plumb himself recognised, the progressive political narrative of the whig interpretation of history was itself a myth, which though '[m]ortally wounded, certainly dying [...] still exists and still exerts force [...] In the middle-class reading public of England it still provides support for their bruised and damaged egos.'<sup>140</sup> In the case of political parties, this is not necessarily connected to the idea of Britain as a Great Nation, more importantly it bolsters faith in the efficacy of parliamentary politics itself.

Party politics occupies an unusually privileged position with regard to historical time. As we have already noted, political discourse trades in the 'historic': monumental battles, epoch-changing decisions, great personalities. This discourse is a reflection of the way in which the nineteenth century

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<sup>138</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003 [1969]), p. 17

<sup>139</sup> Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos*, p. 32

<sup>140</sup> Plumb, *The Death of the Past*, p. 86

development of professional history was associated with the legitimation of the nation state. It is worth noting here the chronological conjunction of the professionalisation of politics and of history, indeed, from Clarendon to Acton, many of the same individuals were involved in both professions. Another way of thinking about this conjunction between 'the historic' and political action is that, as privileged public actors, politicians are able to take a major role in *making time*. As Bonnie G. Smith showed in her seminal work on the gendering of history, the professionalisation of history in the late nineteenth century was associated with an appropriation of time:

Just as natural scientists produced a 'deep time' in their studies of the universe, earth, and species, historical scientists produced this time for the nation-state by filling its emptiness with the historical facts of great national events and great men's lives.<sup>141</sup>

The passage of time was 'signalled by the movement from one great (universal) individual man to the next' and depended upon 'details' in order to distinguish between them. The nature of this time was associated with whiggish ideas about 'the developmental man' and, according to Smith, this emphasis on the masculine 'weighted time as progressive'.<sup>142</sup> Although the gender bias of historical time has (arguably) been challenged, and both academic and public history have embraced social, working-class and women's history, it is clear that parliamentary politics is still governed by old historical time. For this reason, as we will see in subsequent chapters, histories produced by political actors continue to focus on individuals, on the passage from one leader to the next and on details to distinguish between them.

As we will see in chapter two, the Labour History Archive and Study Centre is housed at the People's History Museum in Manchester. It holds the archives

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<sup>141</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 151

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 151-2

of the Labour and Communist parties as well as various groups and campaigns associated with labour movement and working-class history. Yet, 'people's history' is no longer seen as an exclusively socialist history. The new museum will be opened by the Prime Minister in 2010 – even if there has been a change in government. Jim Garretts, the then Keeper, explained to me that both William Hague and Charles Kennedy have opened exhibitions and 'supported the museum for a number of years'. He noted that politicians of all persuasions are keen to be involved with the museum and attributed this to the fact that each political tradition can claim its own great figures – from Gladstone, Disraeli, Keir Hardie and Churchill up to Thatcher and Blair – 'who will remain in British political history long after their deaths'.<sup>143</sup> They are thus aware of the importance of history – and of their own place within it. Moreover, parliamentarians seem to see themselves as having a role as custodians of the national past. Speaking in a 1991 parliamentary debate on the proposed National Curriculum for History, Labour MP Gordon Oakes addressed the Deputy Speaker 'and all right hon. and hon. Members as 650 history teachers' with a particular role in transmitting the history of British democracy:

We all take tourists around this place. We talk about Simon de Montfort and the row between the Lords and the Commons. We talk about the civil war and show them the painting with Mr. Speaker Lenthall. We then take them into the Chamber and out into Westminster Hall. When I take people round, I talk about the fight for democracy over hundreds of years – it did not happen overnight – and I tell them about events that have occurred in the past 20 years.<sup>144</sup>

We will examine this debate in further detail in chapter three but regardless of the content of the history curriculum or the exhibits in Brown's imagined Museum of Britishness, the fact remains that these are sanctioned voices

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Jim Garretts, then Keeper at the People's History Museum, Manchester. 19 August 2008

<sup>144</sup> Gordon Oakes, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 29 April 1991, cols 129-130

speaking about recognised events. They are the stories it is possible to tell, possible to hear. Their radical potential is unavoidably dissipated as they become 'history', part of the unfolding national story which John Vincent reminds us, 'cannot be undone', it can only be 'absorbed'.<sup>145</sup> We return to Patrick Wright's warning that 'the agencies of public meaning' were 'contain[ing] the labour movement within an overwhelmingly conservative vision of the "national past"'.<sup>146</sup> But this is not simply a question of the stories the left choose to tell, their celebrations of lost battles and tributes to long-dead martyrs. Rather, it is implicit in the very nature of parliamentary politics. The need to tell a story of *events* which can be given a political meaning will forever contain and constrain alternative voices. This is whig history, in Butterfield's sense, which favours the forces of progress even where it defends conservative principles and which emphasises the power of parliament even as it celebrates radical outsiders. It is absolutely history in the service of the present.

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<sup>145</sup> Vincent, *The Seven Voices of Conservatism*, p.14

<sup>146</sup> Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, p.157

## CHAPTER TWO

### Structures of Memory: Parties and their Pasts

In this chapter I examine the ways in which parties explicitly attempt to structure and preserve memory, through written histories, commemorations, party history groups and archives. One of the most striking aspects is the degree of similarity between the three principal parties on this point. Whilst there are differences of detail, of emphasis and of ideology, the overall picture is surprisingly homogenous. I suggest that this is a consequence of the increasing professionalisation of the political parties, which – as noted in chapter one – tends to bring them together under a shared parliamentary narrative. It is significant that the widest divergence between the mnemonic cultures of the parties occurs at local level. Moreover, memory is largely maintained by a small group of interested individuals, rather than by the parties on an institutional level.

By looking at the structures, or technologies, of memory, this chapter examines how ideological approaches to the past, explored in the previous chapter, are instituted within the parties in practice. One of the main themes here is the relation of 'history' and 'memory'. Perhaps the best known consideration of this question is that of the historian Pierre Nora in his seven-volume exploration of the 'sites of memory' of the French state, nation and Republic. For Nora, history was memory's pale replacement. He described how '*lieux de mémoire*' exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience.<sup>147</sup> Instead, he argued, living memory had been replaced by 'historicized memory', that is memory which has ceased to function naturally and has instead become a form of 'prosthetic memory'.

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<sup>147</sup> Pierre Nora, 'General Introduction: Between Memory and History', in Nora (ed), *Realms of Memory*, p. 1

Nora identified three key characteristics of 'historicized memory'. First, the modern 'obsession with the archive [...] in which we attempt to preserve not only all the past but all the present as well.'<sup>148</sup> I will examine party political approaches to archiving below. Second, the desire to research the pasts of various groups to which we belong, from professions to ethnicities. Political parties would clearly fit into this pattern, with the principal organ for organising such activity being the parties' history groups, to which amateur and professional historians contribute research and participants in significant events commit their memories. Interestingly, Nora links such practices to the rise in interest in individual psychology, which he believed coincided with the decline of memory as a 'social practice.'<sup>149</sup> This type of memory operates as an 'individual constraint', which shapes individuals' (but *only* individuals') future behaviour. Through seeking to 'belong', they take on an individual psychological 'debt that can never be repaid'.<sup>150</sup> This is reminiscent of the obligations of the past – conceived in different ways on the left and right of the political spectrum – explored in chapter one. Nora's third category is of 'alienated memory'. Historical knowledge has the effect of distancing us from the past – it creates a sense of discontinuity rather than reinforcing the links between past and present. This seems to be closely related to Svetlana Boym's description of reflective nostalgia, discussed in chapter one. Nora's category is similarly reflective and similarly characterised by the awareness of absence: 'The whole dynamic of our relationship to the past is shaped by the subtle interplay between the inaccessible and the nonexistent. If the old ideal was to resurrect the past, the new ideal is to create a representation of it.'<sup>151</sup>

Mainstream political parties provide a particularly interesting case study in terms of historicised memory. First, we might expect that because political parties exist to fulfil a definite purpose and perpetuate habits and traditions

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>149</sup> *ibid*, pp. 10-11

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 12

as a matter of necessity rather than through a self-aware desire to connect with the past, memory is more likely to be 'living' rather than historicised. Second, parties are (often painfully) aware of their role in 'history' and thus have a particular interest in shaping the conditions by which written history can be created. Third, parties occupy a curious position between official, top-down memory and bottom-up or 'community' memory.<sup>152</sup> While political actors are 'elite' voices and certainly well represented within the national archive, they are there as individuals leaving their papers to university collections and as actors in the official records of Whitehall and Westminster. Records of the parties as political institutions have only been developed relatively recently and it is significant that the first official party political archives were the Labour and Communist parties, rather than the more established, 'elite' Liberal and Conservative parties. This grew out of the bottom-up desire to document working-class and labour history, beginning in the early twentieth century with the Plebs' League, the *Book of Labour* and really taking off in the 1960s and '70s with History Workshop, the Working Class Movement Library and the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*. The Conservative and Liberal party archives may not be part of the cultural democratisation of archives themselves, yet they could be seen to grow out of a growing awareness of the importance of archives, which that movement has created. The difference of course is that they (and the Labour Party archive now) are kept 'for the nation' rather than as a particular form of identity affirmation. These are not 'community archives' of memories and memorabilia; they are repositories of formal documents: minutes, letters, reports.

The collection, organisation and preservation of archives is one of the most explicit methods of moulding the historical record. The selection and exclusion of records shapes the stories which later historians will be able to write. As Michael Lynch reminds us: 'the practices and struggles associated

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<sup>152</sup> For a full discussion of the nature and history of 'community archives' see Andrew Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28: 2 (October 2007), pp. 151-176

with composing, assembling and controlling access to documents play a substantive role in history as well as in the scholarly reconstruction of history.<sup>153</sup> The archive is not just a record of the past; it is also a way of documenting the present. Through the collection and preservation of archives we attempt to speak to the future – to future historians, to familial or ideological descendents, or to the merely curious. As Thomas Osborne has put it, the archive is 'oriented towards a space of public contestation, towards a never-ceasing politics; oriented – one is tempted to say dialogically – towards some or other kind of recipient, the future.'<sup>154</sup> I would therefore like to deal with the three main parliamentary parties' archives at some length, before moving on to consider other forms of history and memory. Finally, I will highlight some of the key themes which emerged from my research into the structures of party political memory.

### Party Archives

Each of the parties has its own archive. The Labour Party's forms the core of the Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), attached to the National Museum of Labour History (now the People's History Museum) in Manchester. In January 1994 the Museum also acquired the papers of the disbanded Communist Party of Great Britain, which had previously been held at the Communist Party Library in Hackney. These are now also part of the LHASC as are, for instance, the papers of Militant, The Unity Theatre and Socialist Sunday Schools. Until 1988 the Labour Party Archive was part of the central organisation of the party, held at its headquarters and managed by a salaried member of staff. The move to Manchester was made in response to a lack of space. Conditions in the basement storage area had become cramped and were restricting the ability of the archivist to collect further materials. The chance to move to a purpose built archive centre, which could become the focal point of labour history more widely was gratefully

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<sup>153</sup> Michael Lynch, 'Archives in Formation: Privileged spaces, popular archives and paper trails', *History of the Human Sciences*, 12:2 (1999) pp. 65-87 (67)

<sup>154</sup> Thomas Osborne, 'The ordinariness of the archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, 12: 2, (1999) pp. 51-64 (56)



seized.<sup>155</sup> However, there is also a suggestion that the party had grown less interested in its archive, that it was no longer as central as it once was.<sup>156</sup> The Labour Party archive initially had an entrance fee of one pound, which was waived for members; the Communist Party archive was never intended to be open to anyone beyond the party. It is significant that neither of these archives were housed in university libraries, Stephen Bird explained that the ability to keep them as a separate collection, rather than subsumed into a larger body of materials, was important.<sup>157</sup>

In contrast, the Secretary of the Conservative Archive Trust, Sheridan Westlake, is very proud that the Conservative Party archive is at the Bodleian Library with the status that brings with it. He emphasised that this was a collection of national importance and 'the biggest and the best political archive, in terms of size, in terms of budgets, in terms of full-time staff devoted to it and as reflected as well by its location in the Bodleian.'<sup>158</sup> The Conservative Party Archive was only assembled as a single body in 1978, under the influence of historian Lord Blake. Previously the papers had been scattered among a range of institutions, including Conservative Central Office and Newcastle University Library. It is unclear why the decision was made to establish a complete archive at this time, except a general sense that 'the collection was too fragmented and no one was in charge of it'.<sup>159</sup> It may also have been a slightly delayed consequence of Blake's research into *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill*, published in 1968. The aim was 'to consolidate [the records] and get them catalogued, [...] to bring it all together in one place and make them available to people.'<sup>160</sup> The influence of Lord Blake was clearly important and considerations of space and other

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Stephen Bird, former Labour Party Archivist, founder of Labour Heritage, Manchester, 6 November 2008

<sup>156</sup> Stephen Bird interview; interview with Helen Roberts, then Archivist, Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, 15 August 2008

<sup>157</sup> Stephen Bird interview

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Sheridan Westlake, Secretary to the Conservative Archive Trust, London, 28 November 2008

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Jeremy McIlwaine, Conservative Party Archivist, Oxford, 16 December 2008

practical matters may also have played their part. The Bodleian was chosen partly because of Blake's personal connections as Provost of The Queen's College but also because 'there was a recognition that it was a collection of national interest, it wasn't just of local interest to the party [...] there doesn't seem to have been any doubt that it should go to an academic library.'<sup>161</sup> The collection is managed by the Conservative Party Archive Trust, which became independent from the party in 1998, following the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act. It maintains strong links with the party through its Secretary, who is a senior member of party staff as well as the day-to-day contact with the archive.

The Liberal Democrats are a particularly interesting case in terms of the production and preservation of memory as they were formed just twenty years ago through a merger of two parties. Each of the parties coming into the merger had its own political narrative, structure and heritage. The Liberal Party, a shadow of its former self, has a stake in reiterating its achievements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Social Democratic Party was itself just seven years old but its founder members were renegades from the Labour Party and saw themselves as the heirs to Attlee and Gaitskell, rather than Asquith and Lloyd George. This complicated situation is explored in more depth in chapter four, but it clearly has important implications for the structures of memory examined here. The Liberal Democrats are formed of two mnemonic communities, two historic traditions.

The Liberal Party Archive was established at the London School of Economics, following the discovery of a great many records in a disused room at the National Liberal Club around the time of the 1987 election (shortly before the merger), when space was being cleared. They went to the LSE, due to a 'connection' with the then archivist Angela Rospin, and were supplemented with further material from the party's headquarters in Cowley Street.<sup>162</sup> The

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<sup>161</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Sue Donnelly, Liberal Party Archivist, London, 17 December 2008

LSE is also the official depository for material produced by the Liberal Democrat Party since 1989, although, as we will see below, deposits are infrequent and limited. The papers of the SDP, produced during its brief life from 1981 to 1989, are housed at the Albert Sloman Library at Essex University. The driving force behind the acquisition of the papers was Professor Anthony King who was preparing to write a large study of the SDP with Professor Ivor Crewe, his colleague at Essex University. 'He indicated to the librarian in 1987 that the SDP might be looking for a home for their archives' and, following a speculative letter from the Librarian to the party's headquarters, the transfer of 'three vanloads' of material was arranged in the late spring or summer of 1988.<sup>163</sup> A number of further small accessions were made up until 1990 and the Library has also acquired the papers of a number of individuals associated with the SDP, including Bill Rodgers and Alec McGivan, its National Organiser. Nigel Cochrane, who manages the collection, was not at the Library at this time but thought that from looking at the transfer papers, 'it appeared that the SDP were anxious to get their papers off the premises at Cowley Street as quickly as possible' and speculated 'that there probably were a lot of different factions in the office at the time.' In particular, he highlighted that 'the papers were actually here in the library, in the university before I suppose there was a formal agreement in place. It seemed important for them to be moved quickly.' He wasn't sure whether this was due to political reasons or more prosaic considerations such as 'boxes piling up on the floor – space, issues like that, having to clear an office'.<sup>164</sup> There does not seem to have been any feeling from either side that it would be appropriate to house the papers of the Liberal Party and the SDP together, reinforcing the separation between the heritages of the two parties. The two histories are not presented as the path to a shared present and future.

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Nigel Cochrane, SDP Archivist, Colchester, 5 December 2008

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

In addition to each of the party archives there are a whole host of private collections of the papers of their key figures. There is by no means an automatic assumption that these papers will go to their respective party's archive. Many politicians prefer to donate the papers to their own university library, such as Barbara Castle and Harold Wilson in Oxford or Roy Hattersley in Hull. In particular, the Churchill Archive Centre in Cambridge has been the beneficiary of a number of deposits, from its initial acquisition of the Churchill Papers, to later deposits by Margaret Thatcher and – somewhat controversially – Neil Kinnock. This latter collection still rankles and stories attributing blame (mostly to Charles Clarke, then Kinnock's research assistant) continue to fly. Speculation about the final resting place of Tony Blair's papers is rife. That said, the archive centres are mostly on friendly terms. In 1997 the Political Parties and Parliamentary Archive Group was formed to provide a common base from which to lobby for the preservation of political records. Its members meet regularly and find that they have 'common problems', ranging from 'the lack of funding'<sup>165</sup> to 'the fact that the parties are not always that actively interested in the history', as we will see below.<sup>166</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine explains that 'The organisation is very small, it's very informal but it's very helpful.'<sup>167</sup> The group also established a database of political records.<sup>168</sup>

The archivist's main concern is with the researcher. They intend to preserve records of the past and present to enable their study in the present and future. The motivations of depositors – whether they be organisations or individuals – are somewhat more obscure. For instance, they might have a general sense that 'what they were involved with was important' and that records of it should be retained.<sup>169</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine has found that senior Conservatives are keen to preserve their own papers: 'they're very conscious that they want to preserve their own record, to show what they've

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<sup>165</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>166</sup> Sue Donnelly interview

<sup>167</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>168</sup> Stephen Bird interview

<sup>169</sup> Helen Roberts interview

achieved'.<sup>170</sup> Individuals might also want to ensure a particular view is represented in history, for instance, 'they might come from a particular strand within the Labour Party where they think that they want that to be represented in the history of the party.'<sup>171</sup> In this way, archives could be seen as attempts to speak directly to history. Helen Roberts noted that politicians 'can be quite selective about what they actually give you.'<sup>172</sup> This is where history collides with myth – myths are not necessarily untrue, but they can involve a certain shaping of the evidence, a certain moulding to fit an agreeable narrative arch. There are occasionally significant gaps in archives. The papers relating to Margaret Thatcher's period as Secretary of State for Education when she was required to implement the previous Labour Government's policy of closing down grammar schools at the same time as she was actively campaigning for their retention is one example. The 'fragmentary' nature of Industrial Department papers of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the sixties, seventies and eighties is another. As Kevin Morgan noted in his introduction to the online collection, 'it is clear that they had also learnt the necessity of discretion in the compiling of written records of discussions of any sensitivity.'<sup>173</sup>

However, these are fairly limited examples and the evidence suggests that for the most part, political parties are not doing anything as active as attempting to mould history. That might be the concern of individual politicians, concerned for their own reputation, but the parties as a whole seem to be largely unconcerned with the preservation of their documents. Stephen Bird emphasised the extent to which the Labour Party was focused on the present, on the need to win elections, run councils and act as Government or Opposition. He contrasted this with the more 'historically-inclined' Communist Party, who did not have such practical concerns.<sup>174</sup> If

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<sup>170</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>171</sup> Helen Roberts interview

<sup>172</sup> Ibid

<sup>173</sup> Kevin Morgan, *An Introduction: Communist Party of Great Britain*. Available at: <http://www.communistpartyarchive.org.uk/9781851171354.php#IND>. Accessed 22.09.2009

<sup>174</sup> Stephen Bird interview

this is a feature of national politics, it is even more pronounced at local level. As Jeremy McIlwaine put it:

I think the thing is with the party and particularly constituency associations is they're volunteers, they're party activists, their primary motivation is politics, not history and so if they've got minute books back to 1885 it's not interesting to them, it's interesting to me but it's not interesting to them.<sup>175</sup>

This lack of interest in the past for its own sake reinforces my observations about the presentist inclination of practical party politics. It could also be seen as the desire to 'do without archives', described by Achille Mbembe as a 'denial of debt'.<sup>176</sup> Helen Roberts, then Archivist at the LHASC, picked up on this theme, stating that the New Labour project was about 'making a new start and appealing to the country in a different way' and that, consequently, its architects 'don't necessarily all want all the historical baggage that goes with the party's history'.<sup>177</sup> This was a view which I encountered time and again in formal and informal conversations about the Labour Party's attitude to its history. There is a clear sense of 'denial of debt', of refusing the obligations which might previously have been seen as an intrinsic part of Labour leadership. As we noted in chapter one, Labour's past has become heritage, of interest to historians and useful for reinforcing identity when necessary but no longer an active presence. Whilst this attitude may be particularly associated with New Labour, Sue Donnelly explained that it is also present in other parties:

We're all battling against the fact that the parties are not always that actively interested in the history [...] and in fact a lot of the time they want to distance themselves from the past. I think that's often less the case with the Liberals than with Labour and the Conservatives, it depends what sort of

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<sup>175</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>176</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2002; Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 19-26

<sup>177</sup> Helen Roberts interview

phase they're going through really. They do sometimes want to distance themselves, New Labour didn't particularly want to be seen as that closely aligned with [...] pre-1979 Labour for instance. And bits of the Conservative Party didn't want to be associated with other bits.<sup>178</sup>

Labour is, however, unusual in that its disregard for the past seems to be a new phenomenon. Stephen Bird emphasised that the Labour Party has 'always been an archival party', founded by resolution and structured around minutes, motions and memoranda. He attributed this to the fact 'that it was established by the grassroots [...not] by a group of people in Parliament, so everything is done by the book.'<sup>179</sup> This is not archival in the sense of historicised memory – it is a world of working, breathing documents. Some of these documents are of course archived; for example, the LHASC holds all the minutes of the NEC from its formation. But they are not created with history in mind, they are an ongoing record which the party generates as it works. Stephen Bird related how the Labour Party Archive had originally been part of the party's Library and attached to its Research Department. Records were collected because they were needed. Yet, as Helen Roberts notes, these records are no longer preserved in the quantities they once were. It is clear that the party is becoming less bureaucratic as it becomes more centralised; it no longer depends on policy resolutions passed up from the grassroots and debated at Conference. Indeed even the NEC no longer plays the role it once did. After describing how the NEC minutes grew in size over the decades, Stephen Bird noted that now 'they're getting smaller and smaller and smaller' because 'the policy making's done elsewhere'. He added a note of reflection: 'so how the Labour Party's going to operate in the future and where the records are going to come from, I don't know.'<sup>180</sup> Bird's linking of the operation of the party with its production of records is telling but no longer seems to reflect the way the party works.

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<sup>178</sup> Sue Donnelly interview

<sup>179</sup> Stephen Bird interview

<sup>180</sup> Stephen Bird interview

Ilaria Favretto has described the British parties' archives as 'an exemplary' case, in comparison with those of other countries. She particularly singles out the Labour and Conservative parties and attributes the quality of their records to the British electoral system which has discouraged party schism and encouraged parties with enough resources to care for their records. The relative scarcity of Liberal records is therefore attributed to its more turbulent history and small size in the mid twentieth century.<sup>181</sup> While there is clearly a great deal of truth in this, it fails to take account of the curious position of the Labour Party's papers, which were collected from almost the beginning of its history and carefully preserved for the future. As Favretto herself notes, Morgan Phillips, General Secretary from 1945, had a long-standing desire to found a museum and archive for the collection.<sup>182</sup> The Labour Party's early formation of its archive and reverence for the written record was associated with its working-class autodidact culture. It was also an awareness of the needs of this projected future historian which inspired Communist Party activists Ruth and Eddie Frow to scour the country, collecting the thousands of texts relating to the history of the labour movement and working-class radicalism which make up the Working Class Movement Library:

We know that eventually there will be a change in our social system; that the country will be governed by those who produce the wealth; that there will be a need and a longing to know what preceded these changes. Recognising this we set out to gather a library of books and ephemera relating to the labour movement in its broadest aspects. To do so we have travelled the length and breadth of the country buying, taking into care and gathering together the history of the working class and its allies in the man struggles which have taken place over the past two hundred years since the developments associated with the industrial revolution.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ilaria Favretto, 'British Political Parties' archive: An Exemplary Case', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 18:2 (1997), pp. 205-213 (212)

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 206

<sup>183</sup> Edmund and Ruth Frow, 'Origins of the Working Class Movement Library: travels with a caravan', in *History Workshop Journal*, no. 2. Reprinted in Michael Herbert and Eric Taplin



The Frows' dedication to the creation of a labour movement archive was not a question of resources, it was a political, ideological task. It was an attempt to carve out a niche of history, to make its mark on the memorial landscape of the country. The decline of this culture in recent decades could then be taken as a reflection on the labour movement's growing self-confidence as an object of historical study and, in the case of the Labour Party, the sense that it was functioning as a potential party of government, guaranteed a place in history by the power of its actions, not the richness of its archive. While the 'change in our social system' might not have taken place in the way that the Frows anticipated, it is clear that the history of the labour movement has become an important area of historical study. The antiquarian and second-hand bookseller, George Kelsall, attributed this to the work of the Frows, noting that 'It can be no coincidence that the growth in political and working class history studies at our universities has taken place in the last 30 years or so [...] the pioneering work of Eddie Frow must have played a major part in establishing the credibility and worth of such studies.'<sup>184</sup>

Despite their much longer histories, both the Conservative and Liberal party archives are primarily focused on the post-1945 period. While the Conservative Archive is far more complete, due to the way papers were stored at Central Office, in both cases this is down to internal organisation. In the case of the Liberal Party, Sue Donnelly explained that 'Liberals were famously independently minded and therefore did not have the kind of party structure until very late that the other parties had.'<sup>185</sup> Similarly Jeremy McIlwaine explained that although Conservative Central Office was founded in 1870, the earliest CCO document in the archive dates from 1911. He attributed this to the fact that 1911 was the year when the first Party Chairman was appointed. McIlwaine also hinted that the party's attitude to

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(eds) *Born with a Book in his Hand: A Tribute to Edmund Frow, 1906-1997* (Salford: North West Labour History Group, 1998), pp. 27-32 (29)

<sup>184</sup> George Kelsall, Antiquarian and Second-hand Bookseller, 'Edmund Frow, remembered', in *ibid*, pp. 33-35 (34)

<sup>185</sup> Sue Donnelly interview

the past has not always been as reverent as modern sensibilities expect. In particular, 'during the war there were some recycling drives' and 'the attitude of the party towards old papers' seems to have been along the lines of 'we can chuck this out, get it recycled for the war effort'. Therefore, he concluded 'a lot of the pre-war papers went for recycling.' He attributed this attitude to the fact that 'it's primarily a political archive'.<sup>186</sup> Yet, McIlwaine qualified this point, noting that the Conservative Party archives 'are working documents but I don't think they're consulted as much as they probably should be.' He thinks that the party has a 'lack of interest in its own archives'; consultation of the documents by party workers is 'rare' and the archive certainly isn't 'an automatic first point of contact'. He could only think of one example when somebody from the party had come to carry out archival research in order to learn from previous policy work done within the party. This is something that McIlwaine is trying to remedy through increasing awareness of the archive and its collections. He says that party researchers 'just don't use historical information but I just feel that they could use it more if they knew it existed.'

When he took an exhibition stand to the Conservative Party Conference, McIlwaine found that people were 'really pleased to hear that there was an official party archive but they weren't really interested in the history'. In fact, 'all they wanted was memorabilia – they wanted the postcards, mugs, they weren't interested in the history of the party. That's what they wanted from the stand. That's why we were there to them; if we didn't have what they were looking for, they wanted to know which other stands had memorabilia.'<sup>187</sup> Both Westlake and McIlwaine felt that the primary purpose of the Conservative Party Archive was to preserve records of national importance, for the sake of future historians. McIlwaine regretted this, wishing that the party would make more use of its own history but Westlake, the party man, seemed less concerned. Apart from a concession to the view

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<sup>186</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

<sup>187</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

that 'Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it', his main interest was that documents should be preserved and made available to historians and that the Archive Trust should take a role in 'promoting the study of Conservative history' within wider society.<sup>188</sup> That view seems to have been shared by party members; they were glad that their past was being preserved and hoped others would research it and turn it into history, but what they really wanted was a commercialised symbol to remind them of their own memories. McIlwaine also noted that the more recent memorabilia sold much better than that relating to earlier periods. This could be something to do with the personal popularity and success of Margaret Thatcher as opposed to Stanley Baldwin but he also felt it had something to do with historical distance – the older material was 'ancient history'; it did not speak to living memory.<sup>189</sup>

The parties' approaches towards archiving are complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, the preference for recent material, for reminders of their own memories, could be taken as evidence of the kind of externalised, historicised memory that Nora described. On the other, the lack of interest in the archives as repositories of memory and emphasis on the present day-to-day practice of politics suggests exactly the opposite – that the parties remain communities rather than sites of memory. As we will see below, there is a basic continuity to party political activity which keeps activists within a constant narrative of belonging without the need for formal mnemonic aids or externalised technologies of memory. Yet, as I argue throughout this thesis, their approach to the past is fundamentally presentist in orientation, using it as model, legitimation or accusation. The overriding story of the archives seems to be a faith that party politics is necessarily historic and that consequently records should be preserved for future historians. There are, however, important party differences, with the Conservatives exhibiting the highest level of confidence in the importance of

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<sup>188</sup> Sheridan Westlake interview

<sup>189</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

their archive and the Liberal Democrats the least. Labour's position has, as we have seen, changed considerably in recent decades.

### Written Histories

A three-volume history of the Labour Party, *The Book of Labour*, was written as early as 1925, on the grounds that 'The history of the Labour Movement, as the story of the workers' achievement in establishing their political and industrial organisation for the pursuit of a policy they have defined for themselves, has yet to be told in a complete and comprehensive narrative. [...]The want of such a work has been increasingly felt.<sup>190</sup> In his introductory section, Arthur Henderson put it in these terms:

The Labour Party is still in the making, and its history has yet to be written. Nevertheless, it is surprising that a complete, detailed, and authoritative account of its origin, its developing organisation, and its broad general aims has not been penned. Perhaps it is that most contemporaries of this already formidable and still expanding movement are only now beginning to realise the enormous importance and the permanence of the Labour Party as a vital force in our national and international life. The historian only deals in retrospect; he treats of the accomplished, seeking to record the facts and to interpret their meaning accurately for succeeding generations. The writing of history does not coincide with its making. The building up of the Labour Party belongs to history in the making that remains still to be dealt with by the historian.<sup>191</sup>

At local level, Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) have been far more likely to produce written histories and publications celebrating anniversaries than either of the other two parties; Local Liberal Parties have occasionally published such histories but Conservative Associations and Clubs only very rarely. In the tiny number of Conservative Association histories I have found, the emphasis has been on institutional longevity, increasing membership,

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<sup>190</sup> Herbert Tracey (ed), *The Book of the Labour Party: Its History, Growth, Policy and Leaders* (London: Caxton Publishing Company, 1925), p. ix

<sup>191</sup> Rt Hon Arthur Henderson MP, 'Introductory: Labour as it is To-day' in *ibid*, pp. 8-34 (10)

cumulative prosperity and the buying of premises for the party headquarters.<sup>192</sup> They are very much stories of institutions and structures, rather than of ideals and political battles. However, Conservative Associations are much more likely to produce yearbooks than either of the other two parties.<sup>193</sup> This suggests a different attitude towards past and future, a different positioning of themselves on the temporal axis: a tendency to focus on the present as the history of the future, rather than on the past as an institutional legacy. It would also seem to tie in with the Conservative Party's far less developed sense of itself as an institution with a partisan history.

All of the parties have, at some level, produced collections of their historic texts. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, the selection of *Great Liberal Documents*, attempted to set the party's own documents into a longer tradition of liberal thought. It therefore stretches from Milton's *Areopagitica* to the 2004 collection of essays *The Orange Book* and its 2007 response *Reinventing the State* (discussed in chapter four).<sup>194</sup> The 2004 seventy-fifth anniversary of the Conservative Research Department (CRD) was marked with a commemorative brochure, featuring a short history by Alistair Cooke and a collection of reproductions of some of the CRD's archival materials, from a 1931 proposal for a scheme of Conservative Education to a brief note from Thatcher to Cooke, thanking him for sending her a copy of the 1987 Campaign Guide.<sup>195</sup> The CRD history's focus on the 'backroom boys' (and girls) has its echo in the Labour Party's collection of biographies of members

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<sup>192</sup> This sample comprises W.S. Carroll, *92 Years: A Chronicle of the Richmond and Barnes Conservative Association, 1880-1972* (Surrey: Thameside Property Trust, 1972) and the *Association of Conservative Clubs, 1894-1994, Centenary Souvenir Programme*, Blackpool 2 July 1994 (London: KP Partners in Publishing, 1994) which as well as a history of the Association of Conservative Clubs, also contains two case-study Conservative Clubs: Finedone in Northamptonshire and Fairwater in Cardiff

<sup>193</sup> The British Library catalogue shows 108 records for Conservative Association yearbooks, from Acton to Wycombe but only two for Constituency Labour Parties (Ipswich and Leeds) and none at all for either Liberals or Liberal Democrats. Accessed 16.06.2009

<sup>194</sup> Liberal Democrat History Group, *Great Liberal Documents* (London: Liberal Democrat History Group, 2008)

<sup>195</sup> Alistair Cooke (ed), *75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Conservative Research Department, 1929-2004*, (London: Conservative Research Department, 2004)

of its central party staff, produced for the 2006 Centenary of the Parliamentary Labour Party.<sup>196</sup> This was accompanied by a reproduction of the *Star Album*, a collection of postcards and biographies of the original twenty-nine Labour MPs elected to the 1906 Parliament and held in the Labour Party Archive in Manchester.<sup>197</sup> The principal publication, as we will see below, was a series of obituaries of these twenty-nine 'Pioneers' written by their successors in each constituency.<sup>198</sup>

Classic political texts can also become sites of memory in themselves, used to provide inspiration, guidance or rebuke in future years. E.H.H. Green points out that Harold Macmillan authorised a facsimile edition of his 1938 plea for Conservatism to pursue *The Middle Way* in 1978 as Thatcher prepared to take the party sharply to the right.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, a facsimile edition of Anthony Crosland's 1956 *The Future of Socialism* was published in 1994 as Labour sought to anchor its modernisation project in the philosophy of Crosland and Gaitskell.

### Commemorative Events

In addition to the publications mentioned above, the 2006 Labour Centenary Group focused on encouraging CLPs and trade unions to undertake their own events and research to mark the occasion. One of the CLPs which entered into the project with particular enthusiasm was Battersea which staged an 'Any Questions' style panel with a 1906 theme, with party activists and guest speakers (in full costume) taking the parts of a suffragette, Lord Bolingbroke and so on. Although it was a fun event, the members enjoyed their attempts to make it as accurate as possible; one audience member had even looked up similar debates from the period to enable her to ask appropriate questions. This is partly about re-enactment but it has an aspect of

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<sup>196</sup> Terry Ashton, *Labour Party Staff: A Century of Serving, 1906-2006* (London: The 1906 Labour Centenary Group, 2006)

<sup>197</sup> *The Star Album* (London: The 1906 Labour Centenary Group, 2006, replica edition)

<sup>198</sup> Alan Haworth and Dianne Hayter (eds), *Men Who Made Labour* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

<sup>199</sup> Green, *Thatcher*, p. 32

playfulness, of irreverence and of parody suggestive of reflective rather than restorative nostalgia, as explored in chapter one. Moreover, Battersea CLP decided to go one step further and celebrate its own centenary as a constituency party in 2008 by producing a DVD of its history. This was a large project, involving the skills of history professor Penelope Corfield as organiser and researcher, actors Prunella Scales and Timothy West as voiceover artists and many other members of the constituency in providing materials and memories, contributing to the research and adding their voices to the narration. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Part of the impetus behind the 2006 centenary celebrations was a sense of regret that the centenary of the Labour Representation Committee's foundation in 1900 had passed with very little activity within the party as a whole. Rather than 'a great programme of events' the event was marked by a gathering of the party's elite at the Old Vic theatre, to hear a speech by Blair and then a union-sponsored drinks party. In addition there was a small ceremony to re-dedicate the plaque at the site of the founding of the Labour Representation Committee.<sup>200</sup> This was in stark contrast to the cross-country roadshow undertaken to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1945 election victory. As both anniversaries fell under Blair's leadership, the difference clearly cannot be attributed to the difference between 'Old' and New Labour's approach to its past. The difference is in the messages they were able to convey. 1945 was Labour's greatest election victory, a positive image to evoke in the run up to 1997. 1900, on the other hand, was too long ago, too associated with the socialist, marginal image Labour was trying to shake and its centenary fell in 2000, when New Labour no longer needed to work on its image and could afford a moment of safe nostalgia. Hayter notes that the 1956 Jubilee of the party fell at a similarly 'interesting moment in the party's history.' While 1906 was still a living memory within the party, and the Pioneers 'not distant names but known characters' to some within the

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<sup>200</sup> Dianne Hayter, 'Practitioners: The PLP 1906-2006', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 60:1 (2007), pp. 153-163 (153)

party 'most obviously Hugh Gaitskell and his revisionist followers—the past was an ambiguous inheritance' inhibiting attempts 'to start looking to how they thought the future would develop.' Therefore, she commented, 'Anniversaries would subsequently take a back seat as the party debated its place in what some thought was a newly dynamic society, one in which there was little place for the past.'<sup>201</sup> The celebration of the 1950 jubilee had been a large event, involving attempts to involve the surviving pioneers. This is discussed in more detail below. Labour's 2006 centenary celebrations managed to generate interest in the party's past and served as a focus for demonstrating continuity and solidarity. They did not however, leave 'a lasting impression' on the party. The aspect of ongoing historical political education which Dianne Hayter had advocated 'soon became just a means of promoting best practice in electioneering'.<sup>202</sup> This is a clear case of the 'presentist' mindset.

### Party History Groups

The party history groups are organised for each of the major parties by volunteers, outside of the official party structures. They combine written history, memory and commemoration and bring together professional historians, key actors from the parties' pasts and party activists with an interest in history. Each of the groups has its own journal, in which articles from professional and amateur researchers are printed alongside reminiscences from political actors. They also hold meetings at which the views of historians are reinforced or challenged by first-hand recollection. Each of the groups was formed in response to a perceived lack – a sense that the parties' pasts were not being remembered as much as they should be and that consequently the lessons of the past were not being learned. The directors of each of the three party history groups expressed a desire 'to learn the lessons of history'<sup>203</sup>; 'to learn from specific instances in the past'<sup>204</sup>.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid, p. 158

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, pp. 162; 161

<sup>203</sup> Interview with Iain Dale, Director, Conservative History Group, London, 24 October 2008



They have all organised meetings on particular past events with lessons for contemporary politics: the Liberal Democrats explored hung parliaments in the twentieth century, and particularly the problems faced by the Liberals in 1924; the Conservatives have tried to learn the lessons of the 1906 opposition; and in November 2009 the Labour History Group held a meeting to discuss whether 'Labour's history [can] offer a guide to weathering the [current economic and political] storm?'. Duncan Brack and Greg Rosen, directors of the Liberal Democrat and Labour History Groups, respectively, also emphasised the role of historical knowledge in contemporary political debates, both in terms of demonstrating political legitimacy ('so if we're writing a paper on social justice or equality, we will say, "look, the Liberal Party has a great record on this"<sup>205</sup>) and in order to pass on learning from the past ('There's not much point in having fantastic new ideas which aren't actually new ideas, they're just the same ideas as previously but people haven't realised it.'<sup>206</sup>). However, the director of the Conservative History Group, Iain Dale, stressed that the pressures of party politics often don't leave room for learning from the past:

I think politics is so in the moment that you're constantly wrestling with the problems of today and if you have learnt from the past it's fairly sub-conscious and there's nothing I could point to where I think, 'well the Conservative Party made the right decision there because they learned from what happened in 1943, or something'. Politics just doesn't work like that.<sup>207</sup>

Although Dale thought that Conservatives have 'more of an appreciation of history' than the other parties, that they have 'history in their DNA', as we saw in chapter one, this is generally connected more to the national past than to their own institutional history.<sup>208</sup> In comparison with the other two

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<sup>204</sup> Interview with Duncan Brack, Director, Liberal Democrat History Group, London, 24 June 2008

<sup>205</sup> Duncan Brack interview

<sup>206</sup> Interview with Greg Rosen, Director, Labour History Group, London, 9 June 2008

<sup>207</sup> Iain Dale interview

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

parties, Conservatives are noticeably less demonstrative about their past. As Dale put it, 'You'll get fond references to Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher but that's about as far as it goes.'<sup>209</sup> As previously noted, this is a sign of confidence, which Dale contrasts with the Labour Party's need to remember and commemorate its martyrs: 'I think the Labour Party have an emotional attachment to the struggle and the history of the working classes probably more than the history of the Labour Party. Maybe that's because they've always had to really fight to get onto the electoral map.'<sup>210</sup>

Yet the parliamentary Labour Party history of the Labour Party History Group is a long way from labour *movement* history, such as that produced by the North West Labour History Group, which was established in 1973 to bring 'together those interested in the history of the working class and its organisations, unions, co-operative societies or political bodies'.<sup>211</sup> Articles in its regular journal tend to focus on social and economic themes; typical titles include 'An End to Sweating? Liverpool's Sweated Workers and Legislation 1870-1914', 'Liverpool's Women Dockers' and 'Labour Migration, Racial Foundation and Class Identity: Some Reflections on the British Case'.<sup>212</sup> Even Labour Heritage, an organisation which explicitly 'promotes the history of the Labour Party', also has more of a labour movement and social history perspective.<sup>213</sup> Recent articles in its *Bulletin* have included an oral history of residents of two housing estates built for employees of the Great Western Railway and a 'Worm's Eye View of the General Strike'.<sup>214</sup> Reports of meetings also reflect a great deal of unease around the New Labour project and particularly its distance from the movement's history. For instance, at

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

<sup>211</sup> [http://www.workershistory.org/about\\_us.html](http://www.workershistory.org/about_us.html). Accessed 20.11.2009

<sup>212</sup> Janet A.C. Golding, 'An End to Sweating? Liverpool's Sweated Workers and Legislation 1870-1914', in *Journal of the North West Labour History Group*, 21 (1996/97), pp. 3-29; Jo Stanley, 'Liverpool's Women Dockers' in *ibid* 25 (2000/2001), pp.2-14; Laura Tabili, 'Labour Migration, Racial Foundation and Class Identity. Some Reflections on the British Case', in *ibid*, 20 (1995/96), pp.16-35

<sup>213</sup> <http://www.labourheritage.com/>. Accessed 20.11.2009

<sup>214</sup> Veronica Kelly, 'Little Moscow and Moscow Row', *Labour Heritage Bulletin* (Autumn 2008), pp. 1-5; Dr Peter Kingsford, 'A Worm's Eye View of the General Strike' *Labour Heritage Bulletin* (Spring 2007), pp. 12-13

the West London History Day in 2006, John McDonnell MP reportedly complained that 'too little had been done to celebrate Labour's centenary and this was because New Labour did not want to acknowledge the history of the Labour Party.' He felt that 'New Labour was not part of the Labour tradition and Labour's aims to redistribute wealth and power to working people and their families had been abandoned.'<sup>215</sup>

The Liberal Democrat History Group is concerned with asserting and celebrating a Liberal identity, which had become marginalised in the mid twentieth century. Brack described this as 'partly about morale raising' as it shows the 'lonely activist' that they are part of a 'great tradition', that the Liberals 'weren't always the third party, we were in power, we have a great record of really great legislative issues behind us, we can do it again.'<sup>216</sup> The Liberal Democrat History Group also plays a more explicitly bonding role than those of the other parties. It was established soon after the merger between the Liberal Party and the SDP and was partly intended to socialise the SDP members into Liberal traditions and history. Brack remembered 'thinking "we have two different traditions trying to come together and we ought to try and encourage an awareness of historical tradition in the activists in the new party and [...] don't pretend that everything started in March 1988, it had long historical roots."' This narrative expresses a clear sense that it was the SDP who were joining the Liberal tradition rather than *vice versa*. Yet, although the Liberal tradition obviously took precedence, Brack also stressed that he was not coming from a rigid interpretation of what that tradition entailed, or what it meant in the present day:

There was a very solid tradition and, in a sense, I didn't really care what people thought it was but I wanted to give them the forum in which people

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<sup>215</sup> Report on West London Labour History Day – '1906 and all that', *Labour Heritage, Bulletin* (Winter 2006), pp. 6-7

<sup>216</sup> Duncan Brack interview

could help, work out for themselves what it was and what they thought the party's traditions were.<sup>217</sup>

Yet this openness to challenge and to suggestions only works if members have their own interpretation of history. Otherwise, the stories the groups choose to tell (and those they don't) help shape the limits of what the party's history and its traditions are. This is perhaps particularly important for new members. The inherent tension of socialising new members into an identity based on tradition and historical lineage can be seen in another of Brack's statements: 'I wanted to [...] help people understand where they came from, particularly for new members who might not be aware of the historical roots'.<sup>218</sup> The claim that by becoming Liberal Democrats, former SDP and Labour Party members (and those who were entirely new to party politics) could discover 'where *they* came from' is striking. It speaks volumes about party political identity and the notion of discovering one's true self in the history of the collective.

It seems that this exercise has been successful. In 2008 I surveyed the membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group and found that former SDP (and indeed former Labour-SDP members) are just as likely to say that they are interested in Liberal History as the former Liberal Party members.<sup>219</sup> None said that they were more interested in Social Democrat history. In fact, one noted that he 'enjoyed the Liberal history because much of it was new to me with my SDP / Labour background.'<sup>220</sup> Yet, despite Brack's belief that the division between the Liberals and SDP is 'completely irrelevant now' and that the majority of members joined post-merger, the history group is dominated by former Liberal Party members. Although the comparative proportions of former Liberal and former SDP members are roughly in line

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> I also surveyed the Labour and Conservative history groups, however, the much smaller memberships meant that the sample sizes were too small to use. I have therefore only used the Liberal Democrat results in an indicative way, rather than as the basis of a comparative analysis.

<sup>220</sup> LDHG survey, Sept-Oct 2008. Respondent 46

with the party as a whole, the History Group contains rather more of both these groups, at the expense of post-merger members. In 2006 Whiteley, Seyd and Billinghamurst found that 43% of Liberal Democrat members had come from the Liberal Party, 14% from the SDP and 42% were new to politics.<sup>221</sup> My figures were 49%, 19% and 28% respectively.<sup>222</sup> This may be a result of the age profile of the History Group. What is perhaps more worthy of note is that none of the forty-one former Liberal Party members who responded to my survey, not one named social democracy as part of their political tradition. Among former SDP members, however, social democracy and liberalism were mentioned in equal number. As discussed in chapter four, divisions within the party remain.

### Fragility of Memory

The first of the themes I want to consider is the concern with the fragility of memory and consequent desire to collect and preserve them in the form of written histories. Many party histories speak of an explicit desire to recover and/or preserve both documents and first hand testimonies before it is too late. In one of the few Conservative Association histories I examined, the author explained that this work was undertaken to mark the rather unusual milestone of ninety-two years in the life of the organisation because 'Many of the records of the growth of the Association have already been lost or destroyed. It was felt that a summary of those that survive should be made before they too get lost or destroyed.'<sup>223</sup> Writers of party histories of all political persuasions commonly complain about the dearth of source material

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<sup>221</sup> Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Antony Billinghamurst in *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 22

<sup>222</sup> From eighty-five survey respondents, three have never been members of any political party, two came from the Conservatives, twenty-one had joined the Liberal Democrats post-merger (one of whom has subsequently left), forty-one came straight from the Liberal Party, two had been members of both the Liberals and the SDP and ten had come from a purely SDP background (or in one case, SDP and Green). One of these has subsequently left the Liberal Democrats. Just five respondents had ever been Labour Party members – four had left Labour to join the SDP and one had been a member of the Liberal and Labour parties but not the SDP.

<sup>223</sup> Carroll, *92 Years: A Chronicle of the Richmond and Barnes Conservative Association*, p. i

and the carelessness with which what does remain has been treated. These comments are typical:

I found it almost impossible to find any relevant photos or election leaflets to reproduce here. Even the party faithful seemed to have the unfortunate habit of throwing out what are really priceless records of the past.<sup>224</sup>

When the study began it soon became evident that the local libraries and County Archives Office were almost totally devoid of documentary material much of which must be lying stored in people's attics, or long since destroyed.<sup>225</sup>

John Saville made a similar plea in his Introduction to the first volume of his and Joyce Bellamy's *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, noting that they had been constantly surprised by 'how quickly quite prominent personalities can fall into obscurity.' They hoped, he said, 'in the years ahead to persuade as many of the living as possible to set down at least some of the basic facts of their lives' as 'The most grievous problem for all who work in this field is the continuous loss of original records' due to 'thoughtless destruction.' He felt that 'The education of members of the labour movement as to the importance of documents, correspondence and the like is no doubt a long-term matter, but a more positive attitude on the part of national leaders, industrial and political, would greatly help research workers in this field.'<sup>226</sup>

Yet, even within the institutionalised setting of the dominant political parties, approaches to the preservation of records are haphazard to say the least. Stephen Bird explained how, as Labour Party Archivist, he had encouraged Constituency Labour Parties to preserve their own material and deposit it at

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<sup>224</sup> Don Mathew, *From Two Boys and a Dog to Political Power: The Labour Party in the Lowestoft Constituency 1918-1945* (Lowestoft: Lowestoft Constituency Labour Party, 1979), p. 3

<sup>225</sup> Muriel Burton, *100 Years of Liberalism: General Elections in Mid & North Oxfordshire* (Mid-Oxon Liberal Association, June 1977), p. i

<sup>226</sup> John Saville, 'Introduction', in Joyce M Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* vol. I (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1972), pp. ix-xiii (xi)

their local records offices. However, this does not seem to have been a particular success. Indeed, the historian and Battersea Constituency Labour Party member, Penelope Corfield, commented that 'there's never any advice or comments about what to do with our minutes [or] our memorabilia.' She felt that the official attitude in relation to the preservation of records was 'pretty casual', and attributed it (like Stephen Bird) to the fact that the Labour Party is 'an organisation on the move, not institutionalised in quite that way'. As an historian, she admitted feeling 'a certain amount of anguish' at disposing of material and explained that, following the research for their centenary celebrations, members of the CLP were hoping to put together their own local archive, with the aim of encouraging others to research the party.<sup>227</sup>

Both the Battersea CLP's centenary and the celebrations of the Labour Party at national level involved historical research projects and each was seen not only as an opportunity to learn more about the party's past but also to pass on that learning – and the historical sources which document it – to imagined researchers of the future. The importance of academic history and archive materials are key here. Similarly, Hayter's decision to write her history of Labour's right wing in the 1970s and 1980s was partly inspired by a need to preserve the story before it disappeared. She said, 'I was really worried that people were dying or they were retiring, going to smaller houses and clearing out their attics. So to begin with, I just wanted to stop things being thrown away.'<sup>228</sup> The other motivating factor was a desire to correct the mythology which was being constructed around the birth of New Labour. This is discussed further in chapter four, but was compounded by the knowledge that if the story was not set straight now, while the documents and witnesses were still accessible, perhaps it never would be: the historical record would be fixed. It is telling that Dianne Hayter wrote *Fightback!* as a PhD thesis. Though she 'never thought of [her]self as an

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Penelope Corfield, Battersea Constituency Labour Party, London, 24 July 2008

<sup>228</sup> Dianne Hayter interview

historian at all at all at all' and still doesn't think of herself as being 'an historian in the sense of really knowing history', she felt it was necessary to become one, 'otherwise it would have been Dianne's take on it.' In order for her book to have the authority to challenge the prevailing wisdom, she felt it needed to have an academic weight, to be 'respected' and seen as 'objective'. She also wanted to learn how to handle the source materials she was now collecting. Similarly, Penelope Corfield repeatedly emphasised her role 'as a professional historian' in scripting the Battersea centenary DVD and the faith that the other party members had placed in her 'professional expertise as a researcher.'<sup>229</sup>

The faith placed here in history (perhaps with a capital H) over political narrative and memory is important to our story. Hayter noted that 'had I just written it from memory it would have been so wrong.' Her research revealed the flaws in her own memory, both in comparison with the stories she gained from oral history interviews ('there was a lot I just hadn't understood. But a lot I had just misremembered') and in terms of the rigour demanded by her supervisor ('I couldn't write "we met on a dark day" without "was it dark? What time did the sun go down that day?" Everything had to be proved, sourced and footnoted'). Hayter's experience in compiling *Fightback!* has convinced her that saving immediate, accurate records is vital. She now writes 'incredibly detailed notes' at NEC meetings which she regularly sends to the Labour Party Archive in Manchester, with the thought that 'sometime in the future when they're opened there will be a very good verbatim report.'<sup>230</sup>

In her 1983 history of Chichester CLP, Dorothy Howell-Thomas, went to great lengths to describe the current state of the party, its recent ups and downs, agreements and disagreements. She was concerned to set the party in national and historical context, noting for example that its members had

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<sup>229</sup> Penelope Corfield interview

<sup>230</sup> Dianne Hayter interview



always been moderate and left-of-centre, voting against proscriptions and expulsions but sometimes for incomes policies.<sup>231</sup> Here she was concerned to show the character of the party, not presumably for her immediate audience, but for those who approach the text across the distance of time, locality or political allegiance. Howell-Thomas indicates that the history of the party, based on research into its documented past, reveals 'the reality of the Labour Party – a reality very different from its media-image.'<sup>232</sup> This is an argument for history above mythology and ideologically driven narratives. Similarly, Greg Rosen sees the role of the history group as bringing authenticated 'history' to party members who might otherwise be distracted by simplistic mythic narratives. He is aware that 'There are many people involved in politics who are happy to wallow in the myths', who are 'not aware of the extent to which their knowledge of history isn't a knowledge of history, it's an accumulation of myth'. Rosen is explicit about the history group's role in 'bursting the balloons' of myth. Partly this is a question of archival research, of returning to the original texts:

How many people can spend the time to go to the British Library, spend an hour, spend more than an hour finding where something might be, ordering it, waiting for it to come out, tracking through these sort of dog-eared and mouldering and collapsing copies of the 1907 Labour Conference transcript? Not many. And why should they have to? So one of the things I've tried to do with the Labour History stuff is to make, it's a sort of people's history, to make it more accessible, to make history easier, not in any dumbing down way but in a literally just making it easier to get to and giving people those opportunities, which not all take up but some do.<sup>233</sup>

Duncan Brack is somewhat more optimistic, finding himself 'pleasantly surprised by how much [Liberal Democrat History Group members] seem to

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<sup>231</sup> Dorothy Howell-Thomas, *Socialism in West Sussex: A History of the Chichester Constituency Labour Party* (Chichester: The Chichester Constituency Labour Party, 1983), pp. 25-6

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26

<sup>233</sup> Greg Rosen interview

know about the history.<sup>234</sup> The Liberal Democrat History Group places more emphasis on its members' historical work in terms of research, which Brack describes as 'contributing to [...] real [...] academic thought'. This was a deliberate strategy aimed to counter a perceived lack of interest in the party among academics in the 1980s and '90s when 'hardly anyone was writing papers about the party, it was all about the Conservatives or Labour.'<sup>235</sup>

### Personal Testimony

The sense of being part of an unfolding history, or something which should be recorded for posterity, is also a strong feature in the publishing of political diaries and (to a lesser extent) memoirs. In the preface to his *Downing Street Diary: With Harold Wilson in No. 10*, Bernard Donoughue explains the unspoken and 'ambiguous understanding' he had with Wilson on this subject. On polling night, 28 February 1974, as it became clear that Wilson would win, he hinted to the young Donoughue about the value of keeping such a record:

[...] he also pointed out to me how privileged I would be, as a then academic specialising in twentieth-century politics, to be able to observe the British political scene from the peak. [...] He recalled the 1960-63 relationship between the US President, John F Kennedy, and the Harvard Professor Arthur Schlesinger, who became historian to the Kennedy court. He urged me to retain 'a clear memory' of all that I witnessed. [...] Mr Wilson certainly did not actually suggest that I should keep a diary [...]. He disliked the whole idea of personal revelations about himself [...] and he often made disapproving noises about ministerial colleagues who he knew were keeping diaries. Yet he knew that I was by profession a contemporary historian who had written on Labour Party history [...]. It was my view that he was not averse to my preparing to write a record of his time as Prime Minister.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Duncan Brack interview

<sup>235</sup> Ibid

<sup>236</sup> Bernard Donoughue, *Downing Street Diary: With Harold Wilson in No. 10* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), pp. ix-x

Donoghue's standing as an historian first and political actor second seemed to give him a privileged position with regard to the retention of memory and historical evidence from the unfolding present. Richard Crossman's *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, similarly written from within a Wilson government (albeit 1964-70), was also kept with the historical record firmly in mind. He notes that the first preparations he made for his position as Housing Minister were those concerning the recording and storage of weekly audio diaries: 'I was aware when I made these arrangements that if I could achieve a continuous record of my whole Ministerial life, dictated while the memory was still hot and uncorrupted by "improvements", this part of the diary would become of quite special historical value.' Crossman had begun keeping a diary in 1952 during the Bevanite controversy, also for historical reasons: 'I felt that if no one kept a record of it, in twenty years' time it would be impossible for a historian to get any coherent and continuous picture of what went on among the Bevanites.' While Crossman explains that he wrote as a political scientist putting forward a controversial theory of modern British democracy, it is the future historian to whom he more frequently refers. He also went to the trouble of appointing an Oxford historian to act as guarantor for the project, confirming that his final text was faithful to the original transcript and compiling notes, biographical details and link passages. Finally, he noted that 'For students who are interested in textual problems the full text of the manuscript will be permanently available in Warwick University.'<sup>237</sup>

Yet Crossman's *Diaries* were not undertaken in the same spirit as Donoghue's. Rather than simply deciding to record everything as it happened, for the sake of posterity, Crossman had an immediate political aim. He envisaged his diary as an important step 'towards lighting up the secret places of British politics and enabling any intelligent elector to have a

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<sup>237</sup> Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Vol I, Minister of Housing 1964-66* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 12; 10; 15

picture of what went on behind the scenes between 1964 and 1970.<sup>238</sup> Donoughue voluntarily abided by the fifteen-year embargo recommended (but not enforced) by the 1976 Radcliffe Report and claimed not to mind the delay that caused, because 'this diary is simply a particular record and is not a reflective view of history, nor is it arguing part of a current debate, nor for or against any role in history.'<sup>239</sup> Crossman, in contrast, wanted his *Diaries* to appear as soon as possible, on the grounds that 'Since many passages will be vigorously challenged, it is best for both the personalities involved and for the historian that the controversy should take place while memories are green.'<sup>240</sup> The publication of Crossman's *Diaries* in 1975, just five years after the events they describe, caused a legal and media sensation, carefully chronicled by Hugo Young. Young describes Crossman's intention 'to blow apart the tradition of secrecy in British government, and destroy the conventions which had rendered innocuous or misleading, or both, the writings of most former Cabinet Ministers about their time in office.'<sup>241</sup> The story of the publication of the *Diaries* is heightened by Crossman's impending death. According to Young, Crossman's 'first action after hearing that he could expect to live only a little longer' was to appoint literary executors with the instructions 'to make sure that the pressure, which will undoubtedly be brought from Whitehall and from Westminster to prevent publication of parts of the manuscript, is completely rejected.' He continued, 'I hold this to be of the greatest importance since it is the publication of the diaries as a whole which will provide a unique historical record of how British Cabinet Government operated in the 1960s'.<sup>242</sup>

The other key aspect of diaries is the immediacy they promise. Both Donoughue and Crossman emphasise that their notes were written in the moment and do not have the benefits of objective reflection found in works

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>239</sup> Donoughue, *Downing Street Diary*, p. xi

<sup>240</sup> Crossman, *The Diaries*, pp. 10-15

<sup>241</sup> Hugo Young, *The Crossman Affair* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape in association with the Sunday Times, 1976), p. 11

<sup>242</sup> Letter from Richard Crossman to Graham Greene, 11 October 1975. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 12

of a more historical bent. They can however, convey the daily experience as life as a political advisor or Cabinet Minister: 'They reflect the realities, including the real trivialities, of daily life. They do suffer from the pressures, distortions and imbalances of a particular instant in time.'<sup>243</sup> This is also emphasised by Alan Clark in the preface to his *Diaries*, where he explains that 'These are not "Memoirs". They are not written to throw light on events in the past, or retrospectively to justify the actions of the author. They are *exactly* as they were recorded on the day; sometimes even the hour or the minute, of a particular episode or sensation.'<sup>244</sup> The idea that what diaries lack in critical reflection they make up for in immediacy and in the transmission of feelings and emotions is interesting. It chimes with Mark Salber Philips' observation on the recent turn towards what he terms 'sentimental history' in that it reflects our desire to know not so much "what happened?" as "what did it feel like to be there?".<sup>245</sup>

All the party history groups stress the importance of witness seminars to their historical understanding. For Brack, the witnesses are an interesting and engaging extra but he insisted that the meetings 'need a bit of analysis as well, we don't want to do just anecdote.'<sup>246</sup> Iain Dale acknowledged the power of having living witnesses at the meetings. He said that a particularly memorable meeting on the Suez crisis had been enhanced by the presence of Eden's widow.<sup>247</sup> However, he also explained that the presence of witnesses could act as a constraint on more critical historical analysis. For instance, a 'sparky meeting' on Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech had been 'inhibit[ed]' because 'people who wanted to be critical slightly felt that they couldn't be because [Powell's widow] was there.'<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Donoghue, *Downing Street Diary*, p. 10

<sup>244</sup> Alan Clark, *Diaries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. ix

<sup>245</sup> Mark Salber Philips, 'On the Advantage and Disadvantage of Sentimental History for Life', *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008), pp. 49-64 (56)

<sup>246</sup> Duncan Brack interview

<sup>247</sup> Iain Dale interview

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*

The witness seminars seem to be much more central to the Labour History Group. Rosen views them as a way of getting to a truth which might otherwise remain obscured. On the one hand, this is a matter of having 'a great opportunity to ask questions of people involved: [...], was it a mistake? You did this at the time, do you regret it? Or, what are the lessons for now, what happened?'<sup>249</sup> This is an example of 'living history' in a very full sense. First, spectators are treated to 'real, live exhibits' who not only speak *of* the past, they also speak *from* it. Their experience is genuine; they were there. But secondly, and most importantly, the audience also sees History itself – the work of telling, ordering, understanding and recording the past – in process. A certain narrative is begun, imposed by the title and structure of the event and by its choice of speakers, but it is open to challenge – to revision – from others who were also there or who have evidence to support their view. It may be that no agreement is reached and that dual or multiple narratives are allowed to stand. Or it may be that the process goes further. For example, at the Labour History Group meeting 'Labour and Militant – twenty years after Liverpool' (24 June 2003), Charlie Turnock responded to a challenge to his depiction of events by producing his own evidence, his notes from the Inquiry into Militant – his *archive*. Faced with this, the challenger not only gave way but also revised his own version of events, his own history. For Rosen this is emblematic of the meetings:

[...] the wonderful thing about Labour History meetings is that people are enormously frank in the way that it's almost a cathartic thing perhaps, people are almost confessional, actually. Which is rather wonderful but it's one of the things that keeps us organising them because, if we didn't do it, it wouldn't happen and history would be missing out on some potentially quite useful evidence [...] it's source material, it's source material in that sense.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Greg Rosen interview

<sup>250</sup> Ibid

As the final stage in this process, the events themselves are recorded, described, archived. They become 'unique historical records',<sup>251</sup> source material for future generations. It has been said that journalism is the first draft of history; the Labour History Group could be seen as an attempt to write the *final* draft, to get the story straight and iron out any creases. This is history of a type the academy could not hope to recreate; it is produced through the live confrontation of participants, of narratives, of histories. Yet this is also history with the doubt left out, untouched by the uncertainties thrown up by forty years of scholarship. Subjective 'memory work' is used in an attempt to reach a rather empirical, positivist idea of 'fact'. Rosen speaks as though by getting the right people in the room it is possible to discover *what really happened*.

The celebrations for Labour's fiftieth Jubilee in 1950 laid great stress on the presence of living witnesses. Adverts were placed inviting members who had been in the party since 1900 to contact the organisers so that they could provide 'testaments' and also be there on the night. Great efforts were made to compile lists of the surviving 'Pioneers'.<sup>252</sup> However, it is not always enough to have been there at the beginning; particularly in politics, more recent actions also must be taken into account. In the case of Labour, a letter was sent to the General Secretary from one Regional Secretary pointing out that they were not intending to include one local Pioneer in the list for honour as his 'record since 1900 was greatly tarnished by his membership of and support for the Liberal Party', consequently 'The Norwich folk just would not agree to it.'<sup>253</sup>

The presence of living witnesses, of those who were really *there* provides a different sort of authenticity, one which includes the sanction of the original participants. Most obviously, this is a feature of war commemoration, which

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid

<sup>252</sup> Various letters to and from Morgan Phillips, October 1948-December 1949, Labour Party Papers, LHASC: LP/GS, 1945-64, Box 22

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 12 December 1949

places veterans at the centre of its rituals in order to pay tribute to their sacrifice and bravery. Graham's Carr's study of war commemoration in Canada stresses the importance placed on the presence of ninety-nine year-old Tom Spear, a veteran of both the First and Second World Wars and of hundred year old Alice Taylor, a 'Silver Cross mother' at Canada's fiftieth annual citizenship ceremony.<sup>254</sup> Peter Glazer's account of the Spanish Civil War commemorative community relates how at a meeting in 2000, a veteran said 'I don't think we should get up on stage anymore. I'm tired of it. Nobody wants to see a bunch of old men up there anymore.' It was one of the younger generation who insisted 'You *have* to get up there. That's always the most emotional part of the show for me. That's why I come'.<sup>255</sup> Glazer concurs, emphasising that 'In the world of docudramas, the vets were the real thing [...] they had been there and done that. You could see it in their bent bodies and wrinkled faces, their raised fists, and their pride.'<sup>256</sup>

The presence of young people is often important to commemoration and Glazer discusses how the Spanish Civil War veterans' community developed 'a new kind of commemorative urgency as they realized that before long, their story would be in the hands of people who did not remember the 1930s, let alone anyone who had participated in the war itself.'<sup>257</sup> Graham Carr has discussed a similar urge among the Canadian authorities to ensure that the ('correct') memory of the Second World War is transmitted to and borne forth by schoolchildren. Their presence at memorial events is considered vital as is the need for them to engage emotionally with the history and – preferably – to establish a personal, familial connection to it.<sup>258</sup> In Battersea, there is a great deal of anxiety among the older members of the party about

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<sup>254</sup> Graham Carr, 'War, History, and the Education of (Canadian) Memory', in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 57-78 (71)

<sup>255</sup> Glazer, *Radical Nostalgia*, pp. 18-19. Original emphasis.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, p. 132

<sup>258</sup> Carr, 'War, History, and the Education of (Canadian) Memory'



being able to pass on the heritage to the younger generation – not just the early history of the party, but also the living memories of current members:

I suppose, on this kind of harking back and this awareness of history, it's not just our really past history but it's also our more recent history – *our* history. And then we've got these young ones coming into New Labour who have the ideals of New Labour, so we've got this divide, so even more we cling to our past and earlier socialist ideals and everything that goes with it.<sup>259</sup>

[The radical younger members are] not a big enough presence for me to think 'oh, thank god'. And it's terrible when you're in your sixties and who's coming through, that's always a problem. [...] You know, I was coming out of college like a banshee by then, wanting to kill Heseltine and Thatcher and all that sort of stuff so it's just a bit of a shame that the country generally doesn't feel radicalised.<sup>260</sup>

The final speaker, Joan O'Pray, was uncertain about the influence of young career politicians who have 'no relationship whatsoever with socialism'. She was particularly concerned that not all the party members shared her 'deep sense of outrage' at the purple posters which arrived with New Labour.

There is also a strong pedagogical element to the party history groups and Greg Rosen, of the Labour History Group, places a particular emphasis on the need to provide 'a forum where younger politicians (who in some cases will be in the position to repeat the mistakes of the past) can learn from history.'<sup>261</sup> However, the meetings also have a nostalgic function. Rosen explained that meetings provide a chance for political activists to relive their pasts together. By this, Rosen meant personal memories; nostalgia for participants' own pasts and reminiscences, not for the labour movement as a

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<sup>259</sup> Interview with Jeanne and Dave Rathbone, Battersea Constituency Labour Party, London, 4 June 2008

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Joan O'Pray, Battersea Constituency Labour Party, London, 4 June 2008

<sup>261</sup> Greg Rosen interview

whole. In fact, as we have seen, he aims to counter any kind of identification with a mythical past. Other mnemonic communities are solely focused on personal reminiscence. In 1992/3, a group of Conservative Party workers in Finchley established a Friends of Margaret Thatcher Group. The purpose of this group was that it 'kept those people that had really been around her together.' It was largely a social grouping, which visited the Thatcher Archive and organised film evenings showing footage of Thatcher speaking at constituency events. It was a place for internal reminiscence and camaraderie rather than for the transmission of memories to those who did not have firsthand contact with Thatcher. After the deaths of several key members, the group ceased meeting.<sup>262</sup>

### Competing Claims

In the absence of living witnesses, relatives or others with personal connections to the memory are often used as a substitute. At Battersea Labour Party's Centenary celebration, it was emphasised that one of the current members, who was present, had known one of the luminaries from the mid-years of the party who, in turn, had known one of its founding members. The importance of this direct line of personal (and, crucially, female) continuity was later stressed to me in interviews:

I think particularly the feminist thing is kind of important. The Charlotte Despard, Caroline Ganley tradition. It's the fact that we have a member here, Lily Harrison, who knew Caroline Ganley and Caroline Ganley knew Charlotte Despard and that matters to me.<sup>263</sup>

So, to have this connection, just through three women to one born in 1845, I think that's tremendous.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> Interview with Tessa and Derek Phillips, Finchley Conservative Association, London, 12 March 2009

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Anne Reyersbach, Battersea Constituency Labour Party, London, 29 May 2008

<sup>264</sup> Jeanne Rathbone interview

As we saw in chapter one, with Barbara Taylor, the link to the struggles of women in the past is an important inspiration for feminist politics. Joan O'Pray described how the Battersea Party's Women's Section had been strongly influenced by its research into radical women from the past. Yet, whilst women such as Aphra Behn were an inspiration, it was Charlotte Despard, with her history in Battersea, who became their figurehead. The legacy of Battersea's Women's Section provides an important reminder that the history of a party cannot be fixed into a single narrative. The campaigns of the 1970s and '80s, particularly those associated with the Women's Section, did not receive as much attention in the Battersea Centenary DVD as their members such as Joan O'Pray, Jeanne Rathbone and Anne Reyersbach might have liked. Moreover, Jeanne expressed disquiet about the focus placed on John Burns; she felt that the reverence given to such 'male working-class heroes' contributed to an overly masculine style of history which 'ignore[d] the fact that women were the first subject class'. In Burns' case she felt that this adulation 'went to his head', marking his absorption into the parliamentary system and eventual turn to Liberalism.

As Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone have discussed, contestation of the past very often focuses 'not [on] what actually happened in the past so much as the question of who or what is entitled to speak for the past in the present.'<sup>265</sup> These problems are heightened in the case of memorials to individuals when the claims and desires of family, party, locality and nation must all be balanced. The role of family members in commemoration is particularly ambiguous. On the one hand, they can lend authority to a commemorative event, acting as proxy for the subject. This is a common feature of such events, from Lloyd George's daughter speaking at Lloyd George Society events, to the presence of family members at party history group witness seminars (discussed above). On 4 April 1968, a bust of Churchill at Conservative Central Office (CCO) was unveiled by his widow.

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<sup>265</sup> Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, 'Contested Pasts', in Hodgkin and Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts*, pp. 1-21 (1)

Correspondence suggests that this was more at the instigation of CCO than of the family: 'We have promised the Churchill family that the ceremony will be amazingly brief. Lady Spencer-Churchill will literally say only one or two sentences.'<sup>266</sup> The bust had been commissioned by CCO, with the intention of having it installed to mark the centenary of Churchill's birth, possibly to accompany the renaming of CCO as 'Churchill House'. The renaming did not happen and the bust was put into storage and action only taken 'towards the end of the Centenary year'. An internal memo notes that it would be necessary to inquire 'about how things should be arranged from the family point of view'.<sup>267</sup> In this case, the presence of the family seems to have been required by the party in order to lend an air of authenticity to the proceedings.

In contrast, the Conservative Party Archive also contains a five-month correspondence with Adam Butler, the son of R.A. Butler, who was keen for the party to commission a portrait of his father to hang in the House of Commons. This suggestion was resisted, on the grounds that it would establish a 'Hazardous Precedent', although Peter Brooke suggested that he would be glad to help establish a private initiative. Butler was disappointed by the response, remarking that 'Although not Leader, I think that my father's contribution must rank very high in the annals of the Party, and for this reason you might possibly like to reconsider whether an initiative could come from Central Office.'<sup>268</sup> Here it is the institutional authority which is required by a family member.

The question of authority can become even more strained in the case of memorials to the long-dead. In certain cases people are able to present themselves as the heirs to a particular tradition and thus sanctioned to speak

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<sup>266</sup> Letter from John Cope to John Stevens, 1 April 1968, Conservative Party Archive (CPA), Bodleian Library, Oxford: CCO 20/1/17, Ch Office, Winston Churchill memorial Nov 1967-March 1968

<sup>267</sup> Memo from Michael Fraser to Chairman, 1 Nov 1967, CPA: CCO 20/1/17, Ch Office, Winston Churchill memorial Nov 1967-March 1968

<sup>268</sup> Letter from Adam Butler to Peter Brooke, CPA: CCO 20/5/184

for it in the present. The case of Tony Benn and the Levellers is probably one such case. He has become very strongly linked with Levellers' Day, having spoken there frequently since 1976. He also feels able to speak *for* the Levellers on current political issues. In his speech at the 1976 event, he selected ten issues which he believed 'would concern them' in England today. He then went on to put words into their mouth to an extraordinary extent, discussing what they 'would' think about a wide range of issues, stretching from industrial democracy to the mass media and from the powers of the European Commission to those of military establishments across the world.<sup>269</sup> Benn continued in a metaphysical vein, with the words:

I say the Levellers *would* do and say all these things were they here today amongst us. But given the power of their ideas to move us, even today, in what sense can we say they are *not* here?

[...]The human spirit, and the ideas it gives birth to, do not die, but live on to refresh those who follow. We who are their descendants and heirs both cherish the memory, and can apply the lessons they have taught.<sup>270</sup>

### Re-enactment

The constituency basis of UK politics is an important basis for memory. In treading the streets, delivering leaflets and canvassing constituents, party activists are physically walking in the steps of their predecessors. Place can be a particularly emotive aspect of memory. This comes out strongly in the literature, often in connection with the desire to retrace footsteps, to walk in the place our predecessors. Graham Carr describes how Canadian school children are taken to the site of the D-Day landings because it is felt to be important for them to trace the same steps as their grandfathers.<sup>271</sup>

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have described how their receptions of their parents' memories of escaping the Nazis in their hometown of Czernovitz were completely changed by being in the place: 'Suddenly, as we talked and

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<sup>269</sup> Tony Benn, 'The Levellers and the English Democratic Tradition' in *The Levellers*, Spokesman Pamphlet No. 92, (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 2000), pp. 11-12

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13. Original emphases.

<sup>271</sup> Carr, 'War, History, and the Education of (Canadian) Memory', pp. 57-78

listened, the barricades and rows of soldiers became visible. And as we walked about this landscape of memory, the streets became animated with the presence of people from that past [...], conjured up by recollection and narration, by our being there, by our presence and witnessing.<sup>272</sup> They explain how 'the location authenticates the narrative, embodies it, makes it real, to the point where it threatens to re-engulf those who come to tell and to listen'.<sup>273</sup>

In 1984 Donald Horne commented on the paucity of memorials to the Tolpuddle Martyrs, as he put it, 'what was, in fact, one of Europe's most significant social creations – the formation of the organized working-class movement.'<sup>274</sup> While the Museum remains small, an annual three-day Festival has since been founded, which ties the Tolpuddle story to ongoing union campaigns. The festival publicity stresses a trail of local landmarks, including the tree under which the martyrs met and their church, where a Methodist service will be held during the festival. Again, the desire to 'walk in the footsteps' is strong. Similarly, just as Levellers' Day is intended to reclaim a part of English history for the left, it also involves the physical claiming of a village for the day. The resonance of a procession of Communist, Anarchist and Socialist banners through a picturesque village in Conservative-dominated Oxfordshire cannot but be felt.

In the case of political commemoration, the link to place can often be about laying claim to the site of remembrance, as much as it is about the experience of retracing steps. For instance, Anne Reyersbach explained that one of the intentions of Battersea CLP's centenary history was that it could be used in campaigning; it would allow the party to demonstrate its long-standing claim to what is now a very marginal seat:

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<sup>272</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "'We Would Not Have Come Without You": Generations of Nostalgia', *American Imago*, 59: 3 (Fall 2002), pp. 253-276 (271-2)

<sup>273</sup> Ibid

<sup>274</sup> Donald Horne, *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History* (London; New South Wales: Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 137-9

One of the original ideas of the 2006 [research] was that we'd use it for campaigning [...] we'd say to people, 'look, you live in Sanders Court; you live in Ganley Court. Do you know why they're called that?' [...] We were going to try and tell people really about how the Labour Party had made their built environment and sort of explain the place-making, to use the trendy expression, the place-making that Labour had done, I suppose. And really remind them of the legacy, with a view, I suppose, to saying, 'do you really want the Tories to go on running this place when what we did was so much more important?' [...] I think it's about reclaiming local history.<sup>275</sup>

However, Reyersbach felt that, in the end, the project had focused on history for its own sake, rather than as an active tool in the fight to retain Battersea. She therefore had 'huge philosophical difficulties' with it.<sup>276</sup> This is another illustration of my wider argument about the 'heritagisation' of political memory.

There is a very real continuity of activity, of purpose and of intention about political campaigning. While Reyersbach felt that this element had been sidelined in the Battersea centenary project, some non-party campaigns have emphasised continuity with the past in order to further their campaigns. The 1981 People's March for Jobs consciously drew on the heritage of the Hunger Marches of the 1930s. Similarly, a great deal of the cultural activity surrounding the 1984/5 Miners' Strike drew on the legacy of earlier strikes. For instance the 7:84 agitprop theatre company staged Joe Corrie's 1928 play about the General Strike, advertised with the slogan 'The end of a long miners' strike ... Joe Corrie's play is about 1926 ... it could be about today'. Later in the programme they reversed this effect by providing the quotation 'People are now discovering the price of insubordination and insurrection. And boy, are we going to make it stick' and then the explanation 'The above is not a quote from a coal-owner after the 1921 strike or the 1926 General

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<sup>275</sup> Anne Reyersbach interview

<sup>276</sup> Anne Reyersbach email correspondence, 15.02.2010

Strike, but the Chairman of the National Coal Board in 1985.<sup>277</sup> In 1985 Mere Commodity Arts also staged a play about the 1942 Betteshanger Miners' Strike. The company was made up of NUM members, support groups and miners' wives 'with some professional help', the production was sponsored by the Kent Area NUM and profits went to the Sacked and Imprisoned Miners Fund.<sup>278</sup> 'The Coal Board's Butchery', a short film produced by the Miners' Campaign Tape Project during the strike, also paints a picture of continuity with previous strikers.<sup>279</sup>

More recently, the campaign group Climate Rush have explicitly modelled themselves on the Suffragettes, dressing in Edwardian costume – complete with 'Deeds not Words' sashes – and chaining themselves to the railings outside the Palace of Westminster. They also staged an 'Edwardian tea party' at Heathrow to highlight their cause and try to organise events to coincide with the anniversaries of key actions in the suffrage campaign. This is an interesting, if somewhat odd, grouping. At first sight, their adoption of Suffragette style seems to be little more than a playful way of drawing attention to their cause. However, their literature reveals a slightly more complicated situation. They describe their action in super-gluing themselves in a chain 'around the same statue as a Suffragette did 100 years ago, to remind our politicians that they need to drastically cut our CO2 emissions'. This is a curious statement. It invokes a sense of collective memory 'to remind' politicians to take action on an entirely different matter to that for which the original campaign was undertaken. The campaigners are trying to impose a line of continuity between events which do not connect, simply by aping their methods and dress. Climate Rush describes itself as a 'women-led grassroots group', 'inspired by the actions of the Suffragettes 100 years

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<sup>277</sup> Theatre programme: 7:84 Theatre Company Scotland, *In Time of Strife* by Joe Corrie, RSA (121)

<sup>278</sup> Mere Commodity Arts, *In the National Interest*, 1985. LHASC: LPGS Collection (uncatalogued) Arts for Labour (inc. Red Wedge 1988)

<sup>279</sup> *The Coal Board's Butchery*, Miners' Campaign Tape Project / NUM, 1984



ago'.<sup>280</sup> It is clear that, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, 'the sense of belonging to an age-old tradition of rebellion provides emotional satisfaction' for this group, despite the lack of obvious connection between the two campaigns.<sup>281</sup>

The basic continuity of party political election campaigning is far more clear. The methods, technologies and social context may differ but the essential activities remain very much the same, particularly the highs and lows of polling day. Electioneering is a functional activity rather than a form of mnemonic contemplation; it is a means by which party members 'perform' their duties. Yet it also helps to orient narrative accounts of activism, both in terms of individual life stories and as a cross-generational account of collective identity and group activity. In particular, this can be seen with the Liberal Democrat's explicit ritualisation of campaigning through singing songs about it at their annual conference. These songs typically emphasise the generational continuity of election campaigning. They also have a commemorative role as they preserve and animate stories of significant victories and defeats in the history of the party. The Liberal Democrat Glee Club instituted by the National League of Young Liberals in 1967 and held at the annual federal conference is an interesting case study of performative memory and re-enactment. The songbooks reveal what might be termed a 'bricolage' approach to memory, a self-aware, self-parodying mixture of old and new, serious and silly, relevant and tangential. The 2008 songbook included the theme tune to Doctor Who on the grounds that 'Of course, all Liberals are Doctor Who fans; it goes with the territory.'<sup>282</sup> There is a constant renewal – or, rather, a layering – of memory, with songs frequently added and updated. This is a clear example of living memory, firmly tongue-in-cheek, irreverent yet vital.

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<sup>280</sup> See <http://www.climaterush.co.uk/index.html>. Accessed 19.06.2009. Also a campaign leaflet entitled 'Climate Rush', distributed June 2009

<sup>281</sup> Hobsbawm, 'The Social Functions of the Past: Some Questions', p. 13

<sup>282</sup> *Liberator Songbook*, Nineteenth edition, (London: Liberator, 2008), p. 42

The experience of singing is important across all three political parties, with 'Jerusalem' as the one constant, able to appeal to patriots, reformers and socialists alike. Singing could be seen to be an important embodied experience, not just referencing political ancestors but re-experiencing their passions through the singing of inherited songs. In his study of the commemorative activities of a Spanish Civil War veterans' association, Peter Glazer is clear that the performances they put on are not just 'mimetic representations'; they can exert an almost transformative power over the audience: '[w]hile singing or listening to this march, this martial anthem – a practiced rhythmic artifact of bodily camaraderie and militance – audiences may take in and perform some lingering physical trace of what it meant to go to Spain in the 1930s.'<sup>283</sup> This is reminiscent of Paul Connerton's argument that '[c]ommemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative (only) in so far as they are performative.' And that 'performative memory is bodily'.<sup>284</sup> Connerton believes that it is through commemorative bodily performances that the narrative of social memory is transmitted. This narrative is 'more than a story told – it [is] *a cult enacted*'.<sup>285</sup> Connerton rejects the common view that there is a 'real' meaning behind ritual and stresses instead the intrinsic value of verbal re-enactment 'as a special kind of actualisation' which can cause 'to reappear that which has disappeared.'<sup>286</sup>

However, David I Kertzer has proposed that collective ritual serves to mask the internal contradictions of ideology: '[c]onsensus comes through collective action, not only because the different participants have different beliefs, but also because each of the participants has a formless mass of conflicting beliefs.'<sup>287</sup> Crucially, Kertzer believes that '[s]olidarity is produced by people acting together, not by people thinking together.'<sup>288</sup> It is clear that political

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<sup>283</sup> Glazer, *Radical Nostalgia*, pp. 35; 211

<sup>284</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 71

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43. Original emphasis.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 68-9

<sup>287</sup> D.I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 68

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76

songs can take on radically different meanings, not only for singers/listeners of different political persuasions but also in terms of generation and historical-mindset. The interview I conducted with Jeanne and Dave Rathbone in Battersea is instructive here. Jeanne had been involved with the centenary celebrations of both 2006 and 2008 and had carried out her own research into local history, particularly the life of Charlotte Despard, with whom she strongly identifies. Jeanne is passionate about political heritage and about the 'resonance' of songs, places and figures across generations. Her husband, Dave, is also a Labour Party activist and a very active member of the Battersea Labour Party choir, which sings socialist songs at party functions, including the national party's annual conference. However it became clear during the interview that they did not approach the songs in exactly the same way. The first sign of disagreement came when Dave said that the 'March of the Women' (brought up by Jeanne) was 'not really a socialist song' but 'got incorporated' into the repertoire. This upset Jeanne, a committed feminist, who responded that anti-war songs might not be strictly socialist either but 'They're all about [...] caring and the movement and our history.' It later transpired that Dave was more concerned with the experience of singing itself, rather than the content of the song and despite being a humanist sings religious music in a choral society on the grounds that 'you don't have to sign a thing saying that you believe in it to be moved by Mozart's Requiem.' Only when really pressed, did Dave admit to any level of connection with the historical element of the songs, and even then somewhat unconvincingly:

I think, it is quite intriguing to go to Conference because it's always been sung there, even though people didn't always know the words of the 'Red Flag'. And we just introduced some new [songs] which may be new to some people but some people knew them [...] Yeah, there is a historical sense of it all running through there, yeah, I agree. I like singing anyway, just go along and have a good sing.

He did not, however, respond to Jeanne's prompting about the joy of 'reclaiming' Holst's 'I Vow to the My Country' through a new version with lyrics by Billy Bragg, saying only that it had been good fun singing the song. Dave's perspective reminds us that performative memory is not always what it seems. Great play has been made of the continuance of singing the 'Red Flag' at Labour Party conferences, despite Blair's supposed discomfort.<sup>289</sup> At the 2006 Centenary Conference Ann Clwyd remarked (perhaps slightly playfully) that the photograph of the PLP in the House of Commons had been a 'very moving occasion for all of us' which had 'ended with everybody – including the Prime Minister – singing the Red Flag!'<sup>290</sup> But it is difficult to penetrate the many layers of meaning which come into play here. For many party members, such as Jeanne Rathbone, the 'Red Flag' remains a powerful statement of political commitment and also carries important historical overtones. Others may take the politics but leave the history, and others still might see it as a playful piece of nostalgia, emptied of real political meaning. Overarching all of these different positions remains the simple, emotive aspect of communal singing, a joyful experience through which solidarity can be experienced as an immediate physical sensation (even if that doesn't always translate into an ongoing political commitment).<sup>291</sup>

It is also possible to perform political division. The 2004 *Liberator* songbook includes a variation of the old parody 'The Pink Flag', with the opening lines 'The people's flag is slightly pink / It's not as red as most folks think / We must not let the people know / What socialists thought long ago.'<sup>292</sup> It also included 'Bandiera Rossa', the original 'Red Flag' and the 'Internationale', all under the heading 'Red Scum Songs' with the comment 'On the principle that even a broken clock is right twice a day, occasionally the socialists have

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<sup>289</sup> See for example: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/labour-to-keep-the-red-flag-flying-1364875.html>; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/462871.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/462871.stm). Accessed 19.06.2009

<sup>290</sup> Ann Clwyd speaking at the Labour Party Centenary Conference, Blackpool, 12 February 2006

<sup>291</sup> The place of the Red Flag in the debate over Clause IV in 1994/5 will be discussed further in chapter four

<sup>292</sup> *Liberator Songbook*, Fifteenth edition, (London: Liberator, 2004), p. 30

produced a good song... or had a good song written about them.<sup>293</sup> There is an aspect here of playacting party division, while alluding to a certain crossover of radical sentiment, if not of policy platforms, between the Liberal and Socialist traditions. The more serious songs are drawn from the Liberal tradition, with 'The Land' as centrepiece but the SDP tradition also gets a look in with light-hearted songs such as 'If You Were the Only Shirl' affectionately satirising the relationship between Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins.<sup>294</sup> It is, however, noticeable that most of the songs relating to the period of the Alliance and Merger are written firmly from the Liberal point of view. These are typical:

Eternal David, for the fight  
With others thou bidd'st us unite.  
With prophets odd; with doctrine strange  
For these we must our seats exchange.  
O hear us when we cried to thee:  
Why must we love the SDP?<sup>295</sup>

They could have been Liberals;  
They could have stayed put;  
They could have backed Healey;  
They could have fought Foot;  
They could have had  
One new idea in their head,  
But decided to pinch all  
The Liberals' instead<sup>296</sup>

On the first day of merger  
The soggies gave to me  
Well, not much actually<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>294</sup> Ibid, p. 13

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, p. 14

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, p. 21

[To be sung to the tune of Twelve Days of Christmas, with further verses including the lines 'Absolutely zilch', 'Sweet F.A.', 'A very small amount', 'BUGGER ALL' etc]

The continued presence of these songs in the Liberal Democrat songbook twelve years after the merger does not seem to indicate a continued animosity between Liberals and Social Democrats, rather they seem to be nostalgically performing long-past divisions. That said, it seems that even when the division was still meaningful and passions were running high, the songs provided something of an outlet or safety valve for those feelings. The songbook notes that 'only hours after massively endorsing merger at the Blackpool Special Liberal Assembly, delegates crowded in to the Liberal Revue at the Tower Ballroom to sing [Twelve Days of Merger] with great enthusiasm.'<sup>298</sup>

A similar kind of playacting was also in evidence in the Battersea centenary project. The DVD was entitled 'Red Battersea' and at the party screening laughter and cheers greeted its title screen with the image of Battersea Power Station silhouetted against a red sky. Throughout the DVD, the emphasis was on radicalism with something of a knowing playfulness. For instance, the statement that Battersea was expelled from the Labour Party for its support of Communist Mayor, Saklatvala, was again greeted with laughter and cheers. At the other extreme, whilst the DVD revelled in listing the contribution the constituency had made to Labour Party history and was themed around the structure of 'lost leaders', Tony Blair's (admittedly brief) involvement with the constituency was treated in a rather tongue in cheek manner and received with mocking rather than proud laughter. The narrative was of a rebellious, left of centre party, not afraid to be at odds with the national leadership, yet the atmosphere was knowing and jocular, self-aware rather than self-righteous.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>299</sup> Personal observations, screening of *Red Battersea: One Hundred Years of Labour*, Clapham Picture House, 14 December 2008

### Focus on Individual Figures

In 2007 the Liberal Democrat History Group held a 'Greatest Liberal' competition, won by J.S. Mill. By all accounts, this was a crowded and highly entertaining meeting. The other history groups repeated this format in 2008, with Margaret Thatcher and Keir Hardie the respective winners. These events seem to really capture the attention of both party activists and the media. Of course the competitive element helps, but the focus on individual figures is also important. It is also significant that auto/biographies and memoirs were markedly the most popular form of political history in my Liberal Democrat History Group survey.

The connection with identifiable figures is also very important in terms of archives. As Sheridan Westlake explained: 'I don't think people are interested in the history of the Party as such, I don't think people are interested in the parts of the machine but they would be interested in the issues.'<sup>300</sup> We should add to that that they are certainly interested in the personalities. Jeremy McIlwaine explained that – in terms of party members – papers relating to Thatcher, Churchill and 'it depends on who you talk to' but possibly Enoch Powell were the big attractions of their archive. He has been consistently 'amazed at the effect Thatcher has', to the extent that visitors to the Conference stall were falling over themselves to pay £495 for signed reproductions of the 1979 'Labour Isn't Working' election poster: 'they'd come along and they'd see this, just they look at it like it's god-like, the deference they still have.' Similarly, one of the big attractions among the archival documents is a 1950 letter written by a Central Office party agent in Dartford constituency praising a speech made by the twenty-three-year-old candidate, Margaret Roberts. In McIlwaine's words: 'That works wonders – show this to the party faithful.'<sup>301</sup> Yet, he also noted that in the only visit so far from a Conservative Association to the Party Archive, it was papers

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<sup>300</sup> Sheridan Westlake interview

<sup>301</sup> Jeremy McIlwaine interview

relating to the constituency itself which caused the greatest stir – even above the Bodleian’s star acquisitions:

We showed them some material from the archive but we also showed them some of the treasures from the Bodleian [...] a couple of people looked at that but most of them were more interested in the files from the 1940s and 50s about their constituency. Some of them didn’t even look at the Anglo Saxon Chronicle [...] they had more of a buzz looking at Conservative files from the 1950s.<sup>302</sup>

Andrew Riley, senior archivist of the Thatcher papers at the Churchill Archive Centre, has also received visits from party members, including the Friends of Margaret Thatcher Group of party workers and activists from her former constituency of Finchley and Friern Barnet (as it was then). He is able to show them numerous personal and political items – including a carefully preserved handbag.<sup>303</sup>

The interest in individual personalities is also apparent in the other parties. Sue Donnelly explained that Liberal Democrats ‘probably would see something like John Stuart Mill’s papers as being more important for them, more iconic than the party papers which they see as being more prosaic, more about accountability, not about image so much.’<sup>304</sup> In his Foreword to the *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, Ben Pimlott claimed biography as a particularly Liberal form of writing, because ‘liberals have always placed particular emphasis on the uniqueness and limitless potential of the individual.’ In support of his claim that ‘one of the finest traditions in British biographical writing should be associated with liberalism and the Liberal Party’, Pimlott cites Morley’s *Life of Gladstone*, Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*, which ‘revolutionised biography [...] by showing how it could be used to explore the human soul in all its complexity’.

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid

<sup>303</sup> Andrew Riley interview

<sup>304</sup> Sue Donnelly interview



This tradition was taken forward in Churchill's biographical essays and, most recently, 'the distinguished biographical writings of Roy Jenkins (always a Liberal at heart), which have always used biography as the most sensitive of dialectical tools'.<sup>305</sup>

Pimlott's claiming of biography and its celebration of individuals as particularly Liberal is interesting as it contrasts with the findings of Brack's 1995 survey of leading Liberal Democrats, which found that the most frequent response (15%) to a question about influential political figures was along the lines of 'I don't have heroes' or 'I do not like hero-worship'.<sup>306</sup> In my own survey of Liberal Democrat History Group members, carried out in 2008, thirteen of eighty five respondents said that they were not inspired by any historical figures (and of those, eight stressed that they didn't think in terms of being inspired by historical figures). To put this in perspective, 'none' was the third most frequent answer, on a par with Churchill but behind Gladstone and Lloyd George, who were named by twenty-six and twenty respondents, respectively. This was, however, an open-ended question and in total, ninety separate names were mentioned.

Individual figures also have a slightly ambiguous position in Labour Party memory. On the one hand, we see a clear desire to acknowledge and honour the founders of the party. The 1925 *Book of Labour* noted that 'Personality has counted for so much in the development of the Labour Movement, that thrice the space could have been devoted to biography without doing justice to the men and women who have made the Movement.'<sup>307</sup> It devoted most of its third volume to biographies of leading activists and the 'pioneer' MPs, whom it treated with an almost mystical reverence:

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<sup>305</sup> Professor Ben Pimlott, 'Foreword', in Duncan Brack (ed), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (London: Politico's, 1998), pp. x-xi

<sup>306</sup> Duncan Brack, 'What Influences Liberal Democrats?' in *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter*, no. 8 (September 1995), pp. 1-3 (3)

<sup>307</sup> Tracey (ed), *The Book of the Labour Party*, p. x

Nearly all the pioneers have passed on in life's march – men and women who had the faith that will remove mountains. They tilled and harrowed the soil and planted the seed. They sowed that others might reap. And viewing the generous harvest of the present, one cannot look back upon the conditions in which the new Movement was launched without marvelling at the sublime faith and unshakable courage of those who undertook a task that was regarded by most of their contemporaries as impossible of accomplishment.<sup>308</sup>

We have also seen the emphasis placed on the presence of the surviving pioneers at the 1956 Jubilee celebrations. Similarly, the centrepiece of the 2006 centenary of the PLP was a collection of 'obituaries' of the pioneers, written by the Labour MPs then representing their constituencies.<sup>309</sup> This speaks to the themes of place, continuity and personal connection explored above. Hayter explained that the personal and geographical link was very important and that some of the MPs had become very enthusiastic and were still carrying out research, three years later. Speaking at a Conference fringe meeting on the project, Ian McCartney, for instance, seemed moved by the correspondences he discovered between his own life and that of his predecessor, Steven Walsh: both were short, both married women named Ann, both stood as district councillors before becoming MPs and both lost sons in tragic circumstances. He also read the eulogy from Walsh's funeral in order to 'inspire all representatives of the Labour Party to keep on working for a better future for all.'<sup>310</sup>

However, this emphasis on parliamentarians and other national figures, whilst a staple of the Labour History Group (as noted in chapter one), does not sit easily within the social history style of 'labour movement studies'. This tension was acknowledged in the *Book of Labour*, as it noted that 'Both in the Labour Party and in the Trade Unions there are scores of men and

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<sup>308</sup> Henderson 'Introductory' in *ibid*, p. 9

<sup>309</sup> Haworth and Hayter (eds), *Men Who Made Labour*

<sup>310</sup> Minutes of 1906 Centenary Fringe Meeting, Labour Party Conference, Blackpool, 28 September 2005

women whose personal history is as romantic and whose services to the organised workers are as great as any dealt with within these volumes.<sup>311</sup>

We have already seen the personal pilgrimage undertaken by Eddie and Ruth Frow to assemble their vast Working Class Movement Library. Their desire that no aspect of working-class history should be lost to history can also be seen in the huge *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, begun by Joyce Bellamy and John Saville in 1972 and now under the editorship of David Howell at the University of York, who is working on the thirteenth volume.<sup>312</sup> Saville's Introduction to the first volume foresaw the never-ending nature of this work, acknowledging that although 'It was at first intended to produce a single large volume on the lines of *Who's Who*<sup>313</sup>:

It became clear as work went forward that one or two volumes would be quite insufficient to encompass the many hundreds of names for whom detailed information was being accumulated. The present editors, let it be said at once, see no end to the Dictionary, and if they themselves can count upon something approaching the biblical span of life, they estimate that eight or ten volumes might be produced under their auspices. Even then at least as many again will be needed to clear arrears down to 1914.<sup>314</sup>

In fact, Bellamy and Saville managed ten volumes between 1972 and 1997. Their insistence that the *Dictionary* should 'include not only the national personalities of the British labour movement but also the activists at regional and local level' made it an immense research task, led by the availability of documents. The structure of the *Dictionary* reflects its cumulative nature. It was impossible to have an A-Z format because gaps in knowledge were being filled as and when information was discovered. Therefore, the editors settled on an A-Z structure within each volume, with much cross-referencing, a cumulative index in each volume and a general index. While the *Dictionary*

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<sup>311</sup> Editor's Preface, Tracey (ed) *Book of Labour*, p. x

<sup>312</sup> <http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/poli/centres/labour.htm>. Accessed 19.06.2009

<sup>313</sup> Saville, 'Introduction' in Bellamy and Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, p. ix

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid*, p. x

does cover national figures, the editors 'felt it even more desirable to write as fully as possible about those individuals who are either footnotes in national histories or who are not mentioned at all except in local chronicles', describing their endeavours as 'an extension to knowledge as well as a summation of existing information'.<sup>315</sup>

The Labour History Group has followed the example of the Liberal Democrat History Group, published its own *Dictionary of Labour Biography* which includes entries on 'every single Labour Cabinet Minister to date. In addition, there are biographies of other key parliamentarians, thinkers and polemicists, trade-union leaders, Labour and TUC general secretaries, Labour's backroom fixers and organisers and prominent mavericks.' The editor, Greg Rosen, described how it was partly assembled as an alternative to Bellamy and Saville's works, which are pricy, unwieldy and mostly out of print and which 'still haven't covered Bevin, Bevan, Attlee, people like that because the project is huge.' He wanted it to be an 'accessible' way to find out about key party figures – like Frank Pickstock and Dickson Mabon – who might not attract the attentions of biographers.<sup>316</sup> This is very much a working view of history, one that will enable party members and students to understand the route by which the party arrived at the present. It is not the labour of love which demands that tribute be paid to 'everyone who made a contribution, however modest, to any organisation or movement' involved with Labour history.<sup>317</sup> It is, rather, a guide to Labour's institutional party history, to its key figures and the factions from which they came. As we have seen, this is a very different approach to Labour's history than that taken by Labour Heritage. For instance, the Labour Heritage Women's Research Committee was established to focus on 'rescuing from obscurity the women stalwarts of the past', largely through oral histories and autobiographical writing. The emphasis was very much on lived experience, to the extent that the second issue carried a letter complaining that 'The articles seem more like

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid, p. xiii

<sup>316</sup> Greg Rosen interview

<sup>317</sup> Saville in *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, p. ix

straightforward reminiscences without any direct link to the Labour Party'.<sup>318</sup>

The editor defended the stance of the Bulletin on the grounds that 'Until we have a much fuller account of how Labour women have acted, thought and felt', analysis would be 'premature'.<sup>319</sup>

The authors of CLP histories have expressed similar difficulties in representing the lived experience of political activism in the form of an historical narrative. The chronological narrative of key events or the veneration of certain key figures does not seem to be quite adequate. This remark from the then Secretary of Colne Valley CLP eloquently summarises the problem:

This is but a brief glimpse into the history of the Colne Valley Labour Party – perhaps more of a reference than a history. I say that because the real history, the complete history, can never be written. To do so it would be necessary to involve everyone who had ever played a part; for the story of the Labour Party is the story of its people – their ideals, their struggles and their personal beliefs that society could and should be ordered in a more egalitarian way. Such a task is clearly impossible. What we offer here, therefore, is an impression and a series of reminders of something which is much bigger and far more important than this slim volume, in itself, could ever pretend to be.<sup>320</sup>

The author of the Lowestoft history similarly felt that the straightforward narrative could not convey the totality of the party or of its members. He resorted to including a few pages of anecdotes, gained through interviewing older members of the party. Whilst these stories do not fit into the narrative as it stands, he remarks that 'At least some, I thought, were worth

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<sup>318</sup> Letter from Freda Maxwell in *Labour Heritage Women's Research Committee Bulletin 2* (London: The Labour Party, Labour Heritage, Spring 1987), p. 17

<sup>319</sup> Christine Collette, 'Editorial', in *ibid*, p. 2

<sup>320</sup> Molly Walton, Foreword to *Colne Valley Labour Party, 1891-1991: Souvenir Centenary History* (Colne Valley Constituency Labour Party, July 1991), p. i

preserving in their own right.<sup>321</sup> Some books dispense with general histories altogether, preferring to collect the anecdotes and reminiscences of local political activists and councillors, two with intriguingly military titles are Hugh Jenkins' *Rank and File* which profiles forty members of his Putney constituency and John Cornwell's *Tomb of the Unknown Alderman*, with its amusing tales from Sheffield city councillors.<sup>322</sup> Jenkins declared himself 'relieved' that 'no clear picture' came out of the forty 'deliberately unstructured interviews' as it 'would depress [him] mightily if [he] thought all members of the party came out of the same pod.' Interestingly, he attributed this heterogeneity to political philosophy, declaring that 'I sometimes have this feeling about the Conservative Party – that it is uniform because it is not interested in ideology; but rather in the preservation of class privileges and rights over property.'<sup>323</sup> Whilst this is clearly a partisan point and contradicts the Conservative emphasis on individuals as an alternative to ideology, there is some truth in the idea that a concern with difference, with attempting to record and represent the totality of views and experiences has been associated with Labour (or rather labour) history. For instance, Penelope Corfield was insistent that the Battersea DVD should not have a single authorial voice and, although she was responsible for the bulk of the research, certain parts were carried out by other members. Similarly, the DVD voiceover was divided between a range of party members, even though the actors Timothy West and Prunella Scales are local members and voiced the core of the narrative. While this made the process more difficult and the plans had to be somewhat scaled back, Corfield felt it was important that 'to make sure that the story is told by a number of voices [...] to show the range of people in the party, the range of accents and tones.'<sup>324</sup> However, this may have been rather more aesthetic than substantive.

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<sup>321</sup> Mathew, *From Two Boys and a Dog to Political Power*, p. 41

<sup>322</sup> Hugh Jenkins (ed), *Rank and File* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); John Cornwell (ed), *Tomb of the Unknown Alderman and other tales from the Town Hall* (Sheffield: J. C. Cornwell, 2006)

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168

<sup>324</sup> Penelope Corfield interview

Another member of Battersea CLP pointed out that the range of voices was only apparent in a literal sense – the perspective was all Corfield's.<sup>325</sup>

It is worth considering the extent to which a focus on individuals – whether famous or unknown – is *easier* than outlining philosophical positions and less contentious than naming factions. Jon Lawrence has highlighted the extent to which high-political divisions in the Labour party have come to be associated with individuals (Bevan and Gaitskell, Castle, Wilson and Callaghan). He sees this as a deliberate strategy on the part of Labour's leaders to transcend the 'high-politics' narrative of 'internecine struggles' and 'to imbue their accounts of complex disagreements over policy and ideology at Westminster with a bold mythic quality' which will resonate with party activists. Thus 'Labour's myths of division have, for the most part, been intensely personal affairs.'<sup>326</sup> Individuals can become a shorthand for their ideological and institutional positions. But, crucially, they are also more malleable. In his biography of Nye Bevan, John Campbell provides a compelling account of the hollowing-out of one of these iconic figures in an attempt to claim and to celebrate his legacy, whilst stripping it of everything that made it his. In the process, Bevan's 'life was emptied of its meaning': 'His memory was in fact adopted as a sort of mascot to disguise the abandonment, by professed left-wingers, of practically everything he had meant by socialism.'<sup>327</sup> The extent to which Bevan had become a cipher for the full range of Labour positions is well demonstrated by a series of letters sent to Michael Foot in November 1981 following his condemnation of Tony Benn's pronouncements on the nationalisation of North Sea Oil. The first extract is from a correspondent urging Foot to take a stand against the right wing of the party; the second wants him to move against the left:

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<sup>325</sup> Anne Reyersbach email correspondence, 15.02.2010

<sup>326</sup> Lawrence, 'Labour: The Myths it Has Lived By', pp. 357; 359

<sup>327</sup> John Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994 [first published as *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987]), p. 373

You know very well that the late Aneurán [sic] Bevan, and Ernie Bevan [sic] would wring their bloody necks!!!<sup>328</sup>

What the electorate expect from you now Mr. Foot is the exorcism of these revolutionary elements from the Party. Mr. Aneurán [sic] Bevan could and would do it, and so can you, now that you have asserted yourself as Leader! It has been done before!<sup>329</sup>

In another interesting example, at the time of the Liberal-SDP Alliance, the name of the Welsh Liberal Weekend School was changed so as to include the SDP members. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the name which was chosen was the Lloyd George Society. It is striking that the naming of a figure from one particular tradition was felt to be more appropriate than something along the lines of 'The Liberal-SDP Alliance Weekend School'. Whilst it might not explicitly exclude SDP members, it is a clear statement of the kind of history and traditions which the group wants to see continued, yet the use of Lloyd George's name was less rigid than the specification of 'Liberal' as it allows for the more generally progressive heritage of, for instance, the People's Budget of 1906.

There is, as yet, no *Dictionary of Conservative Biography* but this does not seem to be through a lack of interest in individual figures. As we saw in chapter one, Conservatives have tended to focus on the examples of past leaders in lieu of defining an ideology and the *Conservative History Journal* deals in biography at least as much as the other party history journals. It is, then, tempting to suggest that this is more of a marker of the Conservative Party's disregard for its institutional past. Indeed, it feels significant that in the run-up to the 1997 election defeat, as the party realised it was losing the mantle of the 'national' party, the Conservative Political Centre chose to host

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<sup>328</sup> Michael Foot Papers, LHASC: MF/L/4, 14 November 1981 (119)

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*, 14 November 1981 (59). Original emphasis.



a series of lectures on Conservative leaders of the past.<sup>330</sup> This is examined in more depth in chapter three.

### The Importance of Individuals

The influence of individuals is an important and consistent theme in party political memory. From the preservation of archives to the staging of anniversary celebrations, party political memory seems to be highly dependent on the instigations (and exertions!) of individuals with a particular interest in history. It may be that they are later able to encourage others to join them and even to gain institutional support but without their initial interest, these activities would not take place.

Archives are an unusual case in that they are managed by professional archivists within institutional and often academic structures. Yet, these archivists feel that they spend a large proportion of their time chasing for records and trying to maintain a relationship with parties more concerned with their present than their pasts. Helen Roberts explained that the relationship between the Labour Party and its archive had deteriorated in recent years. The archive no longer has a 'direct obvious channel or link within the party'; instead they have to make contact individually with the ever-changing staff in a number of departments 'and try and get archive material out of them'. She acknowledged that 'it's something that we have to keep on going over and then working at because it isn't going to be as easy as it was all those years ago'. Preserving and transferring records was now 'the last thing on their mind. [...] they're too busy doing other things and they certainly have not consistently been transferring archives in recent years.'<sup>331</sup> Similarly, the Liberal and Liberal Democrat archivist, Sue Donnelly, explained that the archive has 'received absolutely nothing' from the Liberal Democrats 'since they were formed', with the single exception of papers from the Policy Unit. The reason for this one exception is that a transfer

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<sup>330</sup> Alistair B. Cooke (ed), *The Conservative Party: Seven Historical Studies, 1860s to the 1990s*, CPC Pamphlet no 914 (London, Conservative Political Centre, 1997)

<sup>331</sup> Helen Roberts interview

system was set up by Duncan Brack, director of the Liberal Democrat History Group, when he was also Director of Policy. Without this initial contact, it is possible that no papers would have been transferred at all. Like Helen Roberts, Donnelly is constantly trying to establish contacts in other departments. She also attributes the survival of material from the Liberal Party to 'benign neglect'.<sup>332</sup>

The Conservative Party does maintain a more active link with its archive and ensures that a senior member of staff is responsible for transferring documents – at the moment of writing, this is the Deputy Director of the Research Department, Sheridan Westlake. But even he admits that it is an uphill struggle to obtain documents from members of staff who are concerned about the present and future far more than about the past. When asked if he felt his selections were moulding the archive he replied, 'that's not the issue. It's quite rare that I decide not to transfer something across', the real issue is 'how do I get hold of some of the stuff?' He was very aware that 'we're not transferring enough across.'<sup>333</sup> Across all the parties, this was seen to be an occupational hazard of party politics, with its forward-looking focus. In the words of Sheridan Westlake:

It's important to remember what we've done in the past just so that you don't make the same mistakes or repeat what you've done in the past. But we're not interested in the past just for the sheer sake of it [...] we're very focused on going forward to win an election and we create policies that move forward and tackle the Government on day-to-day issues.<sup>334</sup>

In terms of writing party histories or organising commemorative events, the impetus seems to come from individual party members with a personal interest in history. This could be seen as institutional history recovered and preserved through individual memory work, rather than 'institutional

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<sup>332</sup> Sue Donnelly interview

<sup>333</sup> Sheridan Westlake interview

<sup>334</sup> Ibid

memory' in any formal sense. This remark, from the author of a history of Lowestoft CLP, speaks of this lack of structured memory:

This history is the result of an unguarded remark I once made about the lack of local political history. On complaining about this to a party member I was told that if I wanted more information I should have to get it myself.<sup>335</sup>

The sudden decision in 1972 to undertake a study of Richmond and Barnes Conservative Association's ninety-two year history seems to suggest the action of a particular individual (or perhaps a group of individuals). Similarly, the Parliamentary Labour Party's centenary celebrations were the result of the efforts of a small group of committed individuals, led by Dianne Hayter, who undertook the project because she felt a 'sense of injustice' that the 2000 centenary of the Labour Party itself had passed by almost unmarked. Again, it is striking that she framed this in terms of an obligation to the future as well as (or perhaps even more than) to the past: 'it was because I felt that the Labour Party hadn't done anything to lay down any future in 2000, they hadn't done any original research; they hadn't made anything of it.'<sup>336</sup> She found that the first time she brought up her plans for the 2006 centenary at an NEC meeting 'no one was particularly interested' as they had not been in 2000. However, once she had assembled a group to work on the project 'quite quickly people got quite interested in it' and 'one or two people became really enthusiastic.' Hayter felt this enthusiasm may have been due to the fact that the project was organised around the stories of individual MPs, which made it easy for people to catch onto. A lot of effort was also devoted to producing an information pack about the project and about how to conduct research which was sent to constituency parties and trade unions.<sup>337</sup> It is significant that two of the three publications produced for this event were published by 'Dianne Hayter on behalf of the 1906 Labour

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<sup>335</sup> Mathew, *From Two Boys and a Dog to Political Power*, p. 3

<sup>336</sup> Dianne Hayter interview

<sup>337</sup> Ibid

Centenary Group' rather than the party itself. The third, *Men Who Made Labour*, was published by Routledge.<sup>338</sup>

Another striking instance of individual action is the campaign of eighteen-year-old Conservative, Marcus Vickers, to erect a memorial to Macmillan in his former constituency of Stockton. This has been undertaken entirely in an individual capacity and Marcus had, at the time of my contacting him, received no assistance from his local Conservative Association. Again, the sense of fading memory, of the loss of tangible connections to the past was a primary factor in the campaign. Marcus noted that the Conservative Association used to meet in Macmillan House but that the new premises no longer carried the name. Similarly, a local pub had previously carried the name The Lords Tavern and a picture of Macmillan outside but this too was now gone. He commented that 'if anything stockton [sic] is really losing, perhaps already lost, any history, connection or commemoration with Macmillan.' He felt that a memorial would be 'a way of reminding people and informing people of him and his achievements as well as being a way of perhaps thanking and honouring him.' The reference to honour is important. Marcus expressed a strong sense 'that in general stockton [sic] and the nation doesn't honour its history as well as it should.' And that 'it is important to both teach and remind people of him now and into the future, as [I] believe it's important and he deserves it.' The point about Macmillan deserving a monument on the strength of his achievements in office was repeated several times, with Marcus explaining that 'we see other deserving figures such as Thatcher have memorials created in [their] honour and [I] felt it wrong that others aren't.' The idea of justice in this context is interesting as it contrasts with the striving for justice for unremembered figures on the left, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the truly forgotten. Here, it sits happily alongside a monumental view of history, of history as inspiration and demands that the contribution of the often overlooked

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<sup>338</sup> Ashton, *Labour Party Staff; The Star Album*; Haworth and Hayter (eds), *Men Who Made Labour*

Macmillan be accorded respect in line both with the importance of his own achievements and with the stature of better-remembered figures, such as Margaret Thatcher.

There was also a clear generational aspect to this campaign. Marcus said that he had learned about Macmillan in school but also noted that 'many of the elderly perhaps remember him or are aware of him, where as the younger generation, even the middle aged are not truly [sic] aware of him and his achievements and the difference he made and for many they are not even aware he existed.' He emphasised that 'it is important to both teach and remind people of him now and into the future.' Although he does not reflect on it directly, Marcus' own role as both a member of the 'younger generation' and as the agitator for a greater public memory of Macmillan places him in an interesting position. His fear of losing an historic inheritance is interesting and provides a useful alternative perspective on the views expressed by older party activists about the need to pass on memory.<sup>339</sup>

However, once they begin, mnemonic activities acquire something of a self-perpetuating momentum. There will always be another anniversary to mark, another compilation to produce. Indeed, sometimes anniversaries come so thick and fast that it is difficult to keep up with them. In 2009 the Liberal Democrat History Group marked the centenary of the People's Budget, the bicentenary of Gladstone's birth and 150 years since John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. As a result, the commemoration of the founding of the Party in 1859 will be celebrated 151 years later in summer 2010. That said, the Group managed to raise double the required amount for a blue plaque in a three-month appeal at the end of 2009.

## Conclusion

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<sup>339</sup> All information on this case is taken from email correspondence with Marcus Vickers, 10.03.2009. I discovered the campaign through Marcus' appeal for information about Macmillan in Stockton posted on the Conservative History Group website.

Despite the very great differences between the traditions of the three main parties and their differing philosophical approaches to the ideas of inheritance, history and preservation, what is perhaps most striking is the degree of convergence between their structures of memory, particularly at national level. Each has a professionally staffed archive, used mainly by academic researchers rather than by the party itself, each finds itself more concerned with the demands of day-to-day politics than with its duty either to the past or to posterity, and each has a history group, run by volunteers and organised around witness seminars, with a mixture of academic analysis and personal testimony. There are of course differences between the history groups, with the Liberal Democrats' being far more established than either of the other two. Yet, their basic formats and purposes are very similar indeed, as is their bias towards events within living memory. The emphasis on 'great lives', both in the history groups themselves and within party memory more generally is also a common thread across the three parties. This seems to indicate that – at least nationally, although important local differences should be acknowledged – it is a shared memory of an entwined history which sustains them. When it comes to history, even political divisions can often have the flavour of play-acting (as with the Liberator Songbook's inclusion of 'Red Scum Songs'). The closeness of the three history groups is shown by the interactions of the three directors. In the acknowledgments to the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Greg Rosen thanked the publisher, Iain Dale, and also Duncan Brack for their help.<sup>340</sup> Iain Dale in turn told me that he was keen to put on a joint event with the Liberal Democrat History Group, especially as Duncan Brack was a friend; he also explained that John Schwartz (who established the Labour History Group with Greg Rosen) designs the Conservative History Journal as a favour. In Dale's words: 'it's all very incestuous these history group things.'<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Greg Rosen (ed) *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (London: Politico's, 2001), p. xviii

<sup>341</sup> Iain Dale interview

As this example indicates, the political memory of all three parties is perpetuated by a relatively small number of individuals, who tend to share a concern both for the preserving of contemporary documents and participant observations and for recovering and remembering the stories of the past – usually with an intention of ‘learning from history’. Duncan Brack was instrumental in transferring Liberal Democrat papers to the archives and in setting up and running the Liberal Democrat History Group; Iain Dale runs the Conservative History Group and published histories of all three parties through *Politicos*; Greg Rosen is director of the Labour History Group and was on the 2006 Centenary committee; Dianne Hayter organised the centenary celebrations, wrote her own history of a particular time in Labour’s history, is on the editorial board of the *Labour History Journal* and has previously been involved with Labour Heritage; Stephen Bird was Labour Party archivist and is a key figure in Labour Heritage, as is the former Labour Party Librarian, Irene Wagner; Graham Lippiatt is a central member of both the Liberal Democrat History Group and the Lloyd George Society. There is also a great crossover between party memoirists, diarists, biographers and historians, with Roy Jenkins, Michael Foot, Tony Benn and Winston Churchill only the most obvious examples. It is significant that William Hague acknowledges Jenkins’ ‘valuable advice’ and encouragement in writing his biography of Pitt the Younger: an interest in political history seems to override party political divisions.<sup>342</sup>

There are two key conclusions we can draw from this. First, that for the majority of party activists and, particularly, those involved with parties at national level, these formal structures of memory may be something of a peripheral interest. Party history group events are very well attended and biographies, memoirs and diaries keenly consumed but for the most part, memory is left in the hands of those who care enough to maintain it. The lack of activity around the Labour Party’s 2000 centenary is a case in point; without an enthusiastic advocate, it passed with very little attention. Second,

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<sup>342</sup> William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (London: HarperCollins, 2004) p. xvii

the political parties produce and preserve a very particular type of parliamentary history which resonates far more within the circle of political actors than it does outside, in the nation more widely. This was not true in the early decades, perhaps even the first half century, of the Labour Party when their history and their mnemonic references were allied much more closely with the struggles and experiences of the working classes. Taken together with the Conservatives' recent attempts to emphasise their institutional past, this seems to indicate the temporal convergence which I posit as a key theme in party political approaches to their pasts.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Against the Tide of History Conservatism in the 1980s and '90s

Having looked at the formal and informal structures of memory within political parties, the rest of this thesis turns its attention towards the use of historical narratives as signifiers of party political identity and as rhetorical tools. In order to make comparisons across the parties, I have chosen to look at a number of moments of political change, when identities were called into question and imagined futures collapsed. In later chapters I will look at the break-away of the SDP from the Labour Party in 1981, Blair's revision of Clause IV in 1994/5 and the dissolution of the Communist Party of Great Britain between 1988 and 1992. In this chapter, I will examine the Conservative Party's reaction to its electoral defeat in 1997 as part of a longer-term loss of confidence regarding its place in the dominant narrative of British history. A great deal of conservative thought rests upon the notion of adapting to historical change and flowing with the tide of history. Resounding electoral defeats are therefore, arguably, more problematic for Conservatives than for other parties; without the sense of being in touch with the nation, they have very little to fall back on. This chapter therefore examines the process by which the defeat of 1997 was rationalised, absorbed and set into an historical framework.

As we saw in chapter one, the Conservative Party has prided itself on being a national party, with a special affinity with the British (or more properly the *English*) past. Yet in the decades after 1945 this position was undermined by changes in history teaching as well as by the Labour Party's increasingly confident claims to national status itself. In the wake of the 1997 general election, it became unsustainable. This chapter examines the ways in which the party responded to this new situation, both attempting to reassert its own historical narrative (most notably through the wrangling over the

National Curriculum for History) and developing more of a sense of its institutional past. In particular, the intense debates over Thatcher's relation to 'traditional Conservatism' indicate both the ambiguity of her own temporal positioning (described as 'regressive modernization' by Stuart Hall<sup>343</sup>) and the desire of many Conservatives to define the party's identity through a relationship to its own past.

### Facing Defeat

Whilst the Conservative defeat in 1997 was not unexpected, its scale was devastating. As the new party leader, William Hague, emphasised, it could not be brushed aside. Even as the party prepared itself to move ahead and 'to put behind us the shock and dismay' of the defeat, it was important that they 'must never forget how bad it was, or fail to understand why it happened.'<sup>344</sup> Pamphlets and speeches of 1997 certainly did not shrink from the facts. They listed again and again the depressing roll call: the smallest number of MPs since 1906, the total loss of parliamentary representation in Scotland and Wales and most of the large English cities. But they did not stop there. Hague in particular refused to let the party excuse itself on the grounds of electoral cycles and 'time for a change' thinking. He insisted that the party had 'been in serious decline for years [...] not just suffering from a cyclical downturn at the end of a difficult period.' In fact, Hague felt that the party had not only been declining for most of his own lifetime, but it had 'gone on declining even during some of the Party's great electoral victories of recent years.' It had a declining and aging membership and suffered from poor organisation.<sup>345</sup>

Under the shock of defeat, a campaign to reorganise the party was launched, making it, for the first time in its history a single party with a constitution, central membership database and model rules for constituency associations.

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<sup>343</sup> Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 2

<sup>344</sup> The Rt Hon William Hague MP, *A Fresh Future for the Conservative Party* (London: Conservative Central Office, July 1997), p. 2

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5

Hague's reforms met with little opposition, despite their rather anti-Conservative character. The old system was criticised on the grounds that it 'was not designed to be what it is today, but rather has grown up through history' and had become 'a serious barrier to modernisation' due to its 'disparate' nature.<sup>346</sup> This was a far cry from the conservative commitment to the contingent nature of inheritance and the virtues of organic development. While it was recognised that 'no constitution [should be] cast in stone. It should be a living framework which can be amended and developed as time progresses', the answer to this was a 'constitutional college' system requiring the support of both the National Convention and the parliamentary party for any changes that were proposed.<sup>347</sup> A consultation exercise at all levels of the party showed overwhelming support for the changes.<sup>348</sup> The long-cherished independence of Conservative Associations in the country was willingly sacrificed in the desperation of the times, much as Tony Blair's reforms of the Labour Party would be accepted in 1994/5. The Conservative Party had become a modern political party.

It is unsurprising that the party turned in on itself at this moment. The need to regroup was strong and led to a renewed emphasis on the institutional past of the party – comparable to that in the early years of the twentieth century when Keith Feiling, in particular, sought to explore the Conservative and Tory inheritance in the face of the threat of mass democracy and the rise of Labour.<sup>349</sup> In late 1996 and early 1997 the Conservative Political Centre organised a series of lectures on past Conservative leaders delivered by historians, chosen, it insisted, because they were 'experts in their field and not because the CPC was attempting to foster a particular interpretation

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<sup>346</sup> Conservative Central Office, *Our Party: Blueprint for Change: A Consultation Paper for Reform of the Conservative Party* (London: CCO, 1997), p. 2

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>349</sup> See Keith Feiling, *A History of the Tory Party 1640-1714* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924) and *What is Conservatism?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930). Discussed in Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America*, pp. 86-94

of the Party's history.<sup>350</sup> However, Alistair Cooke's introduction to the published collection of those lectures makes clear that it was in some senses a political project, designed to bring the scrutiny of academic analysis to bear on the party's myths, and particularly the myth of Disraeli, which had been debunked by Richard Shannon's analysis and should in turn be reexamined by the party:

Tories, then, need to be reminded that there is much more to their history than they have been generally encouraged to suppose. Their excessive preoccupation with Disraeli and a few other heroes (and heroines) needs to be checked. That is what this volume seeks to do above all. A keener and more profound appreciation of the Party's history has never been more necessary than it is today – at the start of a new era in its affairs.<sup>351</sup>

The particular significance of the legacy of Disraeli and 'one nation' Conservatism will be discussed in more detail below. Conservatives also attempted to learn lessons from the histories of other parties, with Kenneth Clarke, in particular, declaring that defending the pound would be 'Bennerly' and risked marginalising the party in the way that Labour had marginalised itself in 1983.<sup>352</sup> This set the Conservatives' predicament within a recognisable historical narrative.

### We Have Been Here Before

One of the most frequent responses to the defeat was to seek consolation and inspiration in the past. The Conservative Party had been in this position before – in 1906 if not quite in 1945 – and having fought back before it could fight back again. In Martin L. Davies' terms, this was history understood as 'the same old thing', comprehensible and manageable because familiar.<sup>353</sup> One letter to the *Daily Telegraph* reinforced this point telling readers 'I have in my possession an *In Memoriam* card printed by my

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<sup>350</sup> Cooke (ed), *The Conservative Party: Seven Historical Studies*, p. 7

<sup>351</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>352</sup> Bruce Anderson, 'New Leader, New Voting?', *Spectator*, 17 May 1997, pp. 8-9 (9)

<sup>353</sup> Davies, *Historics*, p. 4

grandfather, a Conservative printer, in Wantage 91 years ago. It reads: "In mournful memory of the Conservative majority... which died of mendacity and somnolence, January 17 1906, aged 21 years. – *Lo, we look for a joyful resurrection*".<sup>354</sup> Leadership candidate, Peter Lilley, emphasised the need to rebuild the party from the grassroots and reminded his colleagues that after the 'crushing defeat in 1945, Rab Butler's renewal of Tory policy thinking paved the way for our return within six years.'<sup>355</sup> His successful competitor, William Hague, made the same point: 'We learned lessons too from our defeat in 1945. The reforms introduced by Lord Woolton and Rab Butler reinvigorated the Party [...]. It is our duty to do now, at the turn of the twenty-first-century, what Disraeli, Woolton and Butler did then.'<sup>356</sup> The parallels with previous defeats point to a similar sense of not being on the side of history – a recurring fear for Conservatives. John Ramsden reminded his party that each time the party had been defeated 'not only its foes but many of its friends too have written it off as a curious survivor from the distant past, an anthropological exhibit of great interest no doubt to historians and political scientists, but one whose importance lay entirely in the past. Time, it was all too often felt, did not lie on our side.'<sup>357</sup> However, each time it had renewed itself and come back stronger, despite protests (as in 1997) that each defeat was different and would be final.

As Conservative historian John Charmley argued, Conservatives could 'take counsel and comfort from the past.' In fact, he thought, the manner in which progressive parties failed to fulfil the hopes invested in them and consequently fell apart 'almost amounts to a pattern.'<sup>358</sup> From an historian ideologically opposed to the idea of historical patterns, this was strong stuff. However, his optimism that a 'Peel-like figure' such as 'a certain ex-

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<sup>354</sup> Jeremy Goer, *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 8 May, 1997, p. 15. Original emphasis.

<sup>355</sup> Peter Lilley, 'Reunite, rebuild and renew', *Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 6 May, p. 20

<sup>356</sup> Hague, *A Fresh Future*, p. 8

<sup>357</sup> John Ramsden, *Britain is a Conservative Country that Occasionally Votes Labour: Conservative Success in Post-War Britain*, Swinton Lecture, 4 July 1997, Churchill College, Cambridge. CPC Pamphlet no. 916 (London, Conservative Political Centre, 1997), p. 5

<sup>358</sup> John Charmley, 'The Consolation of Tory History' *The Sunday Telegraph*, 4 May 1997, p. 27

Chancellor with shabby suede shoes' could lead the party back to victory was questioned by Michael Keith Smith. He suggested that 'in no way was the leadership of Sir Robert Peel a recipe for "happy ever after"' and concluded that 'History indeed carries many messages for the Tories, but not necessarily the ones they wish to hear.' In fact, 'history offers the defeated and broken Conservative Party no consolation whatsoever.'<sup>359</sup> *Telegraph* journalist Robert Hardman saw something rather desperate in the party's evocation of past defeats. On election night he observed that 'The broader remnants of the Tory spin-machine gamely attempted to invoke 1945 as they rallied round John Major. "He's like Churchill. They voted against him but they were very grateful for what he had achieved," said one.'<sup>360</sup>

Like Churchill, the party seemed to have lost what had seemed a natural ability to speak to the nation's soul. In a rather telling speech, David Willetts discussed the ease of the Conservative's Britishness:

Quite simply, the Conservative Party has been, and has seen itself to be, the national party; the British party; the one nation party. Critics are quick to dismiss what they see as a Conservative attempt to hijack the language of patriotism for party purposes. But this makes us sound far too calculating. Conservatives were never detached from Middle England but straining to work out what it felt; we are in it, and of it. Underneath the criticisms from the Left there is a deep, if anxious, respect for the Conservatives' role as the national party.<sup>361</sup>

As the changing tenses in Willetts' speech indicate, this position was now far from secure. The purpose of the speech was to analyse the means by which 'As the national party, we found large swathes of the nation had turned against us.' When canvassing, Conservatives found that many people

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<sup>359</sup> Michael Keith Smith, *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 May 1997, p. 34

<sup>360</sup> Robert Hardman, 'Within an hour, they knew the day was lost', *Daily Telegraph*, Friday 2 May 1997, p. 3

<sup>361</sup> David Willetts MP, *Who Do We Think We Are?* Speech to Centre for Policy Studies meeting at Conservative Party Conference, 8 October 1998 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1998), p. 2

(teachers, health workers, single parents) 'took it for granted that just by describing who they were, they could not be voting Conservative'. Willetts raised this discussion above the level of electoral politics and framed it as a psychological trauma for the party:

The worst possible thing for Conservatives, worse even than intellectual decay, is for us to feel strangers in our own land; to come to feel that we are some 'sect', possessing a special political insight hidden from the vast majority of people. But we confront a Labour Party more determined than ever before to align themselves with central aspects of our national identity.<sup>362</sup>

Yet in contrast to his earlier denial of a 'calculating' 'attempt to hijack the language of patriotism for party purposes', not only did Willetts claim Labour's new-found connection with the national soul to be the product of calculation, he also seemed to advocate a similarly deliberate strategy on the part of Conservatives to regain the support they had lost. They must find 'real, substantial things to say about England or Great Britain which strike a chord with most people and which tie in with our principles and policies'<sup>363</sup> No longer a simple matter of being 'in' and 'of' Middle England, the Conservatives now felt the urgent need to develop a strategy in order to reclaim their role as 'the national party.' Peter Lilley noted that although 'Churchill always advised Conservatives to "trust the people". That is harder to do when the people have lost faith in us – and in such a dramatic manner.'<sup>364</sup>

Other voices also sought to reaffirm the party's national status. Despite the electoral defeat, Viscount Cranbourne assured an audience at Politeia in 1999 that 'The Conservative Party stands for the nation. That is what it is for.

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>364</sup> Peter Lilley, 'Reunite, rebuild and renew', *Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 6 May 1997, p. 20

The day it ceases to stand for the nation it will have ceased to be.<sup>365</sup> As late as 2004, the then party leader Michael Howard introduced an illustrated history of the Conservative Party with the words, 'While recognising the substantial contributions that other political parties have made to the development of Britain, Conservatives are deeply aware of the extent to which their history is also the history of their country.'<sup>366</sup> Moreover, much of the official rhetoric around the need to reform and renew the Conservative Party framed this as a duty *to the country*. For instance, the *Blueprint for Change* consultation paper assured members that it was necessary 'to rebuild the Party to ensure it is equipped to provide our nation with leadership and good government in the new millennium.'<sup>367</sup> A letter from Lord Parkinson (Chairman of the Party), Robin Hodgson CBE (Chairman of the National Union) and Sir Archie Hamilton MP (Chairman of the 1922 Committee) which accompanied the paper stated: 'We owe it to the country to recreate the great fighting force that the Conservative Party used to be.'<sup>368</sup> In William Hague's words, 'The Conservative Party [...] belongs to the nation – past, present and future. We are merely its trustees for the time being. And like all trustees, our duty is to ensure that we hand our Party over to our successors in a better state than we found it.'<sup>369</sup>

### Defending the Record

Yet, seeking solace in the renewal of 1951 was particularly problematic as so much of the past eighteen years had been predicated on the argument that the path taken by the party in the post war years was wrong – wrong for the party and, above all, wrong for the country. As Willetts put it, 'Some Conservatives may be reluctant to learn from this period out of a guilty feeling that somehow all we did then was offer the electorate a paler shade

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<sup>365</sup> Robert Cranbourne, *Allegiance: The Nation State, Parliament and Prosperity*, Politeia Address Series No. 7 (London: Politeia, 1999), p. 1

<sup>366</sup> Michael Howard, Foreword to Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, *The Conservative Party: An Illustrated History*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p. vii

<sup>367</sup> CCO, *Our Party*, p. 2

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid*, p. i (unnumbered)

<sup>369</sup> Hague, *A Fresh Future*, p. 16



of pink.<sup>370</sup> The party certainly wasn't ready to jettison its more recent past. Amidst all the public admissions of defeat and seemingly deep commitments to change, Conservatives also sought to salvage the party's record, to make sure that the achievements of the Thatcher and Major years were not forgotten. Even Michael Portillo – the poster boy of the mea culpa campaign – was determined to 'be clear about our successes and achievements':

The Labour Party is determined to create the myth that our 18 years represented a period of misery and failure. So let me deal briefly with what really happened.

The Conservative Government took a country that was on the brink of being ungovernable and restored the authority of government and the ability of management to manage.<sup>371</sup>

Conservative Central Office was similarly robust in declaring that 'under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, Conservative governments reversed years of national decline. Britain is a better place because of those Conservative governments.'<sup>372</sup> And William Hague celebrated the way in which the party 'achieved what we were told was impossible: we reversed the ratchet of socialism and restored our sense of national pride.'<sup>373</sup>

There were two possible responses to the problematic and contradictory legacies of the 1951 and 1979 victories: to emphasise the radicalism of the post-war years or the conservatism of Thatcher. David Willetts is a good example of the first strategy. He argued that it was 'simply bad history [...] to imagine that we should dismiss the Party's entire political experience from 1945 to 1975 as the triumph of the wets.' He reminded his readers that 'The Party did, after all, give up some of its precious wartime paper ration in 1945

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<sup>370</sup> David Willetts MP with Richard Forsdyke, *After the Landslide: Learning the Lessons from 1906 and 1945* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, September 1999), p. 5

<sup>371</sup> Michael Portillo, *The Ghost of Toryism Past: The Spirit of Conservatism Future*, CPS meeting at Party Conference, 9 October 1997 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1997), p. 4

<sup>372</sup> CCO, *Our Party*, p. 1

<sup>373</sup> Hague, *A Fresh Future*, p. 4

so that more copies of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* could be published.<sup>374</sup> Michael Portillo took the opposite approach, pointing out that the party under Thatcher 'never argued that free markets were everything. We increased sharply spending on social security [...] and on health and education. [...] we were anything but *laissez-faire*.'<sup>375</sup> The party 'never departed from a one-nation approach, but rather updated it for their times'. Moreover, he argued, even if this was the perception, John Major was very different from Thatcher, and could in 'no sense [...] be mistaken for a 'two-nation' politician.'<sup>376</sup>

### The 'One Nation' Legacy

Portillo's concern with this matter was part of a much longer debate about the 'one nation' legacy under Thatcherism. Reba N. Soffer makes the point that 'Even after Thatcherism adopted a policy that in practice created "Two Nations", the ideology expressed by the Conservative historians continued to echo, with accommodation to new times, in the rhetoric of the faithful.'<sup>377</sup> Raphael Samuel described this as 'cognitive dissonance', a deliberate strategy whereby praise of Disraeli and 'one nation' conservatism was used as a camouflaged critique of Thatcher by Tory wets.<sup>378</sup> However, the opposite strategy was used by T. E. Utey, who tried to enlist Disraeli on the side of the Thatcherites, opposed to 'the crusading, moralizing, universalistic sentiments of Gladstone' (and, the implication runs, the current wets) reminding the party that 'Disraeli regarded these sentiments as a load of cant'. He went on to argue that Disraeli 'if he were to come among us today, would look elsewhere than in the division between the rich and the poor for the forces which are sapping our national unity and strength'. Instead he would look at defence and especially the threat from the USSR, at immigration, the threat to the Union and at public order. He went on:

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<sup>374</sup> Willetts, *After the Landslide*, p. 5

<sup>375</sup> Portillo, *Ghost of Toryism Past*, p. 10

<sup>376</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-11

<sup>377</sup> Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America*, p. 296

<sup>378</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'Mrs Thatcher and Victorian Values' in Samuel, *Island Stories*, pp. 330-348 (342)

Mrs Thatcher's government is engaged (I do not blush to say it) in a great campaign for national regeneration. [...] So it falls to the Tory Party to mount an evangelizing campaign. For those of us in the Burkeian and Salisburyian traditions this is not an easy task; we are not accustomed to defending our beliefs, we just believe them. Nevertheless, the task has to be performed and, a hundred years on, it can still be performed under the motto 'One Nation'.<sup>379</sup>

In fact, by this account it seems to be the Thatcherites who were 'crusading' and 'moralizing'. As Utley acknowledged, this was a major shift in outlook from the organicism of much of Conservative thought. Paul Johnson, speaking in 1996, also tried to reshape the legacy of Disraeli, claiming that 'He was not the first One-Nation Tory' and was not trying to turn the nation into 'a homogenous economic whole'. This was, Johnson argued, an 'illusion' based on *Sybil*. Instead, he argued that Disraeli discovered 'something quite different: that gaps between the classes, though profound, could be bridged by appeals to conservative emotions and needs in all of them, and hence that Conservatives, if they learnt how to make such appeals, had nothing to fear from democracy.'<sup>380</sup> In the dog days of the Major administration, this could be read as an appeal for fewer hopes of a 'classless society' and more stirring evocations of patriotism and traditional values, in Margaret Thatcher's style. As E.H.H. Green reminds us, despite the wets' appropriation of the 'one nation' legacy in opposition to Thatcherism, the One Nation Group of the 1950s was very dry indeed, including as it did Enoch Powell, Angus Maude and Keith Joseph. He felt that Thatcher was justified in her claim to be defending the One Nation legacy of 'all [her] predecessors, yes, [...] Disraeli; yes, Harold Macmillan' through the extension of home ownership and share ownership.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> T.E. Utley, CBE, *One Nation: 100 Years On*, 14 October 1981, lecture to CPC at Blackpool, CPC pamphlet no. 511-521-680 (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1981), p. 18

<sup>380</sup> Johnson, *What is a Conservative?*, p. 7

<sup>381</sup> Margaret Thatcher, interviewed by Sir Robin Day, BBC1, 8 June 1987. Quoted in Green, *Thatcher*, pp. 41-2

It is not my intention to adjudicate between these claims. That so much was made of the question of Thatcher's political inheritance, both at the time and since, is in itself significant. She was characterised by turns as an adherent of 'traditional Conservatism',<sup>382</sup> 'a Conservative revolutionary',<sup>383</sup> a 'nineteenth-century Liberal'<sup>384</sup> following 'the liberalism of Mr Gladstone'<sup>385</sup> and 'not a Liberal'.<sup>386</sup> This concern with placing Thatcher within an historical narrative suggests a deep uneasiness not only over *which* narrative she belonged within but also over her unwillingness to be part of an organically unfolding narrative at all. As she declared in 1977: 'We see nothing as inevitable. Men can still shape history'.<sup>387</sup> In 1990 Daniel Wincott suggested that her desire to enact change had resulted in a 'hyperactive' style of government, more usually associated with left-wing politics.<sup>388</sup> I would further suggest that it resulted in a shift in temporal outlook, from conservatism to active presentism.

This shift cannot be attributed to Thatcher alone. Beginning in 1968, the *Swinton Journal* ran a series of articles debating the future of Conservatism and the paths it could follow Disraelian or Peelite, organic or radical, conciliatory or ideological. This was the background to 'Seldson Man' and Heath's 'u-turn' as well as the context of Margaret Thatcher's election as party leader. The root of the debate was whether Conservatives should continue to *conserve* or whether they should, instead, confront. This was, in essence, a debate about the historical process. As Michael Harrington put it: if Conservatives were not to 'take a determinist view of history' and accept

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<sup>382</sup> Margaret Thatcher interviewed by BBC Radio 3, 17 February 1985. Quoted in Green, *Thatcher*, p. 31

<sup>383</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Seoul, 3 September 1992. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 32

<sup>384</sup> J Nott, *Guardian*, 13 September 1982. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 31

<sup>385</sup> The Rt Hon The Baroness Thatcher LG OM FRS, *The Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture: Liberty and Limited Government*, Thursday 11 January 1996 at SBC Warburg, Swiss Bank House, London (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1996), p. 5. Original emphasis.

<sup>386</sup> Margaret Thatcher, interviewed by BBC1, 28 September 1977. Quoted in Green, *Thatcher*, p. 31

<sup>387</sup> Thatcher, 'Dimensions of Conservatism'

<sup>388</sup> Daniel Wincott, 'Thatcher: Ideological or Pragmatic?', *Contemporary British History* 4:2, November 1990, pp. 26-28

that 'socialism is historically inevitable', then it was necessary for them to intervene, to stop being 'political "corks on the water"' and to start creating their own historical narrative. Whilst this felt 'unconservative', they had no choice. And it was to the Conservative past that they could turn for inspiration.<sup>389</sup> Harrington and John O'Sullivan both argued that it was time to abandon paternalist conciliatory Conservatism and return to a sceptical liberal Conservatism, founded in the principles of Burke, Smith and Peel. Yet, while O'Sullivan saw paternalism as a twentieth-century trend, encompassing Baldwin, Churchill and Macmillan, Harrington enlisted Churchill and Powell into the ranks of liberal Conservatives.<sup>390</sup>

### Whigs and Tories?

In an archetypal Tory argument, Robin Harris explicitly declared 'modern' (i.e. Thatcherite) Conservatism as the heir to *both* the Tory and the Whig legacies. Emphasising the contingent nature of history, Harris argued that 'the process of living with – sometimes resisting and sometimes compromising with – Liberalism for almost a century' had left a lasting impact on Conservatism and meant that 'the modern Conservative Party is heir to a substantial part of the Liberal legacy.' The legacy of opposing Liberalism was credited with the Conservatives' acceptance of free-market economics, development of urban and working class support, identity as the 'patriotic party' and commitment to the Union.<sup>391</sup> Harris suggested that 'Within Conservatism, there had always existed two contrasting strains, one paternalist and interventionist, the other non-interventionist and "libertarian"' but that neither dominated the party until it was forced to confront 'the over-extension of State power' brought about by socialism. Then Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph took 'the implications of the fight against

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<sup>389</sup> Michael Harrington, 'A Conservative Ideology?', *Swinton Journal*, 19:2 (Summer 1973), pp. 27-33 (31)

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, p. 29; John O'Sullivan, 'The Direction of Conservatism', *Swinton Journal*, 16:4 (Spring 1970), pp. 30-36 (30-31)

<sup>391</sup> Robin Harris, *The Conservative Community: the roots of Thatcherism – and its future*, CPS Winter Address, St Stephen's Constitutional Club, 7 December 1989 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1989), p. 13

socialism, which had long since been the Conservative Party's primary purpose, to their logical conclusion by developing an unashamedly free market, capitalist Conservative set of beliefs.<sup>392</sup>

So from the basis of a Conservative disposition, from the attitudes of Toryism, from the ambiguous relationship between Conservatives and Liberalism and from the Conservative Party's decisive struggle with Socialism, today's Conservative beliefs and policies have evolved.<sup>393</sup>

Harris' account is striking in its attempt to claim the legacies of both Conservatism and Liberalism as the *natural* birthright of modern Conservatism, rather than as a political innovation. It thus continues the rhetoric of continuity, of absorption and of an ability to embrace the entirety of British history in a single political party as noted in chapter one. It also stresses the contingent nature of political identity. This melding occurred through a combination of particular circumstances, rather than through a coherent ideological or philosophical mission. This is a quintessentially Tory argument.

Another side of the New Right was marked by its rejection of this approach and specifically of liberal values. Paul Johnson located Thatcher's Conservative radicalism in the way she 'decisively repudiated the Peelite maxim that it was the task of Conservative administrations to accept, build on, and operate efficiently the reforms of their opponents.' This was, Johnson felt, 'something not even Salisbury dared to carry out' and 'marks the most important change in the character of Conservatism since the Party was first christened by Peel in 1834.' On this basis, Thatcher alone of twentieth-century party leaders was seen to be straightforwardly Conservative, with no traces of Whiggism; prepared to expose and defeat the delusions of the post-war consensus. Nigel Lawson, on the other hand, cast Thatcher as the successor to Peel and Churchill in reversing the party's

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid, p. 14

<sup>393</sup> Ibid, p. 14

mistaken embrace of social democratic 'delusions' after the war. In her hands 'The old consensus is in the process of being re-established', 'what we are witnessing is the reversion to an older tradition in the light of the failure of what might be termed the new enlightenment.' Lawson explained that the significance of this reversion to Tory tradition was 'not in the sense of some kind of appeal to ancestor-worship or to the legitimacy of scriptural authority'; rather it was because – in the now-familiar model – 'these traditions are, even today, more deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of ordinary people than in the conventional wisdom of the recent past.'<sup>394</sup>

Maurice Cowling traced the roots of these delusions in JS Mill's liberalism, the insidious influence of which he believed had infected the country and was responsible for the attitudes which led to appeasement as well as to the development of the welfare state. In particular, he focused on the language of liberalism, feeling that it had become ubiquitous to the point where 'To use liberal language has been taken to be *intelligent*: to reject it evidence of *stupidity*.'<sup>395</sup>

Thatcher herself took a different approach. She presented the post-war consensus as straightforwardly socialist and therefore best defeated by a *return* to liberalism 'in the old-fashioned sense [...] the liberalism of Mr Gladstone not of the latter day collectivists.' And in seeking to re-establish that old-fashioned liberalism, she insisted that far from being radical modernisers, she and Keith Joseph were 'acting as conservatives, with a small 'c'.<sup>396</sup> Even if this protestation of conservatism is accepted at face value, it still depends on a *radical* restoration of older values; an attempt to reverse the course of recent history. In 1986, John Biffen MP warned the party of the dangers of unrestrained radicalism as with the efforts of 'Tory Maoists' to undertake a 'Perpetual Revolution'. Instead, Conservatives should remember that 'The pursuit of Tory radicalism can be most successful when

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<sup>394</sup> Nigel Lawson MP, *The New Conservatism*, a talk given to the Bow Group, 4 August 1980 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1980), pp. 2-3

<sup>395</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1990 [1963], p. 1. Original emphases

<sup>396</sup> Thatcher, *Liberty and Limited Government*, p. 5. Original emphasis.

it marries the desire for major change with the matching Conservative instinct for continuity.' This was, he felt, 'the triumph of Conservatism since 1979.'<sup>397</sup>

The Tory radical success since 1979 has not deprived the Conservative of initiative: they have given the Party something to conserve. Since 1945 there has not been a happier moment within the Conservative party for the twin partnership of both radical reform and also the spirit of continuity.<sup>398</sup>

Biffen's sense of *finally* having 'something to conserve' is key to understanding the position of the Conservative Party in the 1970s and '80s. It speaks of the extent to which Conservative confidence in both the state of the nation and its own status as the national party had collapsed in the post-war years. This is the background against which Thatcher's radicalism makes sense. It is only possible to preach continuity and stability when one is relatively happy with the direction of political developments and also when one has the social and cultural authority to speak for the national interest. Nigel Lawson explained that in the nineteenth century 'Conservatives could afford to disavow theory and affect a disdain for abstract ideas and general principles, for the simple reason that the theories, ideas and principles on which Conservatism rests were the unchallenged common currency of British politics.' Since the rise of social democracy, however, 'Conservatives have a need [...] to fight the battle of ideas.'<sup>399</sup> It may be objected that Conservatism has always been in competition with a progressive tradition. However, Soffer makes a convincing case that despite their 'considerable differences' the Conservatives could at least accept the Liberals as 'historically English' in contrast with the 'unacceptable' 'alien import' of

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<sup>397</sup> The Rt Hon John Biffen MP, *Forward from Conviction*, the second Disraeli Lecture, St Stephen's Constitutional Club, 14 October 1986, CPC no. 0510-764 (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1986), p. 9

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12

<sup>399</sup> Lawson, *The New Conservatism*, p. 17



socialism which 'could not be accommodated within a conservative idea of an English/British nation.'<sup>400</sup>

The relationship between the Liberal and Conservative parties has occasionally been close. In the years immediately following the 1945 election the Conservative Party discussed forming an alliance with the Liberals in order to present a 'United Front' against socialism. The 1946 Conservative Party Conference voted against uniting formally or changing the name of the party, settling for an appeal to 'attract into the Party all those who oppose the Socialist policy of the Government'.<sup>401</sup> Between 1947 and 1950 a 'large number' of Conservative associations added 'Liberal' to their names and at the 1951 election, former Liberals 'overwhelmingly' supported the Conservatives, leading the re-elected Churchill to offer Liberal leader Clement Davies a ministerial post, which he refused.<sup>402</sup> This was, of course, the time when Margaret Thatcher became active in party politics. Indeed, at her adoption meeting as the prospective parliamentary candidate for Dartford in February 1949, her father made a speech explaining that 'by tradition his family were Liberal, but the Conservative Party stood for very much the same things as the Liberal Party did in his young days.'<sup>403</sup> Similarly, Thatcher's later Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, explained that at university in the late 1940s he felt '*because* rather than in spite of his Liberal upbringing, " that the post-war Conservative party should inherit the Liberal mantle."<sup>404</sup> However, it was not just the Conservatives who were keen to inherit the mantle of the old Liberal Party. And, with their adoption of Keynesian economics and the Beveridge Report, Labour were arguably in a better position to do this. As we will see in chapter four, the narrative of the 'progressive consensus' and the need to reunite the 'two important reformist

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<sup>400</sup> Soffer, *History, Historians, and Conservatism in Britain and America*, pp. 298-9

<sup>401</sup> National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, Conference Minutes, 1946, 67<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Blackpool, 3-5 October 1946, Thursday 3 October, p. 4

<sup>402</sup> Green, *Thatcher*, p. 33

<sup>403</sup> Alf Roberts, 28 February 1949. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 33

<sup>404</sup> Geoffrey Howe, *Conflicts of Loyalty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 18. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 4. Original emphasis.

traditions in British politics – those of liberalism and of social democracy, which became separated from each other in the early part of the twentieth century’ became a powerful strand in centre-left thinking.<sup>405</sup>

### A Crisis of History?

It was not only the Conservative Party’s institutional and ideological past which was under negotiation in this period; the national past and national *history* was also up for debate. In the aftermath of the 1997 defeat David Willetts laid part of the blame for the change in national mood on a ‘serious academic shift in writing about British history’. The originators of this shift were the Communist Party Historians’ Group and particularly Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill, of whom he noted that ‘their Marxism seems to have come before their history.’<sup>406</sup> He went on to attack the next wave of progressive historians whose work contained a ‘residual influence of the Marxist analysis’ in its insistence on the ‘false consciousness’ thesis. The culprits here were Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and – most particularly – Linda Colley’s *Britons*. Willetts took particular exception to Colley’s subtitle: ‘Forging the Nation’: ‘What is being attempted is to show that the conventional national identities – and particularly those of British men and women – are somehow artificial, invented or forged.’<sup>407</sup> While Willetts accepted Colley’s central thesis that national identity and patriotism are intensified by war, he found that ‘the rhetoric of “invention” and “forging” was absurd.’<sup>408</sup> More than that, it was politically motivated and damaging, spreading ‘uncertainty and unease which creates the conditions for Blair’s attempts to create a dominant new progressive electoral coalition, focussing on a European and constitutional agenda.’ He drew an analogy with ‘what the progressives did’ to traditional views of family: ‘What was once seen as

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<sup>405</sup> Liberal Democrat History Group, ‘A concise history of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats’, [http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item\\_single.php?item\\_id=4&item=history](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=4&item=history). Accessed 25.09.09

<sup>406</sup> Willetts, *Who Do We Think We Are?*, p. 4

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

an unproblematic and fundamentally right way of living – a married couple with their children – has come to be just one of a variety of lifestyle choices.<sup>409</sup>

Willetts insisted on a 'common sense', straightforward narrative of British history, in the face of seemingly ideologically-driven theoretical conceptions of the national past. This was an argument for inspirational, identity-affirming history in the face of damaging, critical history; it hoped to keep the dominant interpretation of the past intact, rather than to pour doubt upon it. Without a stable, inspirational past, the fear was that we would fall down the rabbit hole of constructivism, where everything is illusion and nothing can be relied upon. This insistence depended upon Willetts' faith that the existing cohesive, triumphant, national story was true, rather than – as the 'invention of tradition' thesis suggested – based on a myth which has suited the ruling class and is not borne out by the historical evidence. Yet Willetts was not entirely opposed to counter-intuitive, revisionist history. He emphasised the way in which Alan Macfarlane 'painstakingly assembles the evidence' for his thesis of an individualist market-oriented peasantry, thus implicitly recognising his status as a serious historian, in a way he does not allow for Colley.<sup>410</sup> The difference was that Macfarlane's argument fed into Willett's existing historical framework, rather than undermining it. It was also useful for Conservatives in the political present, allowing them to 'tie [their] belief in the free market economy to [their] interpretation of Britain's economic history.'<sup>411</sup>

Whilst Willetts' argument was rather an unusual contribution to the 1997 debate, his concerns had long roots. The Conservative fear of uncertainty, of doubt, was not just a feature of a 1990s loss of faith; it was part of a much longer process and can be traced to another landslide election defeat in 1945. As Paul Addison and Angus Calder have shown, the idea of a 'people's

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>410</sup> Ibid, p. 11

<sup>411</sup> Ibid, p. 11

war', developed by public figures such as J.B. Priestley, took root and seemed to express the experience and solidarity of wartime.<sup>412</sup> This was reinforced by the beginnings of a re-slanting of the national narrative; most strikingly the Army Bureau for Current Affairs tried to create a 'citizen army', along the lines of the New Model Army and also promoted discussion of the Putney Debates amongst the troops.<sup>413</sup> This was very much at odds with the Churchillian grand narrative of glorious and aristocratic battles. After the war, the Conservative reaction to this initiative was venomous, condemning it as a monstrous left-wing conspiracy.<sup>414</sup>

*The Right Angle*, the journal of the Association of Conservative and Unionist Teachers, was established in 1948. All four issues of its first volume were dominated by an intense fear of 'the threatened tide of communism as it is likely to affect [their] schools and [their] profession.'<sup>415</sup> The first Editorial asserted that although political bias had previously been 'almost non-existent' in the teaching profession, 'times change'. The rhetoric was military and confrontational: 'the man who carried a sword was vanquished by the man who fought with a gun. The sacred cause of Education has been pushed into the front line of the political battle; we cannot fight our opponents with obsolete weapons.'<sup>416</sup> In places an apocalyptic tone was reached. Hugh Linstead MP urged teachers to recognise and contribute to 'the urgent need for Great Britain to [...] take over firmly the moral leadership of Europe' at a time when 'the civilisation of Europe as we have known it is at an end and a new civilisation is waiting to be born.'<sup>417</sup> Other

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<sup>412</sup> Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994); Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992 [1969])

<sup>413</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 208

<sup>414</sup> Calder, *The People's War*, p. 251

<sup>415</sup> Address Given by the Rt Hon R.A. Butler to the Annual Conference of the Conservative Teachers' Association, Caxton Hall, Westminster, 13 March, 1948, in *The Right Angle: Journal of the Conservative and Unionist Teachers' Association*, 1:1 (June 1948), pp. 7-13 (9)

<sup>416</sup> Basil M. Bazley, 'Editorial' in *ibid.*, pp. 4-5 (4). Original emphasis.

<sup>417</sup> Hugh Linstead MP, 'Education and Politics', Extracts from an address given at a meeting of the London Teachers' Association, in *The Right Angle*, 2:3 (Summer 1950), pp. 5-7 (5)

articles encouraged teachers to 'Know Your Enemy'.<sup>418</sup> The impression was given of a long-term orchestrated communist campaign 'infiltrating into the educational movement' because 'it has for a long time realised the immense value of a trained intelligentsia to forward its activities.'<sup>419</sup> The suggestion was that Conservative teachers needed to set aside their 'scruples' and begin to promote their own political 'faith'. Again, there was a note of defensiveness, a sense of Conservatives being excluded from their traditional sphere:

So it is high time for the Conservative in the teaching service to assert **his** faith; it is a duty he owes to his country and particularly to the parents of his pupils. One thing will perhaps astonish him; he will note that many of his neighbours will be surprised to learn that he is both a teacher and a Conservative.<sup>420</sup>

One way in which the Conservative Party set out to promote its values was in the re-formation of the Young Britons organisation, 'To teach patriotism, love of Empire, good citizenship and the basic principles of the Conservative faith to its members.'<sup>421</sup> This was an explicit attempt 'to counteract the blasphemous and seditious doctrine of the Communists', particularly in relation to their youth organisation, the Woodcraft Folk.<sup>422</sup> One parent wrote to *The Right Angle* to respond to suggestions that the Young Britons was itself exercising a political influence on children. His or her argument was that this would be true 'Had British tradition prevailed unchallenged in this country'. However, in the face of the 'threat of a foreign creed' parents and teachers had a duty to equip children 'with a certain degree of knowledge which will render their tender minds more capable of resistance.' The main

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<sup>418</sup> Alan Woodward, 'Know Your Enemy', in *The Right Angle*, 1:3 (Spring 1949), pp. 15-16

<sup>419</sup> Humphrey Berkeley, 'Activities in Teachers' Training Colleges', in *The Right Angle*, 1:4, (Summer 1949), p. 10

<sup>420</sup> Bazley, 'Editorial', p. 5. Original emphasis.

<sup>421</sup> Conservative and Unionist Central Office, *The Young Britons Organisation*, Organisation Series, No. 11 (London: Conservative and Unionist Central Office, May 1949), p. 15

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid*, p.1; for correspondence relating to the Woodcraft Folk, see CPA: CCO 60/4/13, Vice-Chairman – Women, General Correspondence, 1975

fear was the 'acutely uncomfortable doubts and questionings' which an 'indoctrinated Socialist child' may be able to rouse in his or her playfellows. The 'faith' necessary to resist these doubts and to enable the next generation 'to preserve the British tradition and way of life' was to be based on a particular reading of British history.<sup>423</sup> This was truly a vision of the past as inspiration, as reassurance, as a political resource:

Faith in such historical things as religion or the Empire requires a certain knowledge of the past. To look at the achievements of past generations in fair perspective does not demand unquestioning and fanatical allegiance to their ideas. What it does is to make us aware of the eternal spiritual values. Men and women in the past were as frail as we are, but when they were true to great ideals they achieved great things. That knowledge is the fount of faith, and that is the knowledge which our children need to protect them from the undermining cynicism of Marx.<sup>424</sup>

The suspicion that teaching in general (and history teaching in particular) had been hijacked by a left-leaning educational establishment continued throughout the later twentieth century. In 1974 Dr Rhodes Boyson MP claimed that 'There are Rank and File International Socialist cells planted in many London schools.'<sup>425</sup> Even without such fears of direct communist influence, it seemed that the left had captured not only the lecture halls but also the history classroom. Rather than a high-politics, grand narrative tale of kings, queens and diplomacy, children were being taught a social history of 'ordinary people', trade, struggle and oppression. Divisions in history teaching widened in the late sixties and early seventies with the growth of 'New History' and the Schools History Project. This not only challenged the touchstones of the national historical narrative, but also sought to change the nature of history teaching itself by emphasising its capacity to develop skills of critical analysis. This was anathema to many on the right. In

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<sup>423</sup> A Parent, 'Supple Young Minds' in *The Right Angle*, 2:3, Summer 1950, pp. 6-7

<sup>424</sup> Ibid

<sup>425</sup> Dr Rhodes Boyson, MP, 'How Red are our schools?', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 1975

Geoffrey Partington's characterisation, this period saw a shift from what he terms a 'mild socialist consensus' in which 'Peterloo was likely to be better known than Waterloo' to a 'relativistic neo-Marxism' which displayed a 'deep hostility to the notion of ever establishing any objective facts' and was consequently based on 'a *priori* ideological conviction'.<sup>426</sup> In the late 1970s, the Conservative Opposition launched an Education Campaign focusing on parental rights and influence (1976), standards (1977) and values (1978), with the latter being considered 'the most important of the three' as it dealt with the fundamental purpose of education, which was, it considered, 'to ensure that every child leaves school with a sense of values and it is the duty of schools to transmit to new generations the essence of what constitutes our civilisation and culture'.<sup>427</sup> This was a very particular view of the purpose of history teaching.

#### A National Curriculum for History

Despite the Thatcher Government's rejection of the postwar consensus and radical rewriting of Britain's political trajectory, it seemed that, ten years in, the party had not managed to regain control of education. The fear of left-wing influence in schools remained high. A pamphlet produced by the 'No Turning Back' Group of Conservative MPs in July 1986 is typical. It lamented that children 'might not be able to read and write, but they do really well at "social awareness"'. History and modern languages might be in decline, but real gains have been made in such vital subjects as "peace studies" and "anti-racism".' They felt that schools were in the grip of a 'kind of extremism' whereby 'a vicious and corrupt ideology' was imposed upon schoolchildren. The blame for this situation was laid on an educational system subject to 'complete domination by the producers [...] be they teachers, educational

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<sup>426</sup> Geoffrey Partington, 'History: Re-written to ideological conviction' in Dennis O'Keefe (ed), *The Wayward Curriculum* (Exeter: Social Affairs Unit, 1986), pp. 63-81 (64; 70)

<sup>427</sup> Statement by Mr. Norman St John-Stevas MP, Opposition Spokesman on Education Science and the Arts, at the launch of the Conservative Education Campaign, 'Values '78', CPA: CRD 4/5/49, Conservative Opposition Speeches 1974-May 1979, E2 News release: 63/78

academics, local authority administrators or ministerial civil servants.<sup>428</sup> The idea of a nationally controlled curriculum began to seem very attractive. It would place power in the hands of central government rather than 'experts' or 'politicized' Local Education Authorities, with their 'standing ability to corrupt the minds and souls of the young.'<sup>429</sup>

Whether in faux-naïveté or genuine innocence, Margaret Thatcher remarked in her memoirs: 'Though not an historian myself, I had a very clear – and I naïvely imagined uncontroversial – idea of what history was. History is what happened in the past.'<sup>430</sup> That others did not see it in quite such simple terms should not have been surprising. The debate over the National Curriculum for History is the most explicit argument about the national past in recent politics; it attracted intense interest from professionals, politicians, press and the public. Thousands of newspaper columns followed its progress, debates were held at Ruskin College and a series of pressure groups emerged to fight their corners. It was not just about using the past, or laying claim to a particular interpretation of it; it was about defining and fixing the whole concept of history itself. Anthony Freeman highlighted what was at stake: 'There is a distinct likelihood, of course, that what the government of the day doesn't license, either as a subject or what a subject consists of, becomes "un-knowledge."<sup>431</sup> Yet, this risk seemed worth taking, even to the libertarian right. A sense of crisis was evoked, sanctioning extreme measures. A pamphlet produced by the Hillgate Group sympathised with the view that 'A national curriculum is alien to the British educational tradition, which has always based itself in consensus rather than in central command.' But, they emphasised, a national curriculum was 'unfortunately' essential because of the current education establishment which, 'prey to ideology and self-

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<sup>428</sup> 'No Turning Back' Group of Conservative MPs, *Save Our Schools*, (London: Conservative Political Centre, July 1986), pp. 6-11

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18

<sup>430</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1995 [1993]), p. 595

<sup>431</sup> Anthony Freeman, 'Which History?', in Nick Seaton (ed), *Conference 1990: Which History? Whose Values? What Culture? Illiteracy, Inspectors and Primary School Matters*, no. 5 (York: Campaign for Real Education, March 1990), pp. 4-8 (4)



interest, is no longer in touch with the public.' A government-controlled national curriculum, on the other hand, would 'win the approval of most people who know the difference between fact and opinion, knowledge and ignorance, culture and barbarism. It is therefore more likely to renew the underlying consensus than to destroy it.'<sup>432</sup> This appeal to the common sense of 'most people' was a key feature of the arguments put forward by the Campaign for Real Education pressure group. As Nick Seaton put it in his speech to the 1990 Campaign for Real Education Conference:

Surely, all parents and the majority of teachers want are clearly defined, measurable curricula and Attainment Targets, which everyone can understand. [...] Yet these are the very things the 'progressive' educational establishment is determined we shall not have!<sup>433</sup>

Seaton called upon 'people like us' to 'monitor what the educational establishment is doing and make an effort to keep things on the right track.' He was similarly concerned about the influence of the 'progressive educational establishment' and felt that this 'old guard' had 'captured' the newly-established National Curriculum Council (NCC) 'to manipulate for its own ends.'<sup>434</sup> This idea that a 'simple', 'uncontroversial', 'common sense' version of history was under attack could be read as the death throes of an epistemological hegemony. It seemed 'uncontroversial' only because it had not been questioned so effectively before.

One of the driving forces of the Campaign for Real Education was Stewart Deuchar. He particularly played on this appeal to the common sense of ordinary people, describing himself as a 'small farmer' who gained a history degree in 1939 and had once 'taught history in a private school for two years.' His credentials for his sustained and forthright contributions to the debate were based on his 'concern' about 'what is going on in our

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<sup>432</sup> Hillgate Group, *The Reform of British Education: From Principles to Practice* (London: Claridge Ltd, 1987), pp. 10-11

<sup>433</sup> Seaton (ed), *Conference 1990*, p. 2

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1

schools.<sup>435</sup> Deuchar's language conveyed a sense of crisis, of division, almost of civil war: 'The LEAs and the governing bodies of the schools are already packed with "activists" or "wets"', 'there is a gulf of distrust and incomprehension between [them] and the public.' Deuchar counselled his supporters to 'keep a steady nerve, and keep your powder dry. [...] The System [is] on the defensive' but 'Already they are mounting a counter-attack'. He took a with-us-or-against-us approach, regretting the 'unedifying' fact that the Historical Association had 'identified itself with The System'.<sup>436</sup> 'The System' was attacked on a number of fronts, perhaps most predictably for its emphasis on multi-culturalism ('which because it engages our post-colonial guilt-feelings, threatens to destroy altogether the basis of our national culture'<sup>437</sup>) and women's history ('Should the books lie and say that these men were in fact women[?]'<sup>438</sup>). Deuchar complained that many in the 'intellectual establishment [...] have adopted a stance which is neutral or hostile towards our western civilisation. They are happy to enjoy all the perks of living in a free society, without feeling under any obligation to raise so much as a murmur in its defence'. This was, Deuchar felt, a 'deplorable' situation.<sup>439</sup>

### Grand Narrative History?

However, right-of-centre opinion on the purpose of history teaching was by no means unified. While the grassroots organisation run by Deuchar appealed for a history of national pride, this was not shared by some New Right thinkers and Conservative historians. In February 1991, the Centre for Policy Studies took issue with the political narrative as set out in the NCC's Proposed Draft Order for History. With its themes of suffrage and the

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<sup>435</sup> Stewart Deuchar, *The New History: A Critique* (York: Campaign for Real Education, 1989), p.1

<sup>436</sup> Stewart Deuchar 'The Interim Report of the History Working Group' in Stewart Deuchar (ed) *What is Wrong with our Schools?* York: Campaign for Real Education, no.4, 1987, pp. 84-6 (86)

<sup>437</sup> Hillgate Group, *The Reform of British Education*, p. 4

<sup>438</sup> Sheila Lawlor, *The National Curriculum, CPS Response to Proposed Draft Order for History*, (London: CPS, Feb 1991), p. 41

<sup>439</sup> Stewart Deuchar, 'Introduction', in Deuchar (ed) *What is Wrong with our Schools?*, pp. 3-7 (6)

widening franchise, the decline of the Liberal Party and rise of Labour, the Celtic Fringe, welfare state, Britain and Europe, the European Community and NATO, the CPS felt that it was 'determined by a Whiggish history'.<sup>440</sup> Sheila Lawlor objected to the Draft Order's statement that:

Through their history lessons pupils will learn that change is inherent in any democratic society and that democracy, like freedom, has to be won, is vulnerable, not perfectable, is valuable beyond price and needs to be maintained and defended.

She responded:

Is this to suggest that 'democracy' is the best form of government – or that the democratic world today is a better place than, for example, the world and governments it replaced? This is a pretty contestable generalisation.<sup>441</sup>

Lawlor's refusal to accept the 'Whiggish history' of the Proposed Draft Order speaks to Conservative distrust of both liberal values and the primacy of the present. This mistrust was set out by Robin Harris:

[...] the interpretation – and misinterpretation – of history, particularly recent history, is a powerful political tool which no one with an interest in politics can afford to ignore. The Whig interpretation of history, which generated for many years a comfortable aura of respectability for Liberalism, and Marxist historiography, which still successfully distorts popular views about the direction of progress, are well known cases in point.<sup>442</sup>

Indeed, Maurice Cowling felt that liberalism was far more of a danger to students than Marxism. He singled out Julius Gould's *The Attack on Higher Education* for particular criticism. He felt that its attacks on 'illiberal groupings' (i.e. Marxists) in higher education were misplaced; instead he

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<sup>440</sup> Lawlor, *The National Curriculum*, p. 34.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid, p. 42. Original emphasis.

<sup>442</sup> Harris, *The Conservative Community*, p. 10

commented that 'It is a matter rather for gloom and regret that anyone as clever as he is should consecrate the unthought-out pluralism in which we live'. Therefore, he felt that Marxists 'perform a valuable, destructive function in disclosing the gulf that divides the doctrinaire liberal from nearly the whole of the rest of the human race.' The divide over education was, then, 'part of a faction fight' based on 'liberal jealousy at the advances made by Marxists from the very point in the late 1960s at which university expansion was expected to confirm the stranglehold of liberal thinking on higher education.'<sup>443</sup>

As we have seen, Conservative historians were fundamentally opposed to teleological Whig narratives of progress and 'freedom gradually broadening down' and preferred to see history as a patternless accumulation of accidents of personality, circumstance and chance. Their emphasis on scepticism and rooting out 'humbug'<sup>444</sup> places them rather closer to Linda Colley and Benedict Anderson's attempts to deconstruct national identity than to Margaret Thatcher's unproblematic story of romantic Englishness. It was not just the particular narrative of whiggism which the Conservative historians set out to counter; they resisted grand historical narratives and teleological explanations altogether, seeing history as an essentially random combination of social and political circumstance and individual agency.

This is an area where the line between 'the past' and 'history' becomes both more important and more contentious. Sheila Lawlor complained about the range of historical sources suggested by the History Working Group and asked why a schoolboy should 'be confused with "myth" and "music" rather than being taught the historical truth?'<sup>445</sup> Yet, it is precisely such methods of cultural transmission which underpin a great many Conservative appeals to the national past. In 2005 the right-wing think tank Civitas republished H.E.

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<sup>443</sup> Maurice Cowling, 'The Present Situation' in Cowling (ed) *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), pp. 1-24 (8)

<sup>444</sup> Charmley, 'A Conservative Historians Speaks...', p. 3

<sup>445</sup> Lawlor, *National Curriculum*, p. 20.

Marshall's 1905 *Our Island Story*. This was a clear political statement, designed to reignite the debate over history teaching and revelling in the *Guardian's* criticisms, which, it suggested, showed that the left 'wish bitterly to resist' the possibility of schoolchildren acquiring 'a national identity'.<sup>446</sup> Yet, while it is a perfect example of narrative history, designed to inculcate 'a sense of national identity', *Our Island Story* can hardly be described as objective, fact-based history. H.E. Marshall described her own work as a 'story book', containing episodes 'which wise people say are only fairy-tales'.<sup>447</sup> Indeed, her tale begins with the story of Albion, the son of Neptune, being led to the island by a mermaid. Its 'brave mixture of truth and myth' was described as 'cutting edge' and 'impeccably postmodern' by the *Economist*.<sup>448</sup> Marshall asserted that these fictions 'are part of Our Island Story, and ought not to be forgotten, any more than those stories about which there is no doubt'.<sup>449</sup> *Our Island Story* was not seen as objective fact-based history even by its author; what it offered was a chronological, engaging narrative. Perhaps this wasn't a debate about truth and fact at all; it was about the importance of stories in transmitting a usable, inspirational national past.

This was not a left-right issue. Identity-affirming history is not restricted to tales of national or imperial glory. During a parliamentary debate on the National Curriculum, Labour MP Peter Archer argued that local social history could be a source of inspiration and 'self-respect' for working-class communities, previously 'ashamed' of their identities.<sup>450</sup> Archer's argument was firmly based in the 'dig where you stand' philosophy of history pioneered by Raphael Samuel at Ruskin College. It was predicated on the importance of history and community to developing a sense of self. Whether the referent is class consciousness, local pride, national glory or apparently neutral evolution, the principle is the same: our understanding of the present must

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid

<sup>447</sup> H. E. Marshall, *Our Island Story* (London, 2007 [1905]), p. xxii

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, quotation on back cover

<sup>449</sup> Ibid, p. xxii

<sup>450</sup> Parliamentary Debates, Commons, 29 April 1991, col. 135

be based upon a knowledge of the past. As Rhodri Hayward has shown, this is a culturally specific understanding of the human condition, which grew out of the concurrent professionalisation of history and of Freudian psychoanalysis. An inability to give a coherent, chronological account of the past has thereby become a marker of disorientation and – at the extreme – insanity.<sup>451</sup> The alternate view advocated historical study as a means of learning not about the past *for its own sake* but in order to think critically about the information we are receiving; to be able to judge and value a range of evidence. This was – perhaps in caricatured form – the position attributed to both the Schools History Project and to the Interim Report of the History Working Group, as seen in Deuchar’s and Freeman’s critiques, above.

The hinge of the argument over the National Curriculum became the four Attainment Targets and the things which they did – or rather did not – require of students. The right-wing pressure groups (and Thatcher herself) leapt on the fact that ‘historical knowledge’ was not included in the targets. Stewart Deuchar protested that ‘The nihilists will use every possibility to make History completely meaningless. Many of them hanker for a “content-free” syllabus.’<sup>452</sup> Eventually, the argument was resolved by a calculated fudge by the Secretary of State John MacGregor, who (apparently at the direct insistence of Thatcher) asked the History Working Group to include the words ‘historical knowledge’ in the first Attainment Target’ without changing the actual assessment criteria. That this had become such a totemic issue reveals a deep and political division over the *nature* of history itself. We have already noted Thatcher’s view that ‘History is what happened in the past.’<sup>453</sup> One author of a pamphlet thought that the use of the plural ‘interpretations of history’ in the second Attainment Target was ‘subversive because it must

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<sup>451</sup> Rhodri Hayward, *Resisting History: Religious transcendence and the invention of the unconscious* (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Palgrave, 2007)

<sup>452</sup> Deuchar, ‘The Interim Report’, pp. 84-6 (85)

<sup>453</sup> Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 595

tend to the view that there is no truth to which we can aspire'.<sup>454</sup> The fear was that national history – indeed national *identity* – would be lost in a sea of doubt and relativism. We might see this as nostalgia for a time when history was history: it was political, patriotic and chronological. It was what the public understood to be history – before it had been corrupted by left-leaning historians and post-Marxist theory. That this did not accord with the view of history advocated by Tory historians like Maurice Cowling and John Charmley seemed rather less important than perhaps it should. Thatcher's view of history was determinedly celebratory, presentist and whiggish.

### Thatcherism and Pastness

The Peterhouse Right's suspicion of grand narratives did not preclude a commitment to a conservative sense of inheritance, continuity and tradition. As we saw in chapter one, John Casey's contribution to Cowling's *Conservative Essays* bemoaned the attempts of Conservatives to justify their attachment to the nation's historic institutions on the basis of rational, *liberal*, judgements, such as the House of Lords' ability to scrutinise legislation. In contrast, 'A conservative attitude will be in some manner directed towards institutions and pieties as things in themselves, as ends.' Yet this is not an argument for 'a merely aesthetic, or nostalgic or whimsical attachment', rather a 'political being' must view customs and institutions 'as having a claim upon him, as deserving allegiance, as having authority'. He argued that, 'Any attempt to "depoliticise" such loyalties (as Tories now wistfully aim at depoliticising their attachment to a certain form of education) makes them unintelligible.' Indeed, 'It is precisely the attempt to depoliticise conservative attitudes that has made the conservative position intellectually unavailable.'<sup>455</sup> This is a clear rejection of whig teleology. The British state has not been developed as a result of rational judgments; we do not owe allegiance because of its structural attributes. Rather it comes to us through

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<sup>454</sup> Freeman, 'Which History?', pp. 5-6

<sup>455</sup> Casey, 'Tradition and Authority', p. 85

the accidents of history and our allegiance should be unconditional, based on the power of tradition and heritage.

Margaret Thatcher certainly made gestures towards this spiritual sense of heritage. The year before becoming Prime Minister, she spoke at a Conservative rally held at Blenheim Palace. The choice of location was significant. She quoted Churchill's evocation of Blenheim's past: 'Blenheim is heir to all the memories of Woodstock. Here kings—Saxon, Norman, Plantagenet—have held their courts and they loom in vague majesty out of the past' then continued:

It was here that Winston Churchill was born, a man of destiny whose courage and inspiration are immortal. It was here that the shades of those who marched with Marlborough and who served with Churchill, gathered to remind us—and I use the words of one of Marlborough's officers after the battle of Blenheim—without vanity—"I think we did our part". But Blenheim is not a memorial for one man alone. It is the tribute of a nation to what Winston described as weary, faithful soldiers who by their sacrifice and devotion made Britain the foremost power in Europe, and subsequently the world. Their names may now be forgotten. But this is their memorial too.<sup>456</sup>

It was this mystical past of kings and armies, national honour and personal sacrifice from which Thatcher hoped the party could draw inspiration to rebuild Britain. She spoke of the way that, 'today we gather together here to renew confidence in our people, and to express our faith in our future'. There is a powerful sense here of the past as eternally present in the 'shades' of fallen armies, to which one can return in order to refresh the present and gain the strength to face the future. This is similar to Enoch Powell's 'old sense of the symbolic, numinous kingship' discussed in chapter

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<sup>456</sup> Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Conservative rally at Blenheim Palace , Woodstock, Oxfordshire, 16 July 1977. Available at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=103420>. Accessed 09.10.2009



one.<sup>457</sup> However, Cowling was sceptical about the depth of Thatcher's connection to the past. He felt that she had 'only a low-level, Neville Chamberlain-type conception of the spiritual glue which is one of the Conservative Party's special needs.'<sup>458</sup> It is clear that her sense of the past was shaped by the needs of the present – the essence of whig history in Butterfield's analysis. The idea of looking back in order to go forwards is a constant theme in Thatcher's rhetoric. In this speech, it comes through a reference to Burke, who 'said that people will not look forward to posterity who never look back to their ancestors'. Thatcher's approach has also been well summarised by Tim Bell of Saatchi and Saatchi:

We made a party political broadcast in 1978, which was called Going Backwards and Forwards. And the idea was that as a result of the way the country had been governed for the previous years, Britain had gone backwards in its achievements, whereas in the past it had gone forwards. And if we could bring the past into the future, into the present, then we could go forwards ourselves. [...] And the argument was that if we could bring the glory of the past into the present and gain the economic strength that the past had had, then we had a chance of regaining the glories of the past in the present day.<sup>459</sup>

Thatcher's sense of the past was rooted in the needs of the present day. Her speech accepting the leadership of the Conservative Party played on conservative notions of the need to renew the 'heritage which our forefathers bequeathed us', yet she described the consequence of the failure to do this not as a loss of the past but, significantly, a loss of the *future*: 'we have lost our vision for the future, and we know that where there is no vision the people will surely perish.' This present rootlessness was set against the 'great' moments of the past, when such a vision had been firm:

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<sup>457</sup> Powell, 'Patriotism', pp. 2-3

<sup>458</sup> Cowling, Preface to Second Edition, in Cowling *Mill and Liberalism*, p. xlii

<sup>459</sup> Tim Bell interviewed for Adam Curtis (dir) *The Living Dead, 3: The Attic*, BBC: 1995

the founding of the Commonwealth, Elizabethan exploration and the development of parliamentary democracy.<sup>460</sup>

This presentist use of the past was seen very clearly in the Thatcher governments' approaches to the preservation of 'the national heritage'. This issue had been rising up the political agenda since the postwar years with Hugh Dalton's attempts to secure public ownership of country estates through his Land Fund. More than a confrontation between the ideals of private and public ownership of the country's resources, it became a symbol of the decline of 'the spacious way of life'.<sup>461</sup> In the mid-1970s this issue acquired the appearance of a national crisis. In the autumn of 1974 the Victoria & Albert Museum ran an exhibition entitled 'The Destruction of the Country House, 1875-1975'.<sup>462</sup> The pressure group SAVE Britain's Heritage was established in 1975, accompanied by a string of publications with alarmist titles: *The Rape of Britain*, *Heritage in Danger*, *The Sack of Bath*.<sup>463</sup> This was presented as a clash between Wilsonian, *progressive*, modernisation and conservative care for tradition and established ways of life. The Thatcher government came in on a promise to 'bring forward proposals to safeguard our national heritage of historic buildings and artistic treasures'<sup>464</sup> yet, as many commentators have noted, its actions in this area were ambiguous to say the least.<sup>465</sup> Patrick Cormack had lamented in 1976

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<sup>460</sup> Margaret Thatcher, speech accepting the Conservative leadership, Grosvenor Square, 20 February 1975. Available at: <http://www.margareththatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=102629>. Accessed 04.01.2010

<sup>461</sup> David Eccles, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 1952-53, 6 February 1953, col. 2209

<sup>462</sup> Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940*, revised edn (London: Methuen, 1997 [1995]), p. 193

<sup>463</sup> Colin Amery and Dan Cruikshank, *The Rape of Britain* (London: Elek, 1975); Patrick Cormack, *Heritage in Danger* (London: New English Library, 1976); Adam Fergusson, *The Sack of Bath: A Record and An Indictment* (Salisbury: Compton Russell, 1973)

<sup>464</sup> Queen's Speech, 15 May 1979, Parliamentary Debates, Commons, vol. 967 cols 47-51. Available at: <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1979/may/15/queens-speech>. Accessed 17.01.2010

<sup>465</sup> In addition to Hewison, *Culture and Consensus* and *The Heritage Industry* see, for instance, Peter J. Larkham and Heather Barrett, 'Conservation of the Built Environment under the Conservatives', in Philip Allmendinger and Huw Thomas (eds), *Urban Planning and the New Right* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 53-86

that even if these buildings were conserved, it was too late to do anything more 'than ensure the preservation of pockets of traditional England – quaint museum-like reminders of what the countryside used to be.'<sup>466</sup> This is exactly what Thatcher seemed to set out to do: a 1981 consultation paper suggested that 'The presentation of monuments to the public' should be 'a significant commercial operation'.<sup>467</sup> At the same time, the needs of economic expansion were prioritised over those of conservation: the 'Certificate of Immunity from Listing' was introduced in 1980, for the benefit of developers, and in numerous instances Conservative Secretaries of State judged in favour of commerce rather than heritage.<sup>468</sup>

### 'Victorian Values'

One of Thatcher's most explicit and controversial engagements with pastness was her invocation of 'Victorian values': thrift, self-help, responsibility and philanthropy. As her critics were quick to point out, this was a way of disguising innovation behind the rhetoric of tradition.<sup>469</sup> However, the phrase was not (seemingly<sup>470</sup>) chosen by Thatcher. It was first used by Brian Walden during an interview with Thatcher for *Weekend World*. In response to her description of the self-reliance she hoped to inculcate in the British populace Walden suggested, 'those values don't so much have a future resonance, there's nothing terribly new about them. They have a resonance of our past [...] you've really outlined an approval of what I would call Victorian values.'<sup>471</sup> She seized upon this, agreeing wholeheartedly with Walden and immediately incorporating the phrase into her political rhetoric. This opened her up to attack by both social historians and political

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<sup>466</sup> Cormack, *Heritage in Danger*, p. 27

<sup>467</sup> *Organisation of Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings in England* (London: Department of the Environment, 1981). Quoted in John Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: A Policy History of the Built Heritage 1992-1996* (London: E & F. N. Spon, 1997), p. 136

<sup>468</sup> See Larkham and Barrett, 'Conservation of the Built Environment', pp. 56-63

<sup>469</sup> See Samuel, 'Mrs Thatcher and Victorian Values'

<sup>470</sup> Raphael Samuel hints that this might have been a set-up, *ibid*, p. 333

<sup>471</sup> Brian Walden interview with Margaret Thatcher for London Weekend Television *Weekend World*, 16 January 1983. Available at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=105087>. Accessed 09.10.2009

opponents, much of which focused around the darker side of Victorian – or rather ‘Dickensian’ – life. Hansard shows that the phrase ‘Victorian values’ was most often used by Thatcher’s questioners, who accused her of ‘trying to turn our universities into Victorian finishing schools for an exclusive, tiny, elitist minority’<sup>472</sup>; asked ‘which she most fancies reintroducing—the absence of a National Health Service, the absence of old-age pensions, the workhouse, or a long series of colonial wars?’<sup>473</sup> and demanded to know whether she ‘believe[d] that mass unemployment and all the misery, poverty and insecurity that accompanies it are part of the Victorian values that she admires so much?’<sup>474</sup> While this was a robust line of attack, it was based on a misconstruction of Thatcher’s historical attitude. She was not advocating these values *because* they were inherited from the past; rather she set out the values she admired and then enthusiastically embraced a ‘heritage’ description of them. This shows a presentist rather than conservative attitude towards time.

But there is more to it than this; the controversy over ‘Victorian values’ stems from a greater debate concerning the interpretation of the Industrial Revolution. Thatcher felt that the story of successful, entrepreneurial progress had to be rescued from the social historians’ accounts of oppression, poverty and class conflict. In 1979 Thatcher provided the Foreword to a Centre for Policy Studies pamphlet entitled *History, Capitalism and Freedom*. It set out to correct ‘foolish misconceptions’ about history, chief of which was Marx’s reading of the nineteenth century.<sup>475</sup> A key line of argument in defence of ‘Victorian Values’ was to stress the philanthropic side of Victorian society, the self help, mutual help, friendly societies and churches which ‘created a private network of welfare which the state has undermined.’<sup>476</sup> The implication being that the poor were, despite the arguments of the left,

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<sup>472</sup> Mr Canavan, House of Commons PMQs, 3 May 1983, Hansard [42/15-20], col. 19

<sup>473</sup> Mr Dobson, House of Commons PMQs, 17 February 1983, Hansard [37/463-68], col. 464

<sup>474</sup> Mr Winnick, House of Commons PMQs, 19 April 1983, Hansard [41/158-62]col. 160

<sup>475</sup> Hugh Thomas, *History, Capitalism and Freedom* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1979)

<sup>476</sup> Charles Moore, *How to be British*, annual Centre for Policy Studies lecture, Blackpool, 12 October 1995 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1995), pp. 12-13

better provided for by Victorian philanthropy than they now were by the welfare state. This has clear resonances of Conservative pessimism with regard to historical development: the present is not necessarily an improvement on the past; innovation did not necessarily mean progress. Yet, despite the ambiguities of her 'regressive modernization',<sup>477</sup> Thatcher was by no means a restorationist; her sights were clearly set on the future.

Again, this brought her into disputes over what had now become known as the 'heritage industry'. Robert Hewison felt that the new emphasis on industrial heritage, particularly through open air museums, such as Ironbridge Gorge and Beamish, was intended to serve 'both as a mask for the revolution of the present and as a compensation for it.' Both 'Victorian values' and the discovery of a sanitised industrial 'heritage' were a means of reinventing the past 'so that the conflicts of the industrial revolution were consolingly reintegrated into the picturesque and pastoral narrative that became the consumer's vision of the national story.' In this pre-packaged, presentist vision of the past, 'Cotton mills and coal mines were painted into a picture-book history as decorative artefacts [...]. The machinery still stood but its brutal *raison d'être* was at best dimly recalled in the act of fantasising "the way we were"'.<sup>478</sup>

#### Forward or Back?

As we have seen, 'pastness' is a valuable political commodity, which can be used to confer authority on present actions. Anthony P. Cohen uses Thatcher's invocation of 'Victorian values' to demonstrate the political salience of appealing to this general sense of pastness. It is the very vagueness, the malleability of a term such as 'Victorian values' which is able to evoke 'a way of life, of complex characters, or a large fabric of values and

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<sup>477</sup> Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 2

<sup>478</sup> Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 265

attitudes'. Therefore, these 'simple "historical" labels are made to describe complex and often ideological messages', such as monetarism:<sup>479</sup>

So, it is the very imprecision of these references to the past – timelessness masquerading as history – which makes them so apt a device for symbolism and, in particular, for expressing symbolically the continuity of past and present, and for re-asserting the cultural integrity of the community in the face of its apparent subversion by the forces of change.<sup>480</sup>

Thatcher managed to conjure up a symbolic past which resonated with the public imagination, perhaps due to the way in which it coincided with 'Young Fogeyism', the TV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* and the boom in Laura Ashley soft furnishings.<sup>481</sup> Using a heritage sheen to soften radical modernisation seemed appropriate in the 1980s. However, as David Willetts noted, the national mood in 1997 was above all for change, for the new, for modernity. Blair's declared intention to make Britain a 'young country' again chimed with the national mood, perhaps best summed up by Ikea's 1996 'Chuck out your chintz' advertising campaign. This 'modernity' was itself self-consciously echoing the styles of thirty years earlier: the pop art, pop music and pop fashions of the 1960s. Nevertheless, heritage frills were out; sleek 'modernity' was in.

Given this national mood, it is perhaps not surprising that there were very few attempts to return to a 'true' pre-Thatcherite conservatism in the wake of 1997. The extent of the defeat obviously necessitated a painful post-mortem of its causes but this was not without an element of self-awareness or irony: the first post-election issue of the *Spectator* was labelled 'Special Recriminations Issue'.<sup>482</sup> In addition to the ever-thorny question of the party's European policy, the main debate seemed to be the extent to which

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<sup>479</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985; 2004 reprint), pp. 101-2

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid*, p. 103

<sup>481</sup> See Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*

<sup>482</sup> *Spectator*, 9 May 1997

Major was guilty of betraying Thatcher's legacy – whether he had 'fatally [...] discarded the notion that Conservatism should be based on an argument with the post-war consensus'<sup>483</sup> or whether 'the principles on which Mrs Thatcher refounded the Tory party were never lost sight of, merely pursued with less vigour.'<sup>484</sup>

The most high-profile argument for a pre-Thatcherite Conservatism was that made by Peter Lilley, failed leadership candidate, at the Carlton Club on 20 April 1999. He argued that the root of the Conservatives' unpopularity lay in their 'supposedly hostile attitude to the Welfare State and particularly to Health and Education.' Lilley sought to demonstrate that this was a misapprehension; in fact, Conservatives 'have had to run the welfare state and in practice they have assiduously preserved, expanded, and improved it. To coin a phrase – it has been safe in our hands.' Moreover, 'Conservative governments have very consistently increased spending on both health and education more rapidly than have Labour governments.' But the problem was not merely 'decades of Labour black propaganda', it was also the Conservatives' own rhetoric, focused as it had been on dismantling the post-war consensus.<sup>485</sup> This was a clear attack on Thatcher's legacy. While Lilley was delivering the Butler Memorial lecture, William Hague, the party's leader, was making his own speech at the dinner held to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Thatcher's election as Prime Minister. Unsurprisingly, his line was rather different. In the presence of Thatcher herself, Hague delivered a rather sickly paean to the former leader, based around the idea that 'Margaret, you took on the foolish ideas that had captured our governing classes and that had brought a once great nation to its knees. You had the courage and the vision to set the British people free.' While Hague referred briefly to Lilley's speech and accepted his argument that 'it is a great mistake

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<sup>483</sup> Janet Daly, 'They Simply had no Ideas' *Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 1997, p. 20

<sup>484</sup> Tessa Keswick, letter to *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1997, p. 19

<sup>485</sup> Peter Lilley, Butler Memorial Lecture, 20 April 1999, Carlton Club, London. Available at: <http://www.peterlilley.co.uk/text/article.aspx?id=12&ref=859>. Accessed 26.11.2009

to think that all Conservatives have to offer is solutions based on free markets', there was no mistaking the difference of their visions.<sup>486</sup>

The need to renew and to change was based upon an evocation of Thatcher's own modernising tendencies and a warning not to rest on the laurels of her past glories or to sink into nostalgia for the recent past. In 1997 William Hague assured the party that 'We will never stop being part of that record.' However, the party's role now was 'not simply to justify the past, or to defend the world as we left it. We must [...] acknowledge that the world moves on, and to move in step with the hope and optimism and forward-looking confidence which will accompany the arrival of a new millennium.'<sup>487</sup> In 1999 he noted that under Thatcher the party 'changed Britain. It would be a tragedy if the one institution in Britain that didn't change was the Conservative Party.'<sup>488</sup> It seems appropriate to end with Thatcher's own response to the defeat, as told by Michael Portillo to the Centre for Policy Studies at the first party conference following the election:

On the Friday morning, the day after the general election, even before Tony Blair had arrived in Downing Street, I received a telephone call of condolence from Lady Thatcher. But it was condolence delivered in her inimitable style. It was a call to arms and to renewal. She reminded me how after the defeat in 1974, the party had to rebuild, and in particular begin again its work on ideas and policy. That was when the Centre for Policy Studies was founded, and I for one hope that the CPS will be a source of new thinking in our present difficulties. But that process cannot be based on nostalgia for old ways of thought. An idea whose time has come can quickly become an idea whose time has gone. The value of the CPS's work has always been its originality and its fitness for the day. Even the enduring

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<sup>486</sup> William Hague, speaking at the dinner to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thatcher's election as Prime Minister, 20 April 1999. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1999/apr/20/conservatives1>. Accessed 26.11.2009

<sup>487</sup> Hague, *A Fresh Future*, p. 4

<sup>488</sup> Hague, 20 April 1999



principles upon which a party should be founded must be given contemporary forms of expression.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Portillo, *Ghost of Toryism Past*, p. 1

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Breaking the Mould or Recapturing the Past?

#### The SDP and New Labour in Negotiation with Labour's History

This chapter examines the different ways in which the founders of the SDP and the self-described architects of New Labour presented their negotiations with the Labour Party's past and particularly with revisionism which was by this stage a tradition in its own right. Despite the emphasis on novelty and on starting a new historical narrative outside the traditions of 'left' and 'right', both of these re-positionings also depended on reworking Labour's past. Whilst Blair used Labour's tendency to focus on its history against his opponents by presenting them as simply nostalgic for a dead past, he also tried to portray himself as the figure who could reach back to the party's older and therefore more authentic pre-1918 past. Whilst the narrative of an historic 'progressive consensus' with liberalism had long been an important strand of social democratic revisionism it gained fresh meaning in the context of the SDP's merger with the Liberals. However, I argue that there was a significant difference in the way that the SDP and New Labour positioned themselves in relation to this past. Most of the founders of the SDP (with the exception of Roy Jenkins) were determined to demonstrate that they remained loyal to Labour's heritage, justifying their re-positioning as a necessary response to the direction the Labour Party had taken in the recent past. For them, the social democratic narrative was a means of maintaining a sense of personal continuity as they broke with Labour and eventually merged with the Liberal Party. New Labour was far less of a genuine break with the party's past but was deliberately constructed as a statement of a new temporal attitude, valorising novelty and presentism for their own sake. Yet, its spokespeople used the alternative historical narrative of the 'progressive consensus' to position themselves within a legitimating historical framework and as a further claim to *national* status – to reaching past the Labour Party and speaking for the country beyond.

## New Labour

The making of New Labour has received a great deal of critical attention, much of which has inevitably focused on the way in which it placed itself in relation to past and future, its inheritances and its iconoclasm.<sup>490</sup> Nick Randall is right to note that students of New Labour have been particularly interested in 'questions of temporality' because 'New Labour so boldly advanced a claim to disrupt historical continuity'.<sup>491</sup> But it is not only academics who have contributed to this analysis. Many of the key figures associated with New Labour have also had their say. The New Labour project was not just about 'making history' in terms of its practical actions; the writing-up of that history seems to have been just as important. As early as 1995 Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle were preparing a key text designed 'to enable everyone to understand better why Labour changed and what it has changed into'.<sup>492</sup> This was followed in 1999 by Phillip Gould's analysis of *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*, which motivated Dianne Hayter to begin a PhD in order to counteract the emerging consensus that the modernisation process began with the appointment of Gould and Mandelson in 1983. The result of this study was published in 2005 under the title *Fightback! Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s* and made the case for a much longer process of modernisation, strongly tied to the trade unions. My concern here is not to adjudicate between these accounts, still less to provide an analysis of New Labour's philosophy or experience in office. These tasks have all been undertaken admirably by others. Rather, I aim to examine the discourse of change-making; the negotiation between past, present and future. In

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<sup>490</sup> See James Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: The Labour Party and its Discontents* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), Fielding, *The Labour Party*; Steven Fielding, 'New Labour and the Past' in Duncan Tanner et al (eds) *Labour's First Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 367-91; Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party: From Gaitskell to Blair* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) and Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul: New Labour and the Blair Governments, 1997-2007* (London: Routledge, 2007)

<sup>491</sup> Randall, 'Time and British Politics', p. 217

<sup>492</sup> Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. vii

particular I have decided to focus on the debates which took place in 1994/5 over the decision to change Clause IV, part iv of the party's constitution, as this was one of the most striking attempts to confront the party's relationship with its own past.

An association with the past cuts both ways: it can invest its holders with the authority of tradition or tie them to seemingly obsolete modes of thinking; conversely, modernisers can present themselves as vigorous and forward looking or be damned as unthinking and rootless. During the debates over Clause IV, the party leadership used nostalgia as a rhetorical tool in order to neutralise the demands of the party's left-wing for a socialist programme in the present and for the future. At the same time, they tried to control the party's history, in the guise of both heirs and critical historians, 'correcting' myths and laying down a new story for the future. As Cronin notes, this was the means by which New Labour invested itself with a past, a foundation myth 'in which their own small band heroically, and against great opposition, rescued the party from its self-destructive impulses and from likely electoral oblivion.'<sup>493</sup>

In a narrative encouraged by the rhetoric of its architects, the modernisation of the party appears to be a rejection of Labour's past, made possible through Blair's ignorance of its core traditions and ideological background. In a much-quoted diary entry, Alastair Campbell recorded Blair's comment that 'What gives me real edge is that I'm not as Labour as you lot'; Campbell explained that Blair 'felt he was in the same position he had always been and we were the people who had changed to adapt.'<sup>494</sup> As this anecdote suggests, the other key members of New Labour did have much deeper roots in the party, from Prescott's union background to Mandelson's lifelong immersion in Labour's high politics. Yet it was Blair's refusal to identify with the party's history which came, above all, to typify New Labour, at least in

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<sup>493</sup> Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts*, p. 5

<sup>494</sup> Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years: Extracts from the Alastair Campbell Diaries* (London: Hutchinson, 2007), pp. 167-8

the public eye. Blair even extended this Year Zero approach to his own biography. In 1996 Mandelson and Liddle explained that 'For Blair, there is no job in opposition really worth having, and he has never bothered to list his opposition posts in his *Who's Who* entry. He finds it bizarre that biographies should be written about him before he sets foot in No. 10.'<sup>495</sup> This telling comment shows Blair's refusal to be bound by what *was* and his self-fulfilling focus on what *could be*. Not only did he refuse to be bound to an institutional history which didn't suit his purposes, he also attempted to manipulate his personal life-history, to manage his legacy, before it had even been achieved. He projected his own identity as Prime Minister into a future yet to unfold. This snippet reveals a characteristic futurity central to Blair's identity and to the New Labour project.

This is a compelling narrative: a straightforward rejection of Labour's history – an attempt to speak *to* the future rather than *from* the past. But it is not the full story. Although Blair has usually been characterised (particularly by his own party) as peculiarly ahistorical, displaying both ignorance and antipathy towards Labour's past, as Oliver Daddow has demonstrated, a content analysis of his speeches reveals him to have been 'obsessed with history', frequently drawing upon historical lessons, parallels and models.<sup>496</sup> This is exactly the presentist use of the past I am trying to trace in party politics; it draws endlessly upon historical narratives even as it refuses to be bound by them. In the case of Blair's repackaging of the Labour Party, his revisionism also became *historical* revisionism, whereby a reinterpretation of the party's past was used to legitimate its actions in the present. Blair and his team were not quite brave enough to follow their revisionist predecessor Anthony Crosland's example in simply claiming that 'nothing is more traditional in the history of socialist thought than the violent rejection of past doctrines'.<sup>497</sup> Instead they drew on the account of David Marquand (who had been a founder member of the SDP) of the damaging historical division

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<sup>495</sup> Mandelson and Liddle, *The Blair Revolution*, p. 31

<sup>496</sup> Daddow, 'Playing Games with History', p. 591

<sup>497</sup> C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 97

between social democrats and New Liberals and pledged to recover an older, liberal, co-operative socialism dating back before Webb's drafting of the party's constitution. In this, Blair was undoubtedly encouraged by Roy Jenkins, his 'personal history tutor',<sup>498</sup> by whom he has been described as a potential heir to Gladstone, the young Churchill, Asquith and Lloyd George, determined to avoid 'the split on the centre-left of British politics that made the twentieth century overwhelmingly a Conservative century'.<sup>499</sup> The 'history lesson' Blair derived from the party's more recent past, from his reading of Gaitskell's leadership, seems to have been that a sophisticated approach to modernisation was needed, maintaining a careful balance between iconoclasm and reassurance. This could be seen as a discursive triple whammy, allowing New Labour's architects to reject the past, to unsettle its narrative structure *and* to claim its authority all at the same time. This is a powerful example of the cultural value of pastness, the authority of which can be usefully claimed even in the act of rejecting the past. It also reinforces the party's presentist approach to its history.

### The SDP

New Labour's reinvention of Gaitskellite social democracy was preceded by the Social Democratic Party. On 25 January 1981, Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers, David Owen and Roy Jenkins announced the creation of the Council for Social Democracy, which they hoped would bring about 'a realignment of British politics'. Two months later, all four had left the Labour Party and, along with another nine MPs and one hundred high-profile supporters, launched the Social Democratic Party. To begin with, the party did not have a manifesto, a membership or even a single leader. It was a party created by press release and by photocall. Its rhetorical and linguistic positioning was, therefore, crucial, even by normal political standards. What was the SDP and

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<sup>498</sup> Derek Draper, *Blair's Hundred Days* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 76. Quoted in Fielding, 'New Labour and the Past', p. 379

<sup>499</sup> Roy Jenkins, *The British Liberal Tradition: From Gladstone to Young Churchill, Asquith and Lloyd George – Is Blair their Heir?* 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Senator Keith Davey lecture, Victoria University, University of Toronto, 2000 (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2001)

what was it not? What did 'social democracy' include and what did it reject? And, most importantly for our purposes, how did its founders negotiate their relationship to the past of the party they were leaving and to the future they were hoping to create? Most of the literature considers the extent to which the SDP succeeded in 'breaking the mould' of British politics and attempts to analyse why it failed.<sup>500</sup> My main concern is with the personal and political rhetoric of breaking with Labour and merging with the Liberal Party. I examine the way in which these negotiations with past and with future were enacted and presented by the SDP's founders and by their detractors. As with Clause IV, I am also interested in the ways in which grassroots members responded to and participated in these discursive strategies.

Unlike New Labour, the founders of the SDP tried to break away from the established Labour narrative and start a new chapter in British social democracy without – initially – breaking away from the socialist story and leaving themselves open to charges of inauthenticity, rootlessness or betrayal. This was a whole new party, a literal break, and they did not aim to carry the majority of the Labour Party with them. This was not so much refashioning as carving out for themselves a distinct legacy, by which they could demonstrate that they had stayed true to their roots while the Labour Party had moved around them. At the same time, however, novelty, difference and modernity were key to the SDP's appeal. Later they needed to find a way to integrate their own history and the history they had carried with them into their new identity as Liberal Democrats. This of course required negotiations with another political tradition, another inheritance: Liberalism.

With New Labour, 'modernisation' was a case of being of their time, *appropriate* to the contemporary political and social context. It could be seen

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<sup>500</sup> See particularly Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *The SDP: The Birth Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Ian Bradley, *Breaking the Mould? The Birth and Prospects of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Robertson, 1981)

as an extension of the *Marxism Today* debates around the need to acknowledge the cultural changes associated with Thatcherism and to tailor their politics to modern Britain, rather than an imagined 'traditional' working class.<sup>501</sup> The slogan 'New Labour New Britain' seemed to present an exciting, but essentially orderly progression from out-dated past to a contemporary present and towards an improved (if not radical) future.<sup>502</sup> The SDP was different. The progression between past and present here was not orderly, timely; it was ruptured. The future was unknown. Both Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins used the same quotation from *Hamlet* to describe the 1970s and the Winter of Discontent:

Throughout the decade of the 1970s, I had the increasing feeling that the times had become out of joint for British politics.<sup>503</sup>

For a few weeks, it seemed as if the times were out of joint<sup>504</sup>

This temporal attitude can be seen in the phrase most associated with the SDP: 'Breaking the mould'. There is a clear sense here that the natural political order, the party system and the relationship of past to present and future had been unsettled. The SDP were breaking out of the prescribed party narrative: making their own present; making their own politics. As we will see, SDP rhetoric showed a tension between the possibility of making this novelty part of their identity, using it as a selling point, and of denying it by demonstrating their essential continuity with Labour's ideals and policies.

### The Search for Origins

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<sup>501</sup> However, the 1998 Special Issue of *Marxism Today* made it clear that Blair should not be seen as a simple inheritor of their political stance and that he had abandoned their hopes of a radical socialist future. See particularly, Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', *Marxism Today*, Special Issue, November/December 1998, pp. 9-14

<sup>502</sup> It also referenced the party's similarly optimistic 'New Britain' manifesto of 1964

<sup>503</sup> Roy Jenkins speaking at the inaugural meeting of the SDP Lawyers' Association, Lincoln's Inn, 29 April, 1981. Quoted in Bradley, *Breaking the Mould?*, p. 28

<sup>504</sup> William Rodgers, 'Government under Stress: Britain's Winter of Discontent 1979', *Political Quarterly*, 55: 2, (April-June 1984), pp. 171-179 (171)



The common political background to the breakaway of the Gang of Four and the revision of Clause IV was the revisionism of the 1950s, led by Anthony Crosland and Hugh Gaitskell. Yet, the approach to this inheritance by each of the 'new' parties was very different. The Gang of Four were much closer (chronologically and in some cases personally) to Crosland and Gaitskell. Jenkins was a close friend of Gaitskell, and Rodgers had organised the Campaign for Democratic Socialism, established following the failure to reform Clause IV to provide a focus for moderates within the party. The two men also had some claim to be the official guardians of Gaitskell's legacy: Rodgers edited a book of tributes published soon after his death and Jenkins was appointed as his literary executor, along with Crosland. Even the much younger David Owen replaced Crosland as Foreign Secretary and has described both the impact of Gaitskell's stance on Suez on his early political formation and his support for Gaitskell over Clause IV.<sup>505</sup> The rhetoric of the SDP made these roots very clear indeed. For instance, Rodgers argued that:

The SDP was not born in an emotional spasm, but emerged as the culmination of a long process of shifting allegiances. Its origins lie in the debate about the future of the democratic left in Britain that began when Harold Macmillan won a third term for the Conservative Government in 1959 and Hugh Gaitskell failed to change Clause 4 of the Labour Party's constitution.<sup>506</sup>

He claimed that the Labour Party 'failed to learn the lesson' of that defeat, resulting in the 1979 defeat, the breakaway of the SDP and, ultimately, the '1983 debacle'.<sup>507</sup> Rodgers also claimed to be acting through loyalty to Labour leaders of the past, in the face of others' treachery:

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<sup>505</sup> David Owen, *Personally Speaking to Kenneth Harris* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), pp. 17, 23

<sup>506</sup> William Rodgers, 'The SDP and Liberal Party in Alliance', *Political Quarterly*, 54: 4 (October-December 1983), pp. 354-362 (355)

<sup>507</sup> Rodgers, 'Government under Stress', p. 179

From Keir Hardie to Jim Callaghan, our Party has believed in a practical humanitarian socialism – a creed of conscience and reform rather than of class hatred. It has owed its inspiration to British radicals, trade unionists, cooperators, non-conformists and Christian socialists – not to Marx or Lenin. [...] If our Party should abandon or betray those principles, it would be a tragedy. But they would not die. They would survive because there would be men and women prepared to carry on the fight. The enthusiasm and the vision would endure and the standard-bearers would not be lacking.<sup>508</sup>

Rodgers' argument could be seen as an inversion of the traditional Labour myth that leaders betray their party.<sup>509</sup> In this case, the party was depicted as betraying all its leaders, past and present. The idea of legacies squandered and ancestors ignored comes through very strongly in SDP rhetoric. David Owen argued that their position was closer to the Pioneers' vision of the Labour Party, who though 'themselves trade unionists, deliberately decided not to create a Trade Union Party but to establish a constitution for the Labour Party that made it a national party.'<sup>510</sup> By this rhetorical strategy, breaking away from the Labour Party became in itself an act of loyalty – an attempt to uphold the legacy of the past and bear the standard into the future.

Unsurprisingly, the SDP's opponents did not accept this narrative. They frequently accused them of ingratitude to the party which had supported and nurtured them. Roy Hattersley later recalled reading an interview in which Tom McNally said 'I'm not sure what I'm going to say to my dad' and then sending a telegram saying 'Tell him you owe everything to the Labour Party.'<sup>511</sup> One letter sent to the Gang of Four directly repudiated their attempts to claim the posthumous approval of Labour's great leaders.

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<sup>508</sup> Rodgers' speech at the Annual Dinner of the Abertillery Constituency Labour Party, 30 November 1979, Lord Rodgers of Quarrybank, SDP Papers (WRSDP), Albert Sloman Library, University of Essex: box 2, folder c,.

<sup>509</sup> See for instance, Lawrence, 'Labour: the myths it has lived by'

<sup>510</sup> *Labour Victory*, Conference Special, no. 17 (Campaign for Labour Victory, January 1981), p. 3

<sup>511</sup> Roy Hattersley, *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p. 234

Specifically, its writer tried to hold Roy Jenkins accountable to his own past and to the ghosts of both his father and Clement Attlee, asking 'is this Roy Jenkins the same person that the Solihull Constituency, I among them sweat blood and tears for in 1945? The same person that Clem Attlee assured us "was steeped in true socialism". Who was a product of the valleys the very cradle of Socialist thinking. Whose father was PPS to Clem[?]' He added, 'I bet that Clem is turning over in his grave.'<sup>512</sup> Shirley Williams suffered similar accusations of betraying her mother's memory. One letter-writer claimed that 'Vera Britain [sic] would be shocked at her daughter'; another that Vera Brittain and her friend Winifred Holtby were 'turning in their graves'.<sup>513</sup> However, Williams also received letters from members of the public – and particularly from women – which tried to assert personal and familial continuity on her behalf. They claimed that her actions were in line with those of her mother, Vera Brittain, who was severely criticised for her pacificism:

You personally must remember the stand your mother had to make during the war. The isolation, from people she thought to be her friends, must be very much akin to your own position now, she remained true to her values, this must be you now.<sup>514</sup>

For 50 years I have admired your mother Vera Brittain [...]. She would have been very proud of you today.<sup>515</sup>

This idea of responsibility to one's ancestors – whether blood relations or intellectual forbears – comes through again and again. It is worth noting that none of the letters preserved in Alec McGivan's collection mention Shirley Williams' father, George Catlin, alone and very few mention him at all, despite his much closer involvement with Labour politics. Yet the perceived

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<sup>512</sup> Letter to Roy Jenkins, 5 January 1980 [1981?], Lord Alec McGivan, SDP Papers (AMSDP), Albert Sloman Library: II, 13

<sup>513</sup> Letter to David Owen, 27 January 1981, AMSDP: II: 13; letter to Michael Foot, 13 November 1981, MF/L/4 letter to Michael Foot, 13 November 1981

<sup>514</sup> Letter to Shirley Williams, 18 February 1981, AMSDP: II: 13

<sup>515</sup> Letter to Shirley Williams, 9 February 1981, AMSDP: II: 13

link between mother and daughter is invoked time and again – and usually by women.

By their detractors, the SDP's actions were presented as opportunistic, self-interested and petty. Roy Hattersley has said that although the members of the Gang of Four each had their own reasons for breaking with Labour, all of them also 'undoubtedly believed that the new party offered them the prospect of power' and that most of the MPs who left with them did so 'because they believed that they would do better in the new party and dressed up self-interest to look like principle.'<sup>516</sup> David Owen has suggested that many of these attacks were a way of other right-wingers asserting their own loyalty to Labour. He describes how within the Campaign for Labour Victory, 'two camps were emerging – the stayers and the leavers.'<sup>517</sup> The stayers 'felt that from now on they had to be more "catholic than the Pope"'. In attacking [the SDP] they were reinforcing their position of influence in the Labour Party.<sup>518</sup> Owen's point is supported by Hattersley's own narrative of self-sacrifice:

If I reach the Pearly Gates, I know what I shall claim is my qualification for crossing St Peter's picket line. Back in 1981, I was one of the people who stood their ground, argued against absurdity, organized (no matter how incompetently) on behalf of reason and, in consequence, saved the Labour Party.<sup>519</sup>

If the SDP was to succeed in overcoming these accusations, it was of vital importance that its founders were able to present themselves as loyal, consistent, and self-sacrificing. This they did with unrelenting energy, turning the accusation back on their detractors:

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<sup>516</sup> Hattersley, *Who Goes Home?*, pp. 233; 235

<sup>517</sup> David Owen, *Time to Declare* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), p. 471

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid*, p. 474

<sup>519</sup> Hattersley, *Who Goes Home?*, p. 236

The real challenge today is to those still in the Labour Party who sail in a different ship, under a different captain, to a different destination. They are the ones who fly false colours.

The Labour Party Michael Foot leads is not the Labour Party that fought the last election. Its programme is not the 1979 Manifesto.<sup>520</sup>

David Owen has since described this line of argument as 'rather defensive'.<sup>521</sup> Yet it seems to have been a key point in the SDP's campaigning strategy as this advice to canvassers shows:

[...] do not be defensive. Go over to the attack. The real traitors are those who have abandoned principle and stayed in the Labour Party. SDP MPs did not leave the Labour Party: it left them. The Labour Party of 1983 is very different from the Labour Party of Clem Attlee, Ernest Bevin and Hugh Gaitskell.<sup>522</sup>

This paper also included an attempt to brand their opponents as 'guilty men'. The echo of Foot's own (anonymous) attack on Chamberlain's Conservatives is unmistakable in this passage, which also clearly demonstrates the SDP's claim to be self-sacrificing:

In this election the Labour Party and its allies will be calling many of those who have formed the SDP 'traitors'. What is the truth? Who are the real guilty men?

Not those who left the Labour Party because they put principle before party, conviction before ideology, their country before personal ambition.<sup>523</sup>

The argument over duty and sacrifice is well illustrated by an exchange of correspondence between Sir John Boyd, the Secretary of the AUEW and Bill

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<sup>520</sup> Press Release: Rodgers speaking to a trade union audience at Westminster, 19 March 1981, WRSDP: 2: c

<sup>521</sup> Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 492

<sup>522</sup> 'Who Are the Guilty Men?' [1983?], WRSDP: 2: c., Original emphases.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid

Rodgers. Boyd disagreed with Rodgers' position and confronted him with his duty to the party and to his class:

What all Party members must never forget, irrespective to the position we may hold, is that we are nothing apart from what the organised working-class have made us, and that we are but stewards of the Party's interests for a few decades, hence it is not entirely our property with which we can do what we like.<sup>524</sup>

Rodgers' reply included a reminder that he 'joined the Labour Party as a schoolboy in Liverpool 35 years ago', moved on to the assertion that 'this is no longer the party of Attlee and Gaitskell' and then to the privileging of nation over party: 'I regard myself as the steward of all those I represent in Parliament but also of the fate of our country as a whole and the prospect for future generations.'<sup>525</sup> The theme of a wider responsibility to the nation is a theme to which I will return below. Rodgers went to great efforts to write to old friends and colleagues, assuring them that he remained the same person and would continue to hold the same views:

I do not kid myself that, if a break comes and a new party is established, there will be no hard feelings.

But, as we shall continue to hold many of the same values in politics – and probably the same views on many policies – we shall have much in common.

More to the point, the respect and affection I feel for you will not be diminished and I hope that our friendship will survive.<sup>526</sup>

I hope that we shall remain in personal touch from time to time. As my views on politics have not essentially changed, I would expect us to have much to discuss and agree with you.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> Sir John Boyd to Bill Rodgers, 19 January 1981, WRSDP: 2: a

<sup>525</sup> Bill Rodgers to Sir John Boyd, 22 January 1981, WRSDP: 2: a

<sup>526</sup> Bill Rodgers to a number of MPs, 12 February 1981, WRSDP: 3

<sup>527</sup> Bill Rodgers to David Basnett, 5 March 1981, WRSDP: 2: b

It is clear that such demonstrations of continuity were important for many of the SDP's founders on a personal as well as political level, but not all members of the Gang of Four went about this in the same way. At the other end of the scale to Rodgers' invocations of Labour values is Roy Jenkins' emphasis on his liberal roots and later explanation that that 'As Asquith's sympathetic biographer' he 'had long been well-disposed towards most liberals'.<sup>528</sup> He has since claimed that he had 'always been a liberal with a small 'l'.<sup>529</sup>

Despite Jenkins' apparent eagerness to leave the Labour Party, the fact that the break took so long to come has been used to demonstrate the other founder members' reluctance to countenance leaving the party to which they had dedicated their lives. Shirley Williams recently – retrospectively – took this line, describing leaving the Labour Party as 'like pulling out my own teeth, one by one'.<sup>530</sup> There is no doubt that the break was incredibly painful for many of those concerned; Rodgers has been the most explicit about this. After thirty years of membership he found breaking with the party 'immensely distressing and for more than a fortnight [he] was crippled by back pains that made it almost impossible to move'.<sup>531</sup> Much later, he described how he spent his days while immobilised reading Bernard Crick's biography of Orwell and contemplating his relationship to both the Party he had served and to the ideals that drove that service. Having convinced himself that 'leaving the Labour Party was the only course open to me consistent with what my life in politics had been' and, significantly, that it was consistent with what he knew of Orwell and of his own father, Rodgers recovered: 'Almost at once the pain in my back began to ebb. By the time of

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<sup>528</sup> Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 513

<sup>529</sup> Jenkins, *The British Liberal Tradition*, p. 13

<sup>530</sup> Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves: The Autobiography* (London: Virago, 2009), p. 278

<sup>531</sup> William Rodgers. 'What happened to the SDP, and what could still happen?', *London Review of Books*, 7 February 1991

the Limehouse Declaration it was virtually gone, and I was walking normally again.<sup>532</sup>

Such emotional responses were by no means restricted to members of the Gang of Four. One letter sent to the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*, the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Evening Post* and the *Observer* began with a moving account of personal hardship and political service stretching back to 1926 and concluded 'I write this letter in tears, with memories so deep that they are inexpressible. It is with bitter regret and anguish of mind that I cut myself off from the Party that has been my life for so long, remembering my dead comrades'. The author was, however, grateful that these comrades 'have not lived to see today's betrayal of all that we worked for and struggled for – democracy. No more; no less.' She urges those who feel the same to join the SDP and signed off with the words, 'I have the honour to sign myself, Social Democrat.'<sup>533</sup> Another long-term Labour member and former councilor wrote to offer his support, declaring that he 'left the Labour Party in January 1981 and joined the S.D.P on day 1 of the launch.' Again he made a statement of personal continuity with the words, 'I am and always have been a loyal and committed social democrat.'<sup>534</sup> Whilst these members were happy to embrace social democracy as a political philosophy, they do not seem to have shifted their temporal positioning. If anything, their turn to the SDP is justified as part of their obligation to 'dead comrades'.

As David Owen put it, 'Being a member of a political party is not like being a member of a golf or tennis club. Membership carries with it tremendous emotional overtones, particularly in the Labour Party.' Significantly, Owen went on to draw a connection between emotional commitment to the Labour Party and a sense of being part of an ongoing and historic collective struggle, explaining that the strength of the party's hold on its members was 'partly because at the beginning of the century the fight was against entrenched

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<sup>532</sup> William Rodgers, *Fourth Among Equals* (London: Politico's, 2000), p. 205

<sup>533</sup> 25 January 1981, AMSDP: II: 13

<sup>534</sup> 14 April 1981, WRSDP: 3. Emphasis added



privilege, and 'unity is strength' was more than just a slogan.<sup>535</sup> Owen did not come from that background himself, but we see here the idea that in joining a political party one assumes the weight of its collective past. However, Owen found the tension between past loyalties and new possibilities far easier to resolve than Rodgers; like Jenkins, he seems to have found the break with the past to be something of a relief. He described the way in which 'To be a social democrat was a new release, a link with my Labour past but also a springboard for the future.'<sup>536</sup> For Owen, at least, the possibilities of the future outweighed his obligation to the past. This is the shift in temporal positioning between socialism and social democracy highlighted by both Walter Benjamin and Henry Drucker, as discussed in the introduction.

### Ancestors

It is striking that the narratives of the SDP and of their critics on both left and right converge around a core group of ancestors: Hardie, Attlee and Bevan. As mentioned in chapter two, Bevan's legacy in particular had been 'hollowed out', enabling his name to be linked to a wide spectrum of political views. Bill Rodgers, in particular, made a clear attempt to claim the legacy of both Gaitskell and Bevan. This was not a matter of denying their political differences; rather it was a case of placing both of them (and himself) firmly within the tradition of a legitimate, parliamentary Labour tradition, which excluded the hard left and entryists. This position was echoed by some at the grassroots, who assured them that, 'Bevan would, like you have believed that the present Labour Party has betrayed the ideals of social democracy for which he fought so hard.'<sup>537</sup>

Bill Rodgers' 1977 inaugural speech to the Campaign for Labour Victory is a strong example of this strategy. He first testified to his and his audience's party loyalty but then questioned what it was that they were being loyal to,

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<sup>535</sup> David Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 473

<sup>536</sup> Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 500

<sup>537</sup> Letter to Shirley Williams, 8 February 1981, AMSDP: II, 13

bringing into doubt the very identity of the party: 'The plain fact is that there are many people deeply disturbed by present tendencies. They would support the party of Callaghan as they supported the party of Attlee thirty years ago. But is it the party of Callaghan, they ask? Whose voice is the voice to which they should listen?'<sup>538</sup> Rodgers then went on to distinguish between the far left activists who 'care little for our values and nothing for the survival of our party, as we have known it' and 'The real activists [who] are those genuinely working in the front line – our local councillors, our fund raisers and bazaar organizers, our shop stewards and convenors, our community leaders.'<sup>539</sup> Finally, he defined the boundaries of the Labour Party as he saw it. By including the 'legitimate left' of the Tribune Group, he shifted his rhetorical position from the right of the party and attempted to speak for its entirety: 'Tribune is a part of our way of life and I congratulate it on its 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. The legitimate left has been an essential element in the coalition of the Labour Movement from its earliest days.' He appealed to the left as colleagues in a shared enterprise, creating a community of 'we' who share a common commitment to the party's history and a shared responsibility for its future:

The Labour party is the party of Bevan as well as Gaitskell. For Bevan was a staunch democrat, opposed to a monolithic society and with no time for tyranny. The heirs of Bevan – the legitimate left – have their role to play in saving the party. I hope that they will not neglect it.<sup>540</sup>

Rodgers had made a similar point in an earlier speech, in 1975, asking 'the heirs of Bevan amongst MPs [to] support the heirs of Gaitskell' in the face of the threat from a 'small number of activists' outside the 'broad framework' of the party who practise 'new style politics'.<sup>541</sup> Rodgers was speaking in 1977,

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<sup>538</sup> Rodgers' inaugural speech to the Campaign for Labour Victory, 19 February 1977, WRSDP: 2: c

<sup>539</sup> Ibid

<sup>540</sup> Ibid

<sup>541</sup> William Rodgers speaking in Stockton-on-Tees, 28 August 1975, quoted in a press release, LHASC, Dianne Hayter, Additional Papers (uncatalogued), Box 2

when he and others still hoped that the party might not split. His argument that the Labour Party now was not the Party it had been was echoed by Bob McLennan in his 1981 resignation speech to his CLP:

The take over of the Labour Party by those who are hostile to all that it has stood for and fought for during almost 80 years of its existence is all but complete; the manifesto on which I stood for election only two years ago is now discarded; the Government of which I was a junior member is reviled; the voice of the apologists for Marxism are listened to with eager enthusiasm; the wisdom, humanity and good sense of former Labour statesmen is ridiculed. I am not leaving the Labour Party; the Labour Party which I joined and which I have been proud to belong during 15 years of public life has left me and many other like me.<sup>542</sup>

It was not enough for the SDP founders to define their own party; they also had to define what *the Labour Party* was and what it was not. In particular, they were at pains to explain that it was *not* the Labour Party as they knew it – therefore, they were not traitors in leaving it. A draft letter to supporters of the Campaign for Labour Victory claimed that, 'We have witnessed in the last eighteen months no less than a change in the whole nature of the Labour Party.'<sup>543</sup> Later in the same letter, the Special Conference decision over the electoral college was described as 'a massive blow' which 'rejects the basic democratic values of One Member One Vote – principles which democratic socialists have fought for since the days of the Chartists.'<sup>544</sup>

The extent to which the SDP founders still saw themselves as part of the labour movement is shown by their surprised and hurt reaction to the Fabian Society's decision to revoke the membership of SDP members. The SDP then set up its own society on the Fabian model: the Tawney Society. This explicit attempt to claim such a key part of Labour's philosophical legacy did not go

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<sup>542</sup> Bob McLennan's speech to his CLP, February 1981, WRSDP: 2: b

<sup>543</sup> Draft letter to Campaign for Labour Victory mailing list, WRSDP: 2: a

<sup>544</sup> Ibid

unchallenged. Michael Foot, among others, wrote to the *Times*, taking up the debate over using the word 'socialism' and in particular its disappearance from the paperback edition of David Owen's *Face the Future*. He asked whether the Tawney Society would 'devote its labours to the removal of the word Socialism from the works of Professor Tawney', accused them of seeking 'for their own purposes, to debase the name of Tawney' and reminded them 'how proudly and passionately he pronounced the word Socialism, and scorned those who would not understand its true origin, meaning and glory.'<sup>545</sup>

Owen later explained that his decision to replace the term 'socialism' with 'social democracy' in the paperback edition of *Face the Future* was a defensive response to the common misperception of what 'socialism' entailed. He insisted, however, that both the word itself and the intellectual debts it entailed remained of immense personal significance to him:

There was a certain cussedness about my refusal to reject identification with socialism. I could not and still cannot repudiate the great body of socialist thinking and writing about egalitarianism and its linkage to an individual's freedom. The non-Marxist socialist tradition of Christian charity and care is not one that can or should be lost in a crude equation with communism or vulgarizing of the socialist viewpoint. British socialists like Robert Owen, William Morris, Professors Tawney and Titmus and G.D.H. Cole have made a profound contribution to political thought and I will not denigrate their memory by decrying socialism.<sup>546</sup>

The name of the new party was a crucial issue. While the founders of the SDP rejected the direct continuity that would have come with the name 'The Democratic Labour Party', they were careful to emphasise that the phrase

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<sup>545</sup> *Times*, 3 February 1982. Quoted in Michael Foot, *Loyalists and Losers* (London: William Collins Sons and Co, 1986), p. 93

<sup>546</sup> Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 499

'social democrat' was interchangeable with 'democratic socialist'.<sup>547</sup> This was not an unproblematic strategy and the equivalence of 'socialism' and 'social democracy' was also emphasised by those attacking the SDP. The Labour Party Research Department complained that, 'By calling themselves the SDP, the Gang have tried to hijack both the name and the prestige of "Social Democracy"' and pointed out that 'Social Democratic had traditionally been the title of Socialist parties in Europe. The Russian Social Democratic Party (Bolshevik) was in fact Lenin's revolutionary party.' Yet, they argued, the SDP was not socialist but rather on a par with 'right wing breakaways from Socialist parties' in countries such as Italy, Japan, Australia and France. They gleefully noted that 'Already the Social Democrats in Britain received short shrift from the Socialist International'.<sup>548</sup>

#### Innovation or Inheritance?

As we have noted, there was an inherent contradiction between the SDP's desire to present themselves as the inheritors of the Labour tradition and their claim to be 'breaking the mould' and bringing about a fundamental 'realignment' of British politics. David Owen has since recognised the tensions of this discursive position, finding that 'A consequence of this stance – that we were the true protectors of the Labour Party manifesto – was that we were a little too ready to defend some of its elements which we really needed to drop.'<sup>549</sup>

SDP support came overwhelmingly from people who had not previously been a member of any political party. In 1984 65% of SDP members were so-called 'political virgins', compared to 22% who had come to the new party from Labour and 8% from each of the Conservative and Liberal parties.<sup>550</sup> These members stressed that 'The great attraction of the S.D.P. is that it is a

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<sup>547</sup> See for instance Bill Rodgers' interview in the *New Yorrick*, Derwent College, University of York Student Magazine, Summer 1981, pp. 3-4. Clipping available in WRSDP: 1: c

<sup>548</sup> Labour Party Research Department, 'The Gang Show', Information Party No. 19, May 1981, p. 21, LHASC: MF/L27/13. Original emphasis.

<sup>549</sup> Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 492

<sup>550</sup> Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 496

NEW Party' and insisted that it should transcend the old politics of Labour by being 'free from ancient class riddled political dogma. [...] neither blemished or tarred with a discredited past.'<sup>551</sup> Bill Rodgers recognised the appeal of this strategy, and noted that 'Members welcomed the assertion that the new politics had no lineal descent from the old. They were prepared to consider discarding the use of 'Left' and 'Right' as inappropriate in defining a position on the axis of conventional political polarization.'<sup>552</sup> Much as they stressed their loyalty to the socialist tradition, the Gang of Four knew that their main appeal was their novelty. The party might have roots in the past but it was located firmly in the present: a world of computers, credit cards and helicopters. The party went to great lengths to appear 'fresh', even holding a 'rolling conference' on a train rather than fall into the old pattern of seaside hotels and conference centres. The tone of much of this was almost apocalyptic, as with a letter to David Owen which read: 'Sir, I have been non-aligned all my adult life hoping against hope for the birth of a truly social democratic party. The hour has come...'<sup>553</sup> Bill Rodgers has also described the birth of the new party in a similar tone, as something long-awaited which eclipsed previous history:

The response to the Limehouse Declaration was immediate and overwhelming. *It was as if a vast crowd of men and women had been assembled in silence to wait for the leadership we now offered.* It was a period of exhilaration and hope quite unlike anything I had known before, even the announcement of Labour's 1945 victory which, as a schoolboy, I had witnessed from the steps of St George's Hall, Liverpool, or my first entry into government as a minister in 1964.<sup>554</sup>

The SDP occupied a self-constructed 'historic' present, located on the solid ground between receding past and uncertain future. The party's reluctance

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<sup>551</sup> Letter to *Huddersfield Examiner*, 22 June 1981, WRS DP: 3

<sup>552</sup> William Rodgers, 'Realignment postponed?', *Political Quarterly*, 58: 4 (October-December 1987), pp. 404-413 (406)

<sup>553</sup> Letter to David Owen, 27 January 1981, AMS DP: II: 13

<sup>554</sup> Rodgers, 'What happened to the SDP, and what could still happen?' Emphasis added.

to commit to a manifesto or definite programme of future action only reinforced this effect.

### SDP: Mark II?

New Labour clearly did not represent so much of a break with the past. It was not a case of leaving the Labour Party, with all the connotations of betrayal that went along with that. This perhaps made it easier for Blair, in particular, to flaunt his apparent lack of connection to the party, his political rootlessness.

New Labour's attitude to the party's ancestors was certainly more cautious than the SDP's. Although Blair stood himself in Gaitskell's footsteps the moment he announced his intention to revise Clause IV, this legacy was not always explicitly claimed. Indeed, Philip Gould noted that 'The language used by Gaitskell in public and others in private is uncannily similar to that used by Tony Blair and other modernisers a generation later' as if this was pure coincidence.<sup>555</sup> By presenting this as an 'uncanny', unwitting case of history repeating itself, Gould managed to present Blair both as Gaitskell's heir and as his own man. He also made the modernising of the Labour Party seem somehow inevitable; a task which will recur generation by generation until it is completed. As Gould was well aware, Gaitskell's legacy could cut both ways. Although it placed Blair firmly within a Labour tradition, it also carried its own narrative structure: that of failure and compromise. In an open letter to *Tribune*, half of Labour's MEPs called for the leadership to follow Gaitskell's example in accepting a compromise, by which a new statement of aims and values stood side-by-side with the existing Clause IV, as with the New and Old Testaments.<sup>556</sup>

In igniting memories of Gaitskell's revisionism, Blair also had to be careful to avoid being burned by the SDP's flame. As Steven Fielding has argued, the

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<sup>555</sup> Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1999), p.33

<sup>556</sup> 'Testament to equality and democracy', *Tribune*, 4 November 1994, p. 4

SDP's example meant that 'highlighting New Labour's revisionist debt was much more hazardous than paying compliments to New Liberalism [...]. Consequently there could only be an unspoken affinity with the 'social market' approach of Callaghan's Foreign Secretary David Owen [...] no moderniser dared publicly claim this difficult and deeply antagonistic figure for their own.'<sup>557</sup> To be seen as heirs to the 'splitters' would have meant immediate death for the incipient project of New Labour. Yet the ghost of the SDP did haunt Blair. Not only did some opponents portray him as a betrayer in the mould of the Gang of Four, they also suggested that without the particular mission enshrined in Clause IV, Labour had become indistinguishable from the (now defunct) SDP:

I used to be a member of the Labour Party, now it appears I belong to something called New Labour. If the leadership are really concerned to find a new name that reflects their swing to the right, how about 'Old SDP'?<sup>558</sup>

When the gang of four split from the Labour Party they demanded one member, one vote, the abolition of Clause IV and the reduction of trade union power and influence within the Labour movement. Does any of this sound familiar comrades?<sup>559</sup>

Blair tried to counter these accusations, with the quip that, 'When you can think of no decent reason why something is wrong, you resort to saying there is to be an SDP Mark Two in the hope that everyone gets out strings of garlic and crucifixes.'<sup>560</sup> One particular controversy involved the Tribune Group of MPs' invitation to David Marquand to speak at their conference on the rewriting of Clause IV. The newspaper felt compelled to remind them that 'Marquand was a driving force behind the SDP which set out to destroy the Labour Party and was an early advocate of an alliance with the Liberals'

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<sup>557</sup> Fielding, 'New Labour and the Past', p.383

<sup>558</sup> Letter from Colin Penfold, Powys, *Guardian*, 29 April 1995, p. 26

<sup>559</sup> Constituency delegate, Special Conference Report (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 297

<sup>560</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Prescott calms ruffled left', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p.1



and to state quite forcefully that 'Marquand, who is not a member of the Labour Party, has no business to be pontificating on our constitution.'<sup>561</sup>

### The Progressive Dilemma

*Tribune* was right to highlight David Marquand as a key link between the SDP and New Labour. His concept of the 'progressive dilemma' was central to both of the parties' historical positioning. Marquand's thesis was first set out in a 1979 article 'Inquest on a movement: Labour's defeat and its consequences' (described as the SDP's 'founding text'<sup>562</sup>) and was then expanded after the demise of the SDP in his seminal 1991 work, *The Progressive Dilemma*.<sup>563</sup> Its influence can be clearly seen in David Owen's condemnation of Labour's decision to follow 'the path of Fabian paternalism [...] pursuing nationalization and Clause Four state socialism' and argued that it was now necessary to recover the 'radical democratic libertarian trend of decentralized socialism' of Robert Owen, William Morris and G.D.H. Cole.<sup>564</sup> This strategy of recovering the party's 'true' traditions was re-used in the later 1990s. Philip Gould was explicit about the importance of Marquand's thesis to New Labour's key thinkers<sup>565</sup> and, as we will see below, the influence of the 'progressive consensus' can be clearly traced throughout the party's subsequent history. However, as Steven Fielding and Declan McHugh have set out, Marquand's thesis was itself a product of a particular historical moment, between the collapse of the SDP and Blair's election as Labour leader. It is therefore 'a product of its time' and should be analysed as both an influential study of the intertwined history of the Labour and Liberal parties and – consequently – as an intervention in that unfolding

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<sup>561</sup> Editorial, *Tribune*, 18 November 1994, p. 2

<sup>562</sup> Steven Fielding and Declan McHugh, 'The Progressive Dilemma and the social democratic perspective' in Callaghan, Fielding and Ludlam eds, *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 134-49 (138)

<sup>563</sup> David Marquand, 'Inquest on a Movement: Labour's Defeat and its Consequences', *Encounter* (July 1979), pp.8-18; David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: from Lloyd George to Blair* (London: William Heinemann, 1991). Revised Second Edition (London: Phoenix, 1999)

<sup>564</sup> David Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 483

<sup>565</sup> Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*

history.<sup>566</sup> The power of academic history in shaping the way in which political actors think of themselves and therefore the ways in which they go about 'making history' has rarely been better illustrated.

Tony Blair used his Fabian Society lecture on the fiftieth anniversary of 1945, to make clear that his narrative of British democratic socialism included 'Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes and not just Attlee, Bevan or Crosland.'<sup>567</sup> Drawing heavily on Marquand's work, Blair 'liberates' the concept of socialism (or 'social-ism' as he preferred), from the question of ownership and 'economic dogma'. Instead he talked about an 'ethical socialism', which was 'based on a moral assertion that individuals are interdependent, that they owe duties to one another as well as themselves'. Although Blair made sure to say 'That, fundamentally, was Attlee's kind of socialism, and it is also mine', it is clear that he was really drawing on the heritage of liberalism and the Co-operative movement.<sup>568</sup> This was presented as a return to the real roots of the party: 'in the rewriting of Clause IV [...] far from escaping our traditions, we recaptured them'.<sup>569</sup> Much use was made of the words 're-establishing', 're-foundation' and 'regain' (my emphasis).

This raises the question of the status of 1945 in the New Labour narrative. On the one hand this was a very useful legacy. In 1995 the party launched a roadshow called Rolling Rose, based around the fiftieth anniversary of the election victory. The commemorative brochure produced for the roadshow was steeped in nostalgia – all personal reminiscences and sepia photographs.<sup>570</sup> The appeal is obvious. 1945 provided a voter-friendly image of Labour's past which conveniently disregarded the divisive '70s and '80s. Instead, it presented Labour as the party of national unity and of popular

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<sup>566</sup> Fielding and McHugh, 'The Progressive Dilemma and the social democratic perspective', p. 135

<sup>567</sup> Tony Blair, 'Let us face the future', 1945 Anniversary Lecture (London: The Fabian Society, 1995), p. 4

<sup>568</sup> Ibid, p. 12

<sup>569</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>570</sup> *Rolling Rose* (Labour Party / Daily Mirror, 1995)

acclaim. On the other hand, it was clear that Blair did not wish to follow Attlee down the path to large-scale nationalisation and strong statism; this was precisely the heritage from which he wanted to distance himself. However, 1945 was such a totemic moment for the Labour Party that it could not be ceded to the leadership's opponents. This led to a rather contorted attempt to both claim the legacy of 1945 and to lay it to rest:

The record of that government makes me proud to call myself a democratic socialist [...]

... its achievements were enormous, its impact enduring. But it is important to understand where its strength came from, what it really represented as well as what it didn't. [...]

The truth that we must take seriously is that 1945 was the exception and not the rule. Labour in 1945 overcame but did not resolve fundamental issues of ideology and organisation facing the Labour Party. In wartime, these became obscured. But later they reasserted themselves. In the late 1970s and early 1980s they were almost fatal. Essentially both ideology and organisation became out of date. What Neil Kinnock, John Smith and I have sought to do is to cure these weaknesses and so transform the left-of-centre in British politics.<sup>571</sup>

At the same time, attempts were made to undermine and unsettle the established narrative of the Labour Party's early history. At the 1994 Annual Conference, Larry Witty attempted to give members 'a short lesson in history' and disabuse them of their image of Sidney Webb as principled idealist. In a terrifically backhanded speech, he paid tribute to Webb's 'pragmatism and subtlety' in 'fixing' a conference that was 'a bit of a shambles' and which included everyone from 'supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution' to 'people whom we should see today as well to the right of the party'. In asking delegates to 'understand the reality of your history', Witty also tried to draw a direct genealogical line from Webb and Henderson down to Blair and Prescott. He pointed out that 'Tony and John will need

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<sup>571</sup> Blair, 'Let us face the future', pp. 2-3

similar drafting skills over the course of the next few months' and also highlighted 'the commitment that the front bench and the party leadership are making to the future of socialism.'<sup>572</sup>

### Rewriting Clause IV

As Blair and his advisors well knew, the debate over the revision of Clause IV had huge symbolic value. It was presented as a battle for the history, identity and soul of the party. As Hugo Young wrote in the *Guardian*, 'Ancient household gods will be invited to make their presence felt. The poltergeists of the past may rattle the furniture.'<sup>573</sup> In the event, the debate was by no means as tempestuous as expected. The revision passed remarkably smoothly at a Special Conference convened on 29 April 1995. The 6,500 responses to the party's consultation exercise were also overwhelmingly in favour of change. This is remarkable, especially as it would seem logical to assume that those who were particularly opposed to the leadership's plans would be the most keen to make their views known. My study of a random sample of 102 uncatalogued responses found just two members who were not prepared to agree 'that the current Clause IV does not set out Labour's actual values in a clear and concise manner'. One of these said that he would prefer to retain the old Clause IV, with a new statement of values; the other felt that although 'perhaps [there is] nothing wrong [with] Clause IV if you are to argue for it's [sic] principles', he was aware that he was in a minority and 'so to make the best of an unsure exercise' had completed the questionnaire anyway.<sup>574</sup>

It is clear that Blair did not get the battle he had bargained on. Partly this may have been because the leadership heavily promoted the postal balloting

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<sup>572</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 198

<sup>573</sup> Hugo Young, 'Genuine Acclaim; Simple Truths', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, pp. 1 & 22

<sup>574</sup> Labour Party Papers, LHASC: Clause IV Consultation (LPCIV). It should also be noted that a third respondent agreed with the initial statement but later wrote 'Clause IV has stood the test of time unlike this questionnaire [sic] – Leave it alone.'

of all members, rather than relying on the votes of constituency activists. The thinking was that those who were less heavily steeped in the party's internal culture would have less of a personal investment in its totemic symbols, such as Clause IV. There is some evidence that this policy paid off. At the Special Conference, a delegate from Bristol South said:

I have been elected to come here and vote for this new resolution, but I'm actually speaking against it, because all the ones that do work in the party – the CLP – voted against change, but when it went out to the postal vote we had an overwhelming majority for the new clause. Yet none of those people participate in the Labour Party. They pay their subs, but they don't do anything in the party whatsoever. (Applause).<sup>575</sup>

However, this is clearly not the entire explanation. For instance, West Worcestershire CLP voted 97.22% in favour of change, despite being 'in the upper age range'. Gisela Stuart, then CLP secretary, explained that it was the older members who 'were saying that times had changed, that the world was no longer as it was. They turned out to be much more radical and in favour of modernising than any of the younger members.' Although the members did have 'a tremendous nostalgic attachment to Clause 4', she felt that 'What came across very strongly was this commitment to change'. However, this commitment was perhaps not as wholehearted as it first appeared, she continued: 'People felt that we should not ignore this nostalgia or our roots. But, on balance, it was not worth objecting to the change.'<sup>576</sup>

After sixteen years in opposition, the party was desperate to believe that Blair had the solution to their electoral woes. One respondent said, 'We have been in opposition for too long. We can only win the next General Election under Tony Blair, so if he wants to change Clause IV, he has my TOTAL

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<sup>575</sup> Special Conference Report (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 299

<sup>576</sup> Quoted by David Ward, 'Elgar country eagerly rallies to the banner of change', *The Guardian*, 24 April 1995, p. 2

support on this and any other topic.<sup>577</sup> Another answered each question with one of the following statements: 'Full support for T. Blair', 'Support the line of T. Blair fully' and 'I support fully the line taken by the N.E.C. under the leadership of T. Blair.'<sup>578</sup> As is well known from the work of Whiteley and Seyd, many new members were attracted to the party because of its attempts to change. They found that post-1994 recruits were 'significantly more likely to be modernizers' and 'more trusting of the party leadership' than people who had joined the party before 1994. This was in spite of being more likely to be working class (1 in 6 as against 1 in 8) and slightly less likely to be graduates than the pre-'94 cohort.<sup>579</sup> This is borne out by the membership surveys. For instance one respondent said, 'I became a member 18 months ago – due to the changes by John Smith; Tony Blair; John Prescott. Keep this up and caring people will want to join.' Much older members were also keen to follow Blair's lead. One woman who said 'I have [been] a socialist from the day I was born 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1912. Have fought all my life for socialism', responded to a question on Labour's economic policy with the words, 'I trust Tony Blair as our leader.'<sup>580</sup> The blandness of these responses speaks not of radical hopes for the future but rather a grim determination to seize political control in the present. The focus was on the immediate task of winning an election; the future would be dealt with in time.

Yet not everyone was so easily satisfied. A vocal minority opposed Blair's plans all the way. Were they, as the leadership claimed, sentimentally holding onto old certainties or did they have other, more vital, objections? The focal point for the opposition to the rewriting of Clause IV was the Defend Clause 4 Campaign, organised by the Campaign Group of MPs, who in the course of the campaign changed their name to the Socialist Group. This grouping was led by Tony Benn MP, who emphasised the need to 'make clear to the movement and to the public that socialist ideas are still to be

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<sup>577</sup> LPCIV

<sup>578</sup> Ibid

<sup>579</sup> Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *New Labour's Grassroots: The Transformation of Labour Party Membership* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 155; 42-43

<sup>580</sup> LPCIV

found within the party [in the hope that this] might discourage members of the party from resigning as some have suggested they might if Clause 4 is deleted.<sup>581</sup> Among other things, the Defend Clause 4 Campaign produced a twenty-two-minute film directed by Ken Loach, entitled 'A Contemporary Case for Common Ownership' and featuring a series of talking heads – from Noam Chomsky to unemployed men at a drop-in centre.<sup>582</sup> Numerous individual members of the party also made their opposition to the proposed change known in the letters pages of the *Guardian* and *Tribune* and by speaking at local, regional and national party meetings.

Several reports of apparently overwhelmingly pro-change conferences include references to wider disquiet. For instance, a report of the Scottish conference's acceptance of the change also notes that George Galloway received the biggest cheer of the afternoon for the words, 'Don't sell the banner; think before you throw it in the dustbin of history.'<sup>583</sup> Similarly, the Labour Women's conference voted 81.59% in favour of change, yet the *Guardian* noted that 'Clare Short, party spokeswoman on women, conceded that Mr Blair had probably suffered his worst heckling when he spoke about his clause to the conference on Saturday.'<sup>584</sup> Amidst a string of articles claiming that the constituencies were overwhelmingly in favour of change, a *Guardian* report on a mass meeting in Hartlepool reveals that, 'As in most of Labour's Clause 4 meetings interventions from the 450-strong audience were heavily in favour of keeping the old form of words, with activists coming [...] from as far away as Southwark in London.'<sup>585</sup> For some, it was a symbolic change too far, indicating that the party had changed further than they were

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<sup>581</sup> Quoted by Patrick Wintour and Stephen Bates, 'Benn urges the left to rebel on Clause 4', *Guardian*, 22 February 1995, p. 6

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>583</sup> Quoted by Erlend Clouston, 'Blair triumph in Scottish Clause 4 vote', *Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 1

<sup>584</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Labour women vote strongly in favour of the new Clause 4', *Guardian*, 3 April 1995, p. 2

<sup>585</sup> Martin Wainwright, "'New Labour' Mandelson blanches at common ownership of chips as Scargill extols Marks and Spencers', *Guardian*, 28 March 1995, p. 6

prepared to follow it. The use of the words such 'excised' and 'crusade' indicate the quasi-religious power of the political past.

The insipid and often inconsistent tenets of social democracy will thus prevail in a party that is no longer a crusade but a crucible for the opportunistic who pay lip service to the need for greater equality whilst being afraid to alienate those who have done well out of decade and a half of Conservative hegemony.<sup>586</sup>

I believe that Mr Blair's pitch had an additional motive, which was to give a clear signal to (unhyphenated) socialists that they are simply not wanted in the new-look Labour Party. Therefore my letter will be dispatched to Walworth Road the moment the formal announcement is made that Clause Four has been excised from the party's constitution. For I have had enough.<sup>587</sup>

Whilst this does not mean that opposition to the change was widespread, it does show that it was deeply felt. It is generally acknowledged that the reason for this strength of feeling was because the change seemed to require a painful break with the past. It was said at the time that the debate was 'as much an argument about finding a proper relationship with the past as knowing what is right for the future.'<sup>588</sup> The advert below, placed in *Tribune*, is a particularly neat illustration of the sense that the change violated a direct ideological line of descent from the founders of the party to 'all future generations of the working class.'

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<sup>586</sup> Letter from Bill Jackson, *Guardian*, 29 April 1995, p. 26

<sup>587</sup> Letter from Walter Cairns, *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 28

<sup>588</sup> Martin Kettle, 'Laying Labour's ghost with a liberal dose', *Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 25



Lost and Found Section

“LOST – CLAUSE 4. If found please return to the Labour Party  
c/o Keir Hardie, Sidney Webb, Clem Attlee, Nye Bevan and all  
future generations of the working class.”



from MSF Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Council

Advert placed in *Tribune*, 23 December, 1994, p. 8

Living Socialism

Despite received opinion, the most striking thing about the opponents of change is that they were not simply tied to the past. They clearly viewed Clause IV as a living statement, with real implications for policy in the present and in the future. It was held to be a succinct definition of an essential principle, as important for securing social justice and democracy in the late-twentieth century as on the day it was written. As Alice Mahon MP put it in an article for *Tribune*, if Clause IV ‘wasn’t relevant to today’s political agenda, then we would be right to abandon it. The truth is it is entirely relevant.’<sup>589</sup> Numerous letter writers to both the *Guardian* and *Tribune* cited the relevance (indeed the necessity) of common ownership in tackling pressing contemporary issues, from the dominance of multi-nationals and the democratic deficit in the World Trade Organisation to social deprivation and pension provision. As one put it, ‘If Clause Four is so unrealistic as a means of organising an economy – what of the free market system?’ He went on to say that ‘In a few decades our unwillingness to find ways to democratise economic processes will just look plain stupid.’<sup>590</sup>

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the belief in Clause IV as a statement of contemporary policy was the debate over Composite Motion,

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<sup>589</sup> Alice Mahon MP, ‘Standing the test of time’, *Tribune*, 16 December 1994, p. 4

<sup>590</sup> Letter from Peter Robbins, London, *Guardian*, 10 October 1994, p. 21

No. 57, which took place at the Party Conference in 1994, soon after Blair's speech announcing the proposed change. The motion was brought by Glasgow Maryhill CLP and called for the NEC 'to draw up a socialist economic, industrial and social strategy'.<sup>591</sup> It was a cry to act upon the principles of Clause IV and – crucially – it was tabled before anyone outside the inner circle had any suspicion that Blair was to set out to reform it. Composite 57 was not inspired by Blair's direct attack on Clause IV but by a concern 'that the electoral strategy currently being pursued by the shadow cabinet places little emphasis on this constitutional aim.'<sup>592</sup> It was a continuation of a theme raised by motions in previous years, particularly Composite 62 in 1993, which made clear that Clause IV should be more than a symbol of socialist commitment; it should form the basis of practical policy proposals:

This Conference reaffirms its belief in an *adherence* to paragraph 4 of Clause 4 of the party's constitution as printed on every Labour Party membership card [...]. Furthermore, Conference believes it to be essential that the present wording remains unchanged and rejects any attempt to alter what is the fundamental basis of Labour Party *policy* [...] and the only *practical* way of attaining a more equitable and egalitarian society.<sup>593</sup>

Although the tabling of Composite 57 cannot be said to owe anything to nostalgia invoked by the threat of change, after Blair's speech it became inevitable that the debate would in effect become a response to Blair's announcement that Clause IV was now under review. As Patrick Wintour put it, 'Mr Mearns had expected to move his motion to a half-full hall with little or no media attention. Only on Wednesday did it become clear that he was to be the Boy David to take on the Goliath of the party machine.'<sup>594</sup> Despite this, as Michael White noted, and in contrast to conference debates of the 1970s and early '80s, 'Virtually no personal attacks were made on the

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<sup>591</sup> Conference Arrangements Committee Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 32

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>593</sup> Conference Arrangements Committee Report (Labour Party, 1993), p. 37. Emphases added

<sup>594</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Vote for the past defies leader', *Guardian*, 7 October 1994, p. 7

leadership. Few fingers were wagged in an accusing manner. There was no rhetoric of betrayal.<sup>595</sup> This is surprising and suggests either that the party had moved on further than anticipated by the leadership, or that the issue was simply too important to reduce to crude political theatre. Equally, it is striking that the debate in 1994 was far less nostalgic than that in 1993, which had invoked the ghosts of Tawney, Attlee, Robert Tressell, Ian Mikardo and the founding fathers of the party.<sup>596</sup>

Far from being a 'usual suspect', Jim Mearns, the proposer of the motion, was a last-minute stand-in. His local MP, Maria Fyfe, assured the *Guardian* that 'Jim is not a Trot. He is a mainstream member of the Labour Party.'<sup>597</sup> Mearns told the hall, 'I am sick of being told by political commentators that socialism is irrelevant, dead or dying [...] socialism is very much alive and well and striding forward with victory in sight.'<sup>598</sup> His use of Blairite phrasing, 'Let's be tough on capitalism and tough on the causes of capitalism', had the effect of insisting that his calls for socialism in practice were just as serious, just as pragmatic and just as contemporary as Blair's policy proposals. In an article subsequently published in *Tribune*, Mearns reaffirmed that, 'It is important that the party fights the issues of the day in the language of the day but *always* in a socialist framework, a framework delineated by Clause Four'. He also asked:

Why should workers not obtain the full fruits of their industry? How can this be achieved without the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange which are the engines of any economy? Is it so wrong to strive for the best obtainable system of popular administration of each industry and service?<sup>599</sup>

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<sup>595</sup> Michael White, 'Party may still be in turmoil but with a crucial difference', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 8

<sup>596</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1993), pp. 271-77

<sup>597</sup> Quoted in Michael White, 'Party may still be in turmoil but with a crucial difference', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 8

<sup>598</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 192

<sup>599</sup> Jim Mearns, 'Back from breaking point', *Tribune*, 4 November 1994, p. 7

Yet, despite this clear call for an active commitment to the principles of Clause IV in the present day, the modernising wing of the party was able to present the debate as essentially one of sentiment versus pragmatism. Immediately after the debate, Blair 'said that no one had seriously got up to defend Clause Four, merely to criticise his tactics.'<sup>600</sup> Alastair Campbell's diary records a more vivid exchange. In response to a warning that 'to some people this is like going into church and taking down the cross', Blair reportedly responded, 'Oh for heaven's sake [...] people believe in God, and they believe in Christ. Name me a single person who actually believes in what Clause 4 says.'<sup>601</sup> Over the following months, the claim that 'nobody believes in Clause Four'<sup>602</sup> was repeated time and again:

A vocal campaign to keep Clause Four has been set up, which argues [...] though outdated and not necessarily what we would write now [it] has a symbolic appeal and that to change it would cause more trouble than it is worth.<sup>603</sup>

Labour is not going to nationalise the means of production, distribution and exchange and we should be honest enough to say that. Few believe that Clause Four is relevant today but we hang onto it as unchallenged and unchallengeable dogma.<sup>604</sup>

This final contribution was discussed in *Tribune's* letters pages for several months. Although one reader thought that its writer, Greg Pope, had 'hit the nail on the head', others insisted that 'Socialist values in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are the same as socialist values in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century' because 'Without common ownership, workers will never secure the full fruits of their industry.' In their opinion, Clause IV was 'not a wishy washy statement of

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<sup>600</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Prescott calms ruffled left', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p.1

<sup>601</sup> Campbell, *The Blair Years*, p. 16

<sup>602</sup> Giles Radice quoted by Michael White, 'Blair defines the new Labour', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 1

<sup>603</sup> Ben Lucas, 'The principles of renewal', *Tribune*, 2 December 1994, p. 6

<sup>604</sup> Greg Pope, 'Saying what we mean, meaning what we say', *Tribune*, 28 October 1994, p.

how we would like things to be, but strikes at the root cause of social injustice and inequality.<sup>605</sup> It was a fundamental component of Labour doctrine. As one correspondent reminded readers, 'for decades Labour conferences have debated and, usually passed, motions calling for the leadership to follow policies based on Clause Four rather than on the latest opinion poll. It did so again this year, with overwhelming support in the constituency section.'<sup>606</sup> Blair flippantly tried to reassure the party by promising that 'we're not going to stop singing The Red Flag or anything.'<sup>606</sup> However, once again Jim Mearns rejected the attempt to deny symbols their power and insisted that they were not simply signs, but signifiers of something real and actionable. He ended his speech to conference with plea to 'Do more than sing about it. Let's do it. Raise the scarlet standard high and keep the red flag flying here!'<sup>607</sup> This plea went unheeded.

The revision of Clause IV took place on similar symbolic terrain to the renaming of the SDP. For some members it created a mismatch between their own political identity and that of the party through whom their beliefs had originally been shaped. As this letter to the *Guardian* makes clear, a revision of party identity is more than a matter of personal crisis; it is of course a question of doctrine and – consequently – of practical politics:

There must be thousands like myself who no longer feel that the Labour Party is their natural political home. Yet they are socialists, and therefore cannot join the Liberal Democrats; they are not Marxists, and cannot join the Communist Party; and they are not revolutionaries and cannot join the many Trotskyite sects on the far left.<sup>608</sup>

For the most part, Blair's opponents were not arguing about history; they were trying to defend common ownership as a practical policy goal. Ironically, the most fervent opponents of the change of wording would

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<sup>605</sup> Letter from Geoff Pope, *Tribune*, 11 November 1994, p. 11

<sup>606</sup> Letter from Graham Day, *Tribune*, 18 November 1994, pp. 10-11

<sup>607</sup> Quoted by Patrick Wintour, 'Vote for past defies leader', *Guardian*, 7 October 1994, p. 7

<sup>608</sup> Letter from Walter Cairns, *Guardian*, 1 May 1995, p. 12

probably have agreed with Blair that, 'The idea that we cannot touch a 77-year-old constitution is farcical. We are not a preservation society guarding the ideological crown jewels. We are a dynamic living movement which seeks to change this country for the better.'<sup>609</sup> Where they differed was over their vision of socialism *as* a 'dynamic living movement'. Jim Mearns claimed that socialism was 'very much alive and well and striding forward with victory in sight.'<sup>610</sup> It is hard to imagine Blair agreeing with him.

### Forwards or Back?

Far from fearing change, the defenders of Clause IV turned the modernisers' argument inside out and argued that socialism was the only way of bringing about change. One constituency delegate was applauded for stating 'I am not afraid of change. I want change to society so that power, wealth and opportunity may truly rest with the many and not the few.'<sup>611</sup> And a union representative assured Conference that although 'It has been said by some critics that those who are opposed to the new redrafting of Clause IV are frightened of change. We are critical precisely because we want change.' The problem with the redraft was not that it was new but that it did not 'acknowledge basic facts – that so long as economic ownership is concentrated in the hands of a small but powerful minority [...] it won't be possible [...] to create the equality of opportunity which we all want to see.'<sup>612</sup> Despite the modernisers' claim that their opponents remained in thrall to an obsolete form of words, there seems to have been a willingness to discuss revising the constitution, even among the left-wing of the party and from the trades unions:

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<sup>609</sup> Quoted by Michael White, 'Cliffhanger Clause 4 win boosts Blair', *The Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 8

<sup>610</sup> Quoted by Patrick Wintour, 'Vote for past defies leader', *Guardian*, 7 October 1994, p. 7

<sup>611</sup> Constituency delegate, Special Conference Report (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 297

<sup>612</sup> Union representative, Special Conference Report (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 298

We are in a period of change. Anything agreed in 1918 we should be able to review in 1994. We look forward to the consultation.<sup>613</sup>

I was taken by surprise, but it is not an unreasonable point to say that in 1994 the constitution needs redrawing. There was no indication that this was the end of socialism.<sup>614</sup>

Yes – needs re-writing but without scrapping the principles which define socialism.<sup>615</sup>

The caveat of course lies in that final sentence: the retention of socialism. It seems that many party members saw the debate on Clause IV as an opportunity to commit themselves anew to socialist principles, within the context of the late-twentieth century. As one CLP delegate, speaking on Composite 57 said, 'I welcome the debate we are going to have in the coming 12 months, because I am so confident in my socialism; I feel it in my bones, it is the centre of my being. It is everything I am.'<sup>616</sup> *Tribune* immediately launched a conference to discuss their hopes for the new Clause IV, noting that, 'There is much that should be in Labour's constitution but which isn't. Where is the mention of socialism or the redistribution of power and wealth for instance?'<sup>617</sup> A group of MPs and trade union leaders also wrote an open letter to the *Guardian*, urging the party to 'seize the opportunity' to enshrine a commitment to full employment in the new constitution.<sup>618</sup>

This attitude was also present among the members who responded positively to the consultation exercise. Some felt that, although they were happy to change Clause IV in principle, the new wording did not inspire them.

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<sup>613</sup> Roger Lyons, leader of MSF, quoted by Patrick Wintour and Keith Harper, 'Unions favour redrawing of constitution', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 9

<sup>614</sup> Michael Meacher, quoted by Patrick Wintour and Keith Harper, 'Unions favour redrawing of constitution', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 9

<sup>615</sup> LPCIV. Original emphasis.

<sup>616</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 195

<sup>617</sup> Editorial, *Tribune*, 14 October 1994, p. 2

<sup>618</sup> *Guardian*, 6 March 1995, p. 21

When asked to identify anything that had been missed out, one said 'A feeling of crusade' and another, 'Some recognition that there is a spiritual, even idealist element: "the brotherhood of man"' and called for the party to 'Remember Rabbie Burns!'<sup>619</sup> Others made suggestions for the new constitution which could not have been further from the intentions of the leadership. One respondent wanted it to include the words 'From each according to ability, to each according to need.' Another felt that the new statement should emphasise that 'Individual freedom is largely illusory. We should aim to emancipate classes / categories of people'. In response to a question on how best to promote a mixed economy, he suggested that the party needed to 'Come up with an even better way of democratically controlling all leading firms. State clearly that the market mechanism is an outright failure.'<sup>620</sup> A third respondent recommended an 'apparent wealth tax' (to apply to housing, yachts, expensive cars etc); an opposition to company cars; worker representation on the boards of all major companies and an 85% top-rate tax bracket for salaries above £150,000 (including shares) so as to 'Challenge those in management & directorships to leave their employment or companies'. He also suggested that there should be a requirement that 'those persons responsible for managing the state-controlled public utilities (Post Office, rail, NHS etc) be shown in their dedication not only competent but socialists too!!'<sup>621</sup>

Similar attitudes were reflected in the Parliamentary Party. Despite the overwhelming support for the revision of Clause IV, a survey of Labour MPs carried out before the 1997 election found that sixty-eight percent regarded 'public ownership [as]... crucial to the achievement of social justice'. After the election, forty-eight percent of the much larger, and younger, PLP remained dedicated to the principle of state ownership of major public

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<sup>619</sup> LPCIV

<sup>620</sup> Ibid

<sup>621</sup> Ibid



services.<sup>622</sup> As Edmund Dell notes, this 'was still a large percentage in a party that had begun to describe itself as New Labour. It demonstrated the extent to which New Labour was a camouflage for deep-seated instincts that Blair had not yet charmed away.'<sup>623</sup> While these MPs might have been happy to change Clause IV and to embrace a new, softer wording, they remained committed to the principles which underpinned it: exactly the opposite dynamic to that portrayed by Blair. It was this practical dedication to socialism that Blair and his allies could not – or perhaps wilfully *would not* – understand. They could not accept that the opponents of the reform were following their own request for the party to 'say what we mean and mean what we say'; that it was their *meanings*, rather than just their methods of discourse which differed. By reducing their argument to one that *only* traded in history, symbolism and emotion, Blair was able to neutralise his opponents and to ignore their desire to discuss the ideological direction of the party.

Similarly, on the party's electoral prospects, the writers of Composite 57 played the modernisers at their own game, reminding Conference 'that Labour won elections when it presented itself as a united team with a radical programme for national regeneration' and suggesting that 'to win, Labour must set out a positive and radical agenda which will unlock the great energies of the Labour movement.'<sup>624</sup> This concern with Labour's electoral prospects was echoed throughout the debate on Clause IV, for instance this contribution from a representative of Kettering CLP at the Special Conference in April:

Let's look at a couple of lessons from our history. In 1945 the greatest ever programme of social and economic legislation was implemented by a Labour government. Did the landslide victory come about because of watered down

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<sup>622</sup> Michael Kenny and Martin J. Smith, '(Mis)understanding Blair', in *Political Quarterly*, vol. 68, no.3, July-September 1997; Peter Riddell, *Times*, 28 April, 1998. Both quoted in Edmund Dell, *A Strange Eventful History: Democratic Socialism in Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 544

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>624</sup> Conference Arrangements Committee Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 32

policies and concentration on image? No it was gained as the result of a fearless socialist agenda and a belief in the relevance of state ownership, other forms of public ownership and collective provision.<sup>625</sup>

Both of these arguments were based on memories of past election victories, with the hope that if the party could only stay the same, it could repeat the pattern. Critics, such as Alan Johnson, could always counter this by pointing out that the world had changed and the party must change with it: 'it is 20 years since we last won a general election. In those 20 years, the command economy has been discredited – forget about it: it is never going to be restored. [...] We want to fight the election on policies, not on shibboleths.'<sup>626</sup> But the Secunder of Composite 57 took the argument further. Although she too drew on the fact that Labour 'won the elections of 1945, 1966 and 1974 with a commitment to public ownership and the redistribution of wealth', she also stole from the leadership's armoury and used opinion polls produced by MORI for the *Economist* to demonstrate contemporary popular support for public ownership and state intervention in the economy.<sup>627</sup> Similarly, another speaker, representing a trade union, turned Blair's appeal to the aspirations of middle England back on him, saying, 'To win the middle ground we must promise to take from the minority who exploit and give to the majority who want a better life.'<sup>628</sup>

### Which History?

The debate on Composite 57 was paired with that on Composite 56, a motion 'congratulat[ing] the Co-operative movement on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Rochdale Pioneers Co-operative Society'.<sup>629</sup> Indeed most of the speakers in the debate referred to both motions. Many of those who rejected Composite 57 were very happy to sing

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<sup>625</sup> Constituency representative, Special Conference Report (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 302

<sup>626</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 195

<sup>627</sup> Ibid p. 193

<sup>628</sup> Ibid p. 194

<sup>629</sup> Conference Arrangements Committee Report (Labour Party, 1994), p. 32

the praises of Composite 56. Not one person spoke against it. It seemed to have no controversial content, nothing with which a member of the Labour movement could possibly disagree. It therefore became something of a touchstone; a way of signalling one's commitment to socialist principles and to the movement's historic roots at the same time as denying the appeal to act on those principles and roots in the modern day. However, it is not as simple as that. In addition to offering congratulations, Composite 56 also called for action from the Labour Party on a number of key policies, including a Co-operatives Act; statutory recognition of housing co-operatives; legislation recognising and protecting voluntary, mutual and self-help groups 'as a separate and distinct sector of the economy; a commitment to fostering co-operative principles in future policy; and the creation of regional co-operative development agencies.<sup>630</sup>

Why then was the discussion (it doesn't really warrant the term 'debate') over this motion so anodyne, compared to the fierce controversy aroused by Composite 57? There are two possible answers. The clue to the first is in the deliberately contemporary language of the motion, which recognised that the Co-operative Party was 'now revitalised with new vision and new direction'.<sup>631</sup> It disguised an appeal to old principles as a step forward into a world of regional government and the social economy. The Secunder of the motion made the distinction between this approach and that of Composite 57 very clear:

[...] the scale and emphasis of the Co-op has grown and changed so much since those days that it has had to modernise and change to expand to remain successful, keeping alive its retail outlets and jobs. So, too, we in the Labour Party have had to change and modernise, but we will never lose our principles and values. Later on we will debate Clause IV. This, too, needs modernising, as it uses only the language of the Scargillsaurus.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid

<sup>631</sup> Ibid

<sup>632</sup> Annual Conference Report (Labour Party, 1994), pp. 191-2

However, this answer is not satisfactory because, as we have already noted, the defenders of Clause IV also insisted upon the relevance of Clause IV to the modern world – to multi-national corporations, globalisation and devolution.

The second answer lies in the particular cluster of roots to which Composite 56 appealed. Larry Witty emphasised the need for a plural notion of public ownership 'which is the centre of [Labour's] industrial policy today [and] reflected in the co-operative ideals in Composite 56'.<sup>633</sup> This is precisely the heritage which Blair, Gould et al were keen to resurrect.

### A New Identity

As we have seen, this narrative of a pre-1918 'progressive consensus' had long underpinned social democratic thought and was revived by the architects of New Labour via the work of David Marquand as the SDP dream fell apart. However, a similar narrative had already been used by SDP members to orient their practical Alliance and eventual merger with the Liberals. This was a further shift in identity which required careful negotiation. The Gang of Four each had very different positions on the Liberal Party, ranging from Roy Jenkins who, as we have already noted, saw himself as a small 'Y' liberal and was keen to merge as quickly as possible. David Owen on the other hand was fundamentally opposed to the whole idea and did not join the merged party but continued to lead a rump SDP. The merger process was prolonged and fraught. Many members and commentators stressed the different histories and political cultures of the two parties; activists on each side feared that their distinctive identity would be diluted in the new party.<sup>634</sup> The 'progressive consensus' was a means of maintaining narrative identity for proponents of merger in both parties. One contributor to the extremely heated debate in the letter pages of *Liberal*

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<sup>633</sup> Ibid, p. 198

<sup>634</sup> For a full discussion see Crewe and King, *The SDP*. The pages of *Liberal News* and *The Social Democrat* are also rich sources of information.

*News* noted that 'Some years ago, before the formation of the SDP, a proposal was put to the Liberal Assembly that the name of the party should be changed to the Liberal and Social Democratic Party.' In addition to recommending the name for the new party, the writer wondered 'if that proposal of years ago had been adopted, whether the Social Democratic Party would ever have come into being – and if so, what name it would have had.'<sup>635</sup>

The Liberal leadership made concerted efforts to present the Alliance as a continuation of Liberal history. In his speech at the re-opening of the renovated National Liberal Club in the midst of the merger negotiations, David Steel quoted Gladstone's regret that the Liberal Party had sometimes 'fallen behind in the point of unity of action.' Steel then used this piece of Liberal history to call for 'unity of action' between Liberals and Social Democrats, describing the Alliance as 'the heir in contemporary politics of the Gladstonian Party of justice and freedom.' Steel did not hesitate to claim the direct authority of Gladstone in his reiteration of the 'progressive dilemma' thesis:

I believe that Mr Gladstone and our great Liberal predecessors would be urging us on to unity now. They would be delighted to see the great streams of social liberalism, divided temporarily in the first half of this century by the emergent Labour Party, now coming together in the full flood of a new party of conscience of reform.<sup>636</sup>

This narrative of a shared historic mission, based on a radical, progressive consensus was fixed in the founding document of the new party, the Joint Policy Statement drafted by the six alliance negotiators and released on 22 January 1988:

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<sup>635</sup> Cllr E Kime, *Liberal News*, no. 1866, 18 September 1987, p. 2

<sup>636</sup> David Steel, quoted in Catherine Sample, 'NLC begins the new century with £1m refit', *Liberal News*, no. 1857, 17 July 1987, p.3

We do not start from a blank page because our tap-roots go deep and Liberals and Social Democrats alike can take pride in our record of promoting social progress and radical reform in Britain. The British people have journeyed from the harsh and uncaring world of Victorian values towards a society with shared concerns and responsibilities. This progress was made when Liberals and Social Democrats were in the vanguard of reforms.

Today our highest priority is to rekindle our traditions of conscience, community and reform, and encourage the spirit of generosity we know exists within the British people.<sup>637</sup>

The implication of these statements was that by merging as the Liberal Democrats, the progressive consensus would be re-formed, thus effectively undoing seventy years of unnecessary and unfruitful division. Yet, the Labour Party itself remained divided between left and right, between 'traditionalists' and 'modernisers'. It was not until 1997 that the 'progressive consensus' narrative was able to (temporarily) unite Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The parties came together to form a Joint Cabinet Committee, tasked with drawing up plans for constitutional reform, resulting in a Plan drawn up jointly by Labour's Robin Cook and former SDP leader Bob Maclennan and an Inquiry into the electoral system led by Roy Jenkins. Both parties also encouraged tactical voting in an unofficial anti-Tory alliance. Whilst this period of at least tacit unity soon dissolved, the idea of an alliance has continued to haunt the political conversation. In 2004 Gordon Brown called for a 'progressive consensus' in his keynote speech to Labour pressure group Compass and later attempted to bring it about by inviting Shirley Williams and Paddy Ashdown to be involved in his 'government of all the talents'.<sup>638</sup> Both turned down this offer, preferring to maintain their Liberal

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<sup>637</sup> 'A Democracy of Conscience', printed in *Liberal News*, no. 1882, 22 January 1988, pp. 4-5

<sup>638</sup> See Martin Bright, 'Reclaim our Radicalism, says Brown', *Observer*, 24 October 2004. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/oct/24/uk.labour> . Accessed 03.07.2009; 'Shirley Williams offered advisory role', 28 June 2007: [http://www.politics.co.uk/news/party-politics/shirley-williams-offered-advisory-role-\\$475416.htm](http://www.politics.co.uk/news/party-politics/shirley-williams-offered-advisory-role-$475416.htm). Accessed 03.07.2009

Democrat loyalties. In 2007 Neil Sherlock (former advisor to Paddy Ashdown) and Neal Lawson (of Labour pressure group Compass) wrote an article for *Political Quarterly* asking, 'Whatever happened to the Progressive Century?' which urged social liberals and liberal socialists to 'come together' and work towards 'real reform'. This would, they hoped, be a precursor to the attempt to 'find bold progressive ways to combat climate change, champion diversity, and security, and restore Britain's tarnished place in the world' – 'work that Keynes, Lloyd George, Attlee, Bevin and Beveridge would have relished.'<sup>639</sup>

A 2002 Liberal Democrat policy paper also sought to reaffirm this legacy, arguing that those Liberals who joined Labour in the years after the First World War 'did not regard themselves as changing their political beliefs; they simply saw Labour as the stronger vehicle for reform'. Moreover, it was 'the political descendants of these people who largely provided the social democratic ethos and approach of the post-war Labour governments', left to form the SDP and then to merge with the Liberal Party.<sup>640</sup> However, as indicated in chapter two, the Liberal Democrat Party has yet to resolve the questions arising from its complicated inheritances. The traces of division between the social and libertarian wings of the party have, if anything, become more pronounced in recent years. In 2004 a group of prominent Liberal Democrats, including both of the 2007 leadership candidates, published a text which claimed to be 'Reclaiming Liberalism', entitled *The Orange Book*, in a clear refutation of the path taken by the party following the New Liberals' 'Yellow Book' (*Britain's Industrial Future*) of 1928. This was in turn answered by *Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, published in 2007.<sup>641</sup> The tensions between these two groups came to the fore at the 2007 party conference, in a high-profile debate over

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<sup>639</sup> Neil Sherlock and Neal Lawson, 'Whatever Happened to the Progressive Century?', *Political Quarterly*, 78: 1 (January-March 2007), pp. 175-181 (181)

<sup>640</sup> *It's About Freedom*, The Report of the Liberal Democrat Working Group, Policy Paper 50 (June 2002), p. 11

<sup>641</sup> Paul Marshall and David Laws (eds), *The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism* (London: Profile, 2004); Duncan Brack, Richard Grayson and David Howarth (eds), *Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Politico's, 2007)

taxation. The former camp argued for lower taxation to allow citizens to help themselves through the recession; their opponents felt that now, more than ever, it was necessary to support a strong state funded through redistributive taxation. The debate on the conference floor was markedly rooted in the party's history, with Gladstone and Cobden invoked by 'classical Liberals' and Lloyd George, Hobhouse, Keynes and Beveridge by 'social Liberals'. As these names suggest, the tension within the party is not as straightforward as former-SDP versus former-Liberal: *The Orange Book* had a foreword by then party leader and former SDP (and briefly Labour) member, Charles Kennedy, and *Reinventing the State* was co-written by Duncan Brack, who came to the party from the Liberals. In fact, the division could be seen to stem from a much older, Liberal debate over the role of the state. In seeking to resolve the 'progressive dilemma' the social democrats have (largely) joined with the self-proclaimed heirs of the Edwardian New Liberals. Their relationship to classical Liberalism remains ambiguous at best.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, in his bid to appear "modern", "up-to-date", "*au fait*" (in the prophetic words of Henry Drucker), Blair used Labour's traditional temporal positioning in order to portray his opponents as simply nostalgic for a dead past.<sup>642</sup> However, he did not jettison the past completely; instead he retold it. This was historical revisionism, not a complete rejection of the past. As I have suggested in earlier chapters, this respect for the past – or rather *a* past – was actually more 'in harmony with the dominant time-perspective of our age' than the relentless modernism which Drucker described.<sup>643</sup> The argument that the progressive consensus was an older and *therefore* more accurate narrative was used to authorise the positioning of New Labour.

The approach of the SDP was somewhat different. Coming at an earlier point in Labour's history, when a return to the policies of Crosland and Gaitskell

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<sup>642</sup> Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos*, p. 35

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid*



still seemed possible, they could perhaps be seen as having been thrust into a novel stance in order to attempt a genuine return to the values of the recent past. To them it was the hard left which provided the unacceptable break with Labour's past. The idea of the progressive consensus was a means of maintaining a sense of personal continuity as they broke with Labour and eventually merged with the Liberal Party.

The notion of the 'progressive consensus' had the additional benefit of explicitly reaching beyond party boundaries. It therefore allowed its proponents to present themselves as a national, rather than a sectional, party. Blair not only presented his party as 'New' but also as a national party, in tune with the public mood and focused on creating an atmosphere of *national* rejuvenation, of innovation, of being 'a young *country*'. This was not, however, a new strategy. As we have already noted, in his letter to Sir John Boyd, Bill Rodgers attempted to claim a wider loyalty than to the Labour Party, claiming that, 'I regard myself as the steward of all those I represent in Parliament but also of the fate of our country as a whole and the prospect for future generations.'<sup>644</sup> Similarly, when asked by *Weekend World* how he would respond to Labour accusations of treachery, David Owen replied, 'I would just ask them [...] what is the biggest treachery; to put the Labour Party before your country or your country before the Labour Party?'<sup>645</sup> Of course, this is itself part of a shift stretching back to at least the 1945 election, but the 'progressive consensus' model provided an additional means by which social democrats could claim to reach beyond the Labour Party and speak to the country beyond.

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<sup>644</sup> Bill Rodgers to Sir John Boyd, 22 January 1981, WRSDP: 2: a

<sup>645</sup> David Owen on *Weekend World*, 16 January 1981, quoted in Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 475

## CHAPTER FIVE

### New Times, New Politics

#### The Collapse of the CPGB's Historical Narrative

Of all the political traditions we have examined here, Marxism has the closest connection with the practice of history, its political analysis being explicitly based on a theory of historical development. At the same time, the small size and intense commitment of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) meant that it developed an unusually strong mnemonic culture. Indeed, the divisions within both the party itself and the wider Marxist community, which stretched from 1956 right through until 1991, were often framed around questions of historical interpretation. The Communist Party Historians' Group boasted a number of renowned historians and was one of the party's key contributions to wider intellectual debate. However, the historians' ability to analyse the history of either the party itself or of the labour movement in the twentieth century was extremely restricted by political considerations. One of the consolations of the weakening of the Soviet Union was the ability to subject its history to critical historical analysis. In losing the Marxist future, the historians gained access to its past.

In this chapter I focus on the final four years of the CPGB's existence and the effects of the collapse of the USSR on both the identity of its members as constructed through collective narrative memory and on Marxist interpretations of history. This was fundamentally an historical and mnemonic crisis: every certainty upon which members had founded their identities was crumbling away. While attempts were made to find inspiration in alternative pasts, it was by adopting an 'affirmative presentism' that many members were able to reconcile their past identities with their present situation. They stressed the need to find new ways to progress socialist aims, without relying on a discredited grand narrative.

## Context

The Communist Party of Great Britain disbanded amid the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike communist parties in Eastern Europe, this did not entail a reorganisation of state machinery or a renegotiation of national identity. For the most part, there was no direct experience of oppression or brutality to contend with. Yet, for the members of the CPGB, the breakdown of the Party was undoubtedly a traumatic experience. It necessitated a re-examination – and in many cases a repudiation – of the collective narrative structure upon which their personal identities were founded. Indeed, it has been suggested that 'it has been those communist parties farthest removed from the regimes of the bloc which have suffered the greatest traumas.'<sup>646</sup> Francis Beckett has argued that the dissolution of the CPGB was not a consequence of the fall of the USSR, saying that 'Actually at the end of its life, the Party which had sometimes been slavishly obedient to Moscow was surprisingly little affected by what was happening there'.<sup>647</sup> Whilst it is true that the party was tearing itself apart long before 1989, I would argue that this was a direct legacy of 1956. While the debate over the *Manifesto for New Times* had begun in 1988, it was the shocks of the following year which shaped its development. The sources show that party members (and even somewhat distant left-wing intellectuals) were deeply shaken by the news from Eastern Europe and from China and that they were forced into re-examining their own pasts and that of the party.

The painful process of coming to terms with the truth about Soviet-style communism had begun in 1956, with the invasion of Hungary and the revelations which followed the death of Stalin. This was a point of personal crisis for many CPGB members. Many – including most of the communist historians – left the party; many more turned to the softer formulations of Gramscian 'eurocommunism'; the remainder refused to address the matter

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<sup>646</sup> Willie Thompson, David Parker, Mike Waite, 'Editorial, What Was Communism?', *Socialist History Journal*, 2, (Autumn 1993), pp. 1-5 (2)

<sup>647</sup> Francis Beckett, *Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London: John Murray, 1995), pp. 212

at all. Francis Beckett's 1995 book, *The Enemy Within*, details the extraordinary ability of many CP members to know about Stalin's abuses and yet, at the same time, not to admit or to accept that knowledge.<sup>648</sup> Over the next thirty years, the party lived in the shadow of 1956. As the lines between eurocommunists and traditionalists hardened, the latter were nicknamed 'tankies' in reference to the Soviet tanks which had rolled into Hungary. In the mid-eighties the argument came to a head. By now the two factions were in charge of, respectively, *Marxism Today* and the *Morning Star* and used these organs to attack one another. The eurocommunists were able to seize control of the party's machinery which they used – in an ironically Stalinist fashion – to expel many of their opponents.<sup>649</sup> In 1988 the remaining members of the left faction departed to found their own party, the Communist Party of Britain. Consequently, when the shocks of 1989 hit, the CPGB had already purged itself of many hardline Stalinists. Had this not happened, it is likely that the final three years would have been more painful still.

It was not only the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that was under question; in the last year of the CPGB's life a number of revelations were made about its own past and its relationship to Moscow. The most notorious of these was Reuben Falber's admission that as Assistant General Secretary he had received hundreds of thousands of pounds from the Soviet Union: the infamous 'Moscow Gold'.<sup>650</sup> This had been preceded in September 1991 by George Matthews's revelation that 'Stalin played a decisive role' in drafting the 1951 *British Road to Socialism* and that 'this was concealed by the party leadership'.<sup>651</sup> These revelations only had the impact they did because of the context of international unrest, but they had the effect of further deepening members' sense of the instability of the past. As

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<sup>648</sup> Ibid, pp. 124-40

<sup>649</sup> Ibid, p. 203

<sup>650</sup> Reuben Falber, 'CPGB: Cash from Moscow', *Changes*, no. 28, 16-19 November 1991, p. 2

<sup>651</sup> George Matthews, 'Stalin's British Road?', *Changes*, no. 23, 12-27 September 1991, pp. 1-3 (of a supplement)

the General Secretary, Nina Temple, put it in her report to the Executive Committee, *New Times*, *New Politics*:

Nineteen eighty nine in Eastern Europe has meant at last the lifting of the long shadow of Stalinism, and has made the world quite literally a different place. A place in which every previous assumption must be reconsidered, especially by us who call ourselves communists.<sup>652</sup>

Not only the past was under revision; the future was also looking incredibly uncertain. At the most basic level, any political strategy now had to be rethought, reworked. If communism had failed, how much of Marxism and Marxist historical theory could be salvaged? In addition, these internal discussions were taking place against the background noise of the New Right's triumphant declaration of the End of History. Yet the party had already begun to shift towards a presentist temporal attitude: the *Marxism Today* approach was above all based in the need to be *timely*, to base their politics on analyses of society as it was, not as it had been. The *Marxism Today* authors stressed that this reorientation did not mean relinquishing the radical socialist future. It was by 'Submit[ting] everything to the discipline of present reality' that this future could be brought about.<sup>653</sup> In the words of Stuart Hall, 'we can only renew the project of the left by precisely occupying *the same world* that Thatcherism does, and building from that a *different* form of society.'<sup>654</sup> An acceptance of the present was the key to reaching the future. But in the years after 1989 the promised future fell along with the past. Much later, Willie Thompson was to publish *What Happened to History?* in which he suggested that the 'near-total defeat' of the left in 1989-91 had ushered in the 'conceptually flawed and empirically vacuous' project of deconstructionism. The teleological narrative of Marxism 'has to be rejected

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<sup>652</sup> Temple, 'New Times, New Politics'

<sup>653</sup> Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 14

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15. Original emphases.

along with all teleologies.’<sup>655</sup> The problem was finding something with which it could be replaced.

### Identity Politics

Unlike the other episodes we have examined, the debate about the CPGB was about the past at least as much as it was about the future. The past was not invoked in order to justify future changes; changes were made necessary because of a new perspective on the past. During the party’s ‘transformation’ process (as it became known), Mark Perryman sent a sheet of rough notes to party leader Nina Temple. He began by saying ‘I’ve been thinking about 5 crucial areas for next stage of CPGB’; at number one was ‘Coming to terms, taking responsibility for, and understanding our history and tradition’.<sup>656</sup> One of the most dramatic expressions of this process came from party member Margaret Peck. In October 1989 she and her husband, John, had written an article for *News and Views* enthusing about a recent trip to the GDR. Although they mentioned their concerns for democracy, the tone of the article was highly optimistic, praising the low rents and plentiful food. They also rejected any suggestion that East Germany was a police state, supporting their claims with anecdotes about the helpful, non-intrusive police they had encountered during their two weeks in the country.<sup>657</sup> By March 1990 Peck had cause to revise her opinions. She wrote a moving letter to *News and Views* admitting that she now felt ‘deeply ashamed about an article John and I wrote on our return from East Germany.’<sup>658</sup> She compared her blindness to communism’s dark side to that of her fellow Germans under the Nazis: in both cases, people could sense that something was wrong but were unwilling to examine why. Most importantly, she attacked the stories that British party members had told themselves. First,

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<sup>655</sup> Willie Thompson, *What Happened to History?* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 54; 182; 144

<sup>656</sup> Original emphasis. The other four areas were students, marginal constituencies and tactical voting, internal organisation and experimenting and funding [?] new forms [of democracy?]. Uncertainty due to handwriting.CP/CENT/SEC/14/05.

<sup>657</sup> *News and Views*, no. 49, October 1989, pp. 8-9. Wrongly labelled as issue 48 on cover

<sup>658</sup> *News and Views*, no. 55, March 1990, p. 17

some of her comrades had attempted to claim that the CPGB had itself committed no atrocities, therefore its members had nothing to be ashamed of. Peck insisted that this would not wash. She also accused them of rewriting their own pasts in order to assure themselves that they had opposed repression. 'Yes' writes Peck, 'it is easy to say we were against such and such':

We are saying now that we opposed Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan and were for Solidarity in Poland. But did we actually protest strongly or march against these suppressions? No, we did not. In fact, anybody who did take part publicly in solidarity with the Poles was strongly criticised.

At the end of the article, she asked herself why she, John and thousands like her had been so willing to make excuses for the USSR. It was, she concluded, 'Because we are ideologists and, like all ideologists, we are stubborn, dogmatic and always know best.' In light of this, Peck felt unable to stay in the party 'if it continues as a political party', although she 'could support a non-party political movement.' Peck's letter insisted that members incorporate the full story of Soviet communism into their personal and collective memories; not to dilute, excuse or bury it but to carry the truth with them and to bear responsibility for it.

As Peck's letter demonstrates, far more than political philosophy was at stake; the personal and collective identities of CPGB members had been called into question. Raphael Samuel has described the way in which 'To be a Communist was to have a complete social identity' and how its activities 'might be seen retrospectively as a way of practising togetherness', notwithstanding the political urgency accorded to them at the time.<sup>659</sup> Robin Fivush has detailed the extent to which the stories we tell ourselves about our own history and our sense of self are constructed through narrative

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<sup>659</sup> Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 13

discourse within the family.<sup>660</sup> Within the CPGB 'family' these narratives were strong enough to infuse all other potential narratives. Phil Cohen's collection of testimonies from former 'Communist children' makes clear the extent to which Communist identity was tied up with a sense of 'difference' – of holidays spent in Eastern Europe rather than Blackpool, of weekends delivering copies of the *Daily Worker*, of the imperative to challenge school orthodoxies. Parents were busy with Party business, career opportunities disappeared, along with non-Party friends.<sup>661</sup> A world view was constructed not only through the immediate memory work of families and close friendship groups but also through broader, historical narratives of the past – of party, national and international progress and history. The future General Secretary of the Party, Nina Temple, told Cohen how as a child she was advised not to take an O Level in history because her teacher said she was 'useless' at it: they had disagreed over the correct interpretation of the 1926 General Strike.<sup>662</sup> For communists, the past was not a neutral area of study; it was a political resource.

Political parties could be seen to operate as mnemonic communities: they 'socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten'.<sup>663</sup> The identities they transmit thus become self-reinforcing. As Barbara A. Mizstal has put it, 'Due to a group's mnemonic tradition, a particular cognitive bias marks every group's remembering'.<sup>664</sup> In subscribing to a collective sense of meaning, we aim to orient our approach to the world. Clifford Geertz has described the way in which we construct and use cognitive frameworks 'to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them.' According to this view, ideologies are 'maps of problematic

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<sup>660</sup> Robin Fivush, 'Remembering and reminiscing: How individual lives are constructed in family narratives', *Memory Studies* 1: 1 (2008), pp. 49-58

<sup>661</sup> Phil Cohen (ed), *Children of the Revolution* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997)

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93

<sup>663</sup> Barbara A. Mizstal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 15

<sup>664</sup> *Ibid*



social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience.<sup>665</sup> Such a description seems to be particularly apt in the case of the CPGB, which functioned as a repository for personal, familial and collective memories of struggle, exclusion and comradeship. As David Lowenthal, among others, has emphasised, narrative memory is the means by which we construct and maintain a consistent sense of self.<sup>666</sup> Maurice Halbwachs argued that such narratives are socially constructed; they depend upon the memories of other individuals and of the collective.<sup>667</sup> The loss of these social frameworks can be disorienting; the destruction of the memories they contain is dramatic and painful. The mix of responses to this loss within the CPGB is shown by a report of a branch meeting in Oxford, which took place on 5 January 1990. The energy (and even exhilaration) of searching for new maps, new narrative identities, is palpable:

We started with a discussion on the POLITICAL SITUATION. Every member contributed. Several spoke against changing the name of the party: they felt we did not have anything to be ashamed [sic] of. Two members spoke of the "Rainbow" coalitions in Europe, and one spoke approvingly of the PCI and its new image as well as name. One member spoke of the centenary of "News from Nowhere" – William Morris was a Marxist, contemporary with Marx, and he had a non-productionist, environmental view of politics which we are only now beginning to adopt. All comrades felt that the events in Eastern Europe are shattering, but at the same time exhilarating. We must be determined to carry on the work of the CPGB, but at the same time we must be ready to change our habits of thought and work. This is not always easy, as old habits keep coming back, despite good intentions.<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>665</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Ideology as a Cultural System', in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*, (The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 45-76 (64)

<sup>666</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

<sup>667</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980)

<sup>668</sup> Letter from Gladys Lewis, (Acting Secretary of Oxford CP) to EC, 9 January 1990, CP/CENT/EC/24/08

Some members faced up to the knowledge that their previous convictions and actions had been based on murky foundations; others simply mourned their personal failure to bring about a communist society. Many wrote to Nina Temple, to express their loss and confusion. One of these correspondents recalled 'Harry Pollitt saying we would see socialism in our time' and commented that he was now '68 and not much time left and socialism seems to be falling apart'. He went on:

In my young days in the party, 1942 onward, I was considered quite a promising Marxist student. [...] but unfortunately I did not in the end fulfil those hopes. [...]

Now I can only think of the motto of an aristocratic English family, I have made it (the motto) mine: "Where have I fallen, what have I done?" Things, it would seem, never looked more bleak for us and I for one have not a clue what the answer can be. It looks like the tide of history has ebbed and left us high and dry and we dont [sic] know what to do about it. Could we, I wonder, perhaps storm Transport House and take over the reigns [sic] of the Labour Party, then mount a massive 'Maggie out' campaign to make sure she goes?

I'm only joking of course. But then again I wonder, could it really happen?

In his attempt to visualise a future in which socialism could happen in his time, the writer told Temple that he had looked into Marx's references to 'the metaphysical' and was 'convinced' that they 'really exist, unacceptable as that may be to most Marxists'. He ended his letter with the words, 'We shall prevail, Harry's prophesy could be fulfilled yet, the "metaphysical" is with us – I hope.'<sup>669</sup> This letter speaks of a need to continue to believe in a discredited dream, via the spirits of the old world. It also tells us a great deal about the ways in which personal identity and hopes of achievement were interwoven with those of the party. The writer felt that not only had the

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<sup>669</sup> Undated letter to Nina Temple (NT), CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

communist project failed, but so had he personally; he 'did not fulfil' the hopes the party placed in him, anymore than it fulfilled those he placed in it.

Others did not wait for the party to either transform or disband itself; they simply left. One described the 'painful' decision which had taken eighteen months to reach in a letter to Nina Temple. Having 'lived and breathed "the Party"' since the age of sixteen, he was now faced with 'deep-seated questions' relating to its history which made him wonder 'why the Party continues to exist'.<sup>670</sup> This was nothing new. Between June 1956 and February 1958 the party lost 27.7 per cent of its membership.<sup>671</sup> The difference this time was that these were the people who had stayed through 1956, through 1968, through 1988. They were either blind to the excesses of Soviet communism, or they had held out faith that the British party could reform itself and start a new path. In part, their political identities were founded upon that decision to stay in the party; it became a matter of 'pride'.<sup>672</sup> Still others clung to ingrained political responses, defending even the worst excesses of totalitarianism. One such member wrote to Temple to express 'regret' that she had criticised the Chinese Government, 'who have educated the students ignorant enough to foul the city centres'. This member attacked the victims of Tiananmen Square for their actions, saying that they 'should show their gratitude for the privileges bestowed on them by returning to work in industries and thereby help in improvements of conditions for the helpless'.<sup>673</sup>

The most common reaction was negotiation, an attempt to preserve some of the dignity of the past at the same time as accepting the need for a new future. Members acknowledged that there had been 'mistakes' but insisted that 'the CPSU record over these 70 years contains a great deal to be proud

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<sup>670</sup> Letter to NT, 31 May 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>671</sup> Steve Parsons, 'What happened inside the CPGB' in *Our History: The Communist Party and 1956*, Speeches at the Conference, pamphlet 88 (Socialist History Society, February 1993), pp. 24-38 (26)

<sup>672</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 218

<sup>673</sup> Letter to NT, 27 July 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/05

of as well as some grounds for shame and condemnation.<sup>674</sup> One of Temple's correspondents reminded her that the Soviet Union had 'been surrounded by hostile states' and so 'had to take harsh methods to protect the young Socialist society'. But, he assured her, 'if it had not been for Joe Stalin, you and I might not be alive right now'.<sup>675</sup> Another noted that 'Anyone who believed that Socialism can be built without dreadful mistakes, including wrongful deaths must have done very very little thinking about human nature.'<sup>676</sup> The process of confronting and questioning the past could be gradual. Some of those who had been against change in 1989 revised their positions in 1991. For Arthur Mendelsohn, the decisive issue was the attempted Soviet coup in August '91. In a letter to *Changes* he explained that before the coup he 'favoured retaining either "communist" or "socialist" in our title – no longer! Our congress must make a decisive break and must carry the majority of members to support the change.'<sup>677</sup> The attempted coup had the same effect on George Barnsby, who also wrote to *Changes* to explain that he had voted for the name 'Communist Federation' in the *Changes* survey but now believed 'that a complete break with former practices can only come about from those who are prepared to break with the name'.<sup>678</sup>

### Still Communist?

As we have seen, the uprooting of the past had brought into question the present identity of party members. They struggled to balance their hopes for the future with their obligation to the past. The name of the party was a key part of this balancing act. Those who stayed in the party had to address the disjunction between their own understanding of communism – the ideology to which they had dedicated their lives – and the wider public understanding. For instance, Howie Martin had joined the party in 1944, aged nineteen; he was clear that he would 'always consider [him]self to be a Communist' but

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<sup>674</sup> Letter to NT, 25 April 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>675</sup> Letter to NT, 2 April 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>676</sup> Letter to NT, 19 August 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/05

<sup>677</sup> Arthur Mendelsohn, *Changes*, no. 24, 28 Sept-11 Oct 1991, p. 6

<sup>678</sup> George Barnsby, *Changes*, no. 23, 14-27 Sept 1991, p. 6

acknowledged that the word's meaning had shifted and that the party would have to shift with it: 'To the majority of British people especially young people' communism now 'means Stalin, Ceausescu, the Berlin Wall, the utter collapse of economies in Eastern Europe'. He was, he concluded, 'for a change of name'.<sup>679</sup> Another longstanding member wrote to Temple on 22 July 1990, telling her that although he had previously been totally opposed to any change in the identity of the party ('When I heard of anyone thinking of name change, I stated do that and I'm off'), again the events in Eastern Europe had changed his mind. His response was nuanced, at first seeming to stick by his original principles, in spite of their corruption by others, but then questioning that response himself:

Gordon [MacLennan, former General Secretary] was so right, when he claimed these people have tarnished the name of socialism, now Nina *what you and I have always believed in was and is right*. But today, I would see little point in going on the knocker and say good moring [sic] I'm a communist, I have come to offer you a better standard of living. They would laugh at us, or to mean it right, they wouldn't want to hear what we have to say.

It may be dishonest to believe in the same things, say the same things, but call it by a different name. *But I don't think we are saying the same things any more, we have new policies, and we need a new name to go with it.*<sup>680</sup>

This negotiation of the rift between self-identity and public image was difficult. But, as Kathleen Cornforth emphasised, a change of name, a break in the narrative continuity, did not have to mean the end of the story. In her letter to *Changes*, she emphasised that she had been a member for fifty years and was extremely proud of the Party's past, particularly during the Spanish Civil War. However, she explained that it was necessary to get rid of the 'discredited' name communist in order to continue working towards their

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<sup>679</sup> Howie Martin, *Changes*, no. 24, 28 Sept-11 Oct 1991, p. 5

<sup>680</sup> Letter to NT, 22 July 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06. Emphases added.

socialist goals, from the destruction of capitalism and common ownership of wealth to world peace and environmentalism.<sup>681</sup>

Opinions on the name of the party were much divided. A survey carried out by *Changes* in October 1991 showed that the largest proportion of respondents (73 of 161) favoured the name proposed by the leadership, 'Democratic Left'. However, as Dave Priscott pointed out in a letter to the Executive Committee, the other votes were split between many competing options. In total, 53% of members wanted to keep the word 'Communist' somewhere in the title and 21% wanted the word 'Socialist', compared to only 22% who were in favour of neither.<sup>682</sup> It is not surprising that the proposed name change was so contentious. As David Kertzer has shown in relation to the Italian PCI, this was so painful because it was not only the name of the party, but also that of its members: no longer would they be 'communists', except in their own estimation.<sup>683</sup> Whilst some members like Howie Martin were able to reconcile their own identity as communists with the need to change the name of the party, others were not prepared to make this leap.

One 'foundation member' wrote to Nina Temple saying that he was totally opposed to the name change because 'it is a disservice to the services and sacrifices of comrades in the party and others who gave their all to the working class.' He highlighted the particular contributions made by those who fought against fascism in the 1920s and '30s and emphasised that 'They were not the cause of giving the word Communism a dirty name'.<sup>684</sup> Another felt that 'For the CPGB to abandon the name communist and with it, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Dimitrov, Pollitt – to mention a few of the many previously honoured names – would be an entirely retrograde step'.<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> Kathleen Cornforth, *Changes*, no. 25, 12-25 Oct 1991, p. 3

<sup>682</sup> Dave Priscott to EC, 26 October 1991, CP/CENT/EC/25/12

<sup>683</sup> D.I. Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1996)

<sup>684</sup> Letter to NT, 7 June 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>685</sup> Michael Balchin, *Changes*, no. 23, 14-27 September 1991, p. 4

This debate was particularly poignant because it took place against the backdrop of the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the CPGB. The mid-November 1989 issue of *News and Views* featured an anniversary cover. Inside, two small articles noted respectively that next years' membership cards would have a seventieth anniversary logo and that a commemorative calendar would be available. The calendar featured photographs 'Charting the Party's history and involvement from the first Unity Convention, through the General Strike and the Hunger Marches' right up to 'the miners' strike, the People's March for Jobs and the fight against Poll Tax'.<sup>686</sup> This was the last issue of *News and Views* before the forty-first Congress at which the Manifesto for New Times was adopted. It is worth noting that this calendar was not mentioned in either the December or January issues. It seems that commemoration was offered as a necessary ritual, part of the mnemonic structure of the CPGB, rather than through any particular sense of its continued importance. Yet this presentist approach to the past was not shared by all the members. A recurring fear was that by changing (or disbanding) the party, communists would be betraying their ancestors and denying their sacrifices and achievements. One 1991 letter to *Changes* urged fellow members to 'save the CP against those who are hell bent on the elimination of 70 yrs [sic] of struggle'.<sup>687</sup>

#### A Manifesto for New Times

Many members found the process of transforming the party as unsettling as the traumatic events which had inspired it. A report from the London District Secretariat described the 'considerable anxiety and uncertainty in the Party about our role and future' and called for an immediate debate because, as they said, 'We are losing members now through their sadness and despair about the party and communism'.<sup>688</sup> The first focus for unease was the

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<sup>686</sup> *News and Views*, no. 51, Mid-Nov 1989, inside cover

<sup>687</sup> Cathie McMahon, *Changes*, no. 24, 28 Sept-11 Oct 1991, p. 5

<sup>688</sup> Report of London District Communist Party to the Political Committee and the Executive Committee, 4 January 1990, CP/CENT/EC/24/08. Original emphasis.

process of drafting the *Facing up to the Future* (FUTTF) document. This was intended to be the redraft of the British Road to Socialism agreed at the fortieth Congress in 1988 but in the wake of the events in Eastern Europe, it became the basis for the *Manifesto for New Times* (MNT), which was adopted at the forty-first Congress. This process provoked a heated debate in the CPGB newspapers. For instance, Bill Wildish wrote to *New and Views* saying he was 'confused by the exact status of the document' and concerned that it would be adopted at Congress 'precisely because there is nothing else on offer'.<sup>689</sup> Tracy Warnes was also worried by the way the leadership were handling the MNT:

My branch, Holborn and South St Pancras, is dismayed by the confusion and disarray which have been caused in the Party by the appearance of the Manifesto for New Times. [...]

What we should be doing at the coming Congress is revising our programme, the 'British Road to Socialism'. The last National Congress called for a re-draft of that programme, which is what we ought now to be discussing and deciding upon. Instead we have been presented with the Manifesto, and told that its relationship to the 'British Road' is a matter for Congress to determine. So what exactly are we supposed to be doing in pre-Congress discussion and at the Congress itself? How can we discuss a document without knowing what its function is? [...] Serious discussion is impossible amidst this confusion.<sup>690</sup>

Some members expressed a fear that they were losing ownership of the party and its processes; they were 'baffled and bewildered' as one letter to Temple put it.<sup>691</sup> The leadership seemed to be rushing ahead into a future they hadn't asked for and couldn't control. In the spring of 1991 Nina Temple received a number of complaints at having been described as the Secretary of Democratic Left in a new publication called *The Socialist*.<sup>692</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> Bill Wildish, *News and Views*, no. 46, Sept 1989 p. 12

<sup>690</sup> Tracy Warnes, *News and Views*, no. 48, Oct 1989, p. 14

<sup>691</sup> Letter to NT, 2 April 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>692</sup> Various letters to NT, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06



Brent North Branch also wrote to the EC complaining that this represented 'a form of brainwashing'.<sup>693</sup> July's EC minutes recorded that this was *The Socialist's* mistake and they have apologized to the members who complained.<sup>694</sup> Interestingly, at least one of the people who wrote to complain said that she wouldn't be unhappy with the change to Democratic Left, so long as it was done democratically. It was the sense that procedures were not being followed which disturbed members.

It has been suggested that the reformers employed exactly the kind of anti-democratic techniques they set out to overcome. It would not, perhaps, be going too far to suggest that this represented a form of cultural or habit memory. In her resignation letter from the London District Committee and from the party, Kate Hudson explained that she was unhappy with 'the political opinion around Marxism Today', which she felt was 'determined to push an alternative vision of what the party should be about.' She believed that MNT was 'never really acceptable to the majority of party members' and had only been accepted by Congress due to 'the mechanisms of democratic centralism, and a certain amount of what I would loosely consider to be termed Stalinist practices'.<sup>695</sup> Similar concerns were raised by the process by which the leadership moved towards the vote on dissolving the party. One member complained that having voted for the 'twin-track' option at the previous Congress, 'when the Democratic Left constitution arrived it was a 'single-track' document, and the Communist Party had disappeared'.<sup>696</sup> Another characterised the available options as 'which form of dissolution do we most prefer?'.<sup>697</sup> In July 1991 Lambeth Branch passed a resolution condemning the 'unequal treatment' given by the EC to the Draft Constitution, which was published in 'readable type and attractive layout as against the existing Party Rules printed incomplete and in type so minuscule

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<sup>693</sup> Letter from Brent North Branch to EC, 28 July 1991CP/CENT/EC/25/10

<sup>694</sup> EC minutes, July 1991, CP/CENT/EC/25/10

<sup>695</sup> Kate Hudson to EC, 15 January 1990, CP/CENT/EC/24/09

<sup>696</sup> Edith Constable, *Changes*, no. 21, 3-16 Aug 1991, p. 1

<sup>697</sup> Steve Johnson, *News and Views*, no. 55, March 1990, p. 27

as to make them difficult to read without a magnifying glass (which was not supplied).<sup>698</sup>

Distrust of Temple was an important element in the debate. Her election as General Secretary in January 1990 epitomised the spirit of reform. She immediately announced that she would simply be called 'secretary' because 'general secretary sounded a bit grandiose [...], and a bit Stalinist'.<sup>699</sup> As Francis Beckett put it:

There could hardly be a clearer sign that Temple saw herself, as did her supporters, as a complete break with the past. The CP had spent 70 years talking itself up. For better or worse, it was now going to do the opposite.<sup>700</sup>

Born – appropriately enough – in 1956, Temple had long been at the forefront of attempts to reform the party and came to personify its modern, feminist, green values. On her election, she immediately removed the bust of Marx which had always sat in the General Secretary's office.<sup>701</sup> The decision to call the new version of the *British Road to Socialism* a Manifesto, rather than a Strategy, is also significant.<sup>702</sup> The title *Manifesto for New Times* could not have been more explicit in its intention. She even described it as 'very different from the original Communist Manifesto', leaving no doubt that it was intended as a replacement, not an addition. The only similarity she admitted was that 'both share a rejection of capitalism's inequality and exploitation'.<sup>703</sup> Despite the step-by-step approach of the leadership, that the adoption of MNT led inexorably to the dissolution of the party should not have surprised anyone.

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<sup>698</sup> Letter to EC, 10 July 1991, CP/CENT/EC/25/10. The criticism was accepted by NT who promised to resolve it before the Congress.

<sup>699</sup> Quoted in Beckett, *Enemy Within*, p. 213

<sup>700</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid*, p. 214

<sup>702</sup> In May 1989 the EC minutes record 17 votes in favour of the title *Manifesto for New Times* over *Strategy for New Times*. The votes against and abstentions are not given, CP/CENT/EC/24/04

<sup>703</sup> Temple, 'New Times, New Politics'

The message of the new was relentless. A promotional sheet encouraged members to 'Keep in touch, be part of it, make it happen!'<sup>704</sup> The appetite for change was combined with a taste for iconoclasm. An earlier press release, with the title '70 Yrs [sic] of history "up for grabs"' had boasted that 'Up for grabs at the weekend's Executive Committee meeting will be one of the sacred tenets of communist thinking – INTERNATIONALISM'. Temple had commented on this that 'The internationalism of the 1990s will be as much informed by Greenpeace and Oxfam, as communism *once was* by Marx and Engels.'<sup>705</sup> Temple's message of change was tempered by her insistence that it was only by transforming that the party could preserve its values and traditions. Her *New Times*, *New Politics* report to the EC stressed the need to 'free' socialist values 'from the outdated and distorted forms with which they have been tarred'. Only then would they be able 'to mould the new times'. She directly addressed the roots of the party's historical memory, arguing that the circumstances of the CPGB's foundation had tied it to a form of communism that was fundamentally flawed. Although the party had 'moved on' from its origins as 'a Leninist party in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution', this had been only 'a partial and incomplete moving on. As the edifice that was Eastern Europe collapses we have one foot in the rubble.'<sup>706</sup> Instead, the Party needed to look back into its own past, to the indigenous English communism championed by the Marxist historians and also outwards to the new Europe:

Can we be part of a new movement that reclaims the best of our traditions, going right back to the Levellers and William Morris? Can we play our part in the new dynamic in Europe, overcoming the divisions between socialists and communists? [...]

We can be part of the last breath of the old or the first breath of the new.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> 'Party In New Times' [January 1990?], CP/CENT/EC/24/08,

<sup>705</sup> Draft press release: '70 Yrs of history "up for grabs"', 6 March 1990, CP/CENT/EC/24/09. Emphasis added.

<sup>706</sup> Temple, 'New Times, New Politics'

<sup>707</sup> Temple, 'New Times, New Politics'

### Whither Marxism?

In both academic conferences and party members' correspondence, the question of the future of Marxism was debated.<sup>708</sup> Whilst most contributors to the discussions accepted that 'the project of 1917 has reached its terminus and [...] there is no foreseeable revival',<sup>709</sup> many held out hope that Marxism could be salvaged from the wreckage. As Perry Anderson argued in 1992, socialism had not been given a 'fair trial'; J. S. Mill had protested that in order to weight capitalism against communism, it was necessary to compare each 'not as it is, but as it might be made'. That comparison had not yet been possible.<sup>710</sup> Monty Johnstone took a similar line:

Identified with collapsed Stalinist and neo-Stalinist caricatures of it, communism has suffered a grave historical setback. However Marx's fundamental critique of capitalism stands, reinforced by powerful ecological considerations, and the long-term objective of a democratic communist society – never yet tried – seems to me to be worth working for.<sup>711</sup>

The November 1991 editorial of *Our History Journal* was doubtful about the prospects of rescuing Marxism from the legacy of the CPSU, which it described as 'a parasitic excrescence on society' which 'collapsed almost as easily and comprehensively as the Tsarist regime in 1917' but not before making 'Marxism synonymous with privation and dishonesty.' Rather than simply blaming Stalin, it counselled that it was important to recognise that 'Stalin acquired absolute power by exploiting the contradictions and deadlock in which the communist movement was enmeshed by the 1920s.' Even if international revolution had been 'on the agenda in the years after 1917 [...]

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<sup>708</sup> For instance, Derrida's *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and The New International* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994, tr. Peggy Kamuf) was based on his plenary speech to a conference entitled 'Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective' held at the Center for Ideas and Society, University of California, Riverside, 22 and 23 April, 1993

<sup>709</sup> Thompson, Parker, Waite, 'Editorial, What Was Communism?', p. 2

<sup>710</sup> Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London; New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 360-1

<sup>711</sup> 'Assessments – what was communism?' *Socialist History Journal*, 2 (Autumn 1993), pp. 6-8 (8)

It would quickly have run into the same problem as manifested itself in the former socialist bloc', i.e. how to organise production without market forces to regulate demand. The editors pointed out that such a solution not only had not been found but that 'Even the theoretical underpinning for that project has barely started and will require the work of decades if not generations.'<sup>712</sup> Such despair at the task ahead was not unusual. Sebastian Berg has shown that 'despite their critical distance' from the party, left wing intellectuals felt a profound political, intellectual and emotional loss in 1989.<sup>713</sup> As his selections from *New Left Review* show, these feelings were certainly not predicated on an unthinking acceptance of the USSR, but they were associated with a sense of despair that 'the whole idea of socialism as a systemic alternative to capitalism was in danger':

It is true that I was heavily critical of the Soviet Union, but the angry little boy who pummels his father's chest will not be glad if the old man collapses. As long as the Soviet Union seemed safe, it seemed safe for me to be anti-Soviet. Now that it begins, disobligingly to crumble, I feel impotently protective toward it.<sup>714</sup>

Ten years of defeat for almost all egalitarian and collectivist endeavours has caused many of us on the left to fall into chronic mutual abuse, to fall upon our own swords, or to fall – some never to rise again – onto the analytic couch.<sup>715</sup>

As the light of socialist hopes and aspirations fades, and the need for clear vision and historical perspective grows, we might look to the owl of Minerva,

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<sup>712</sup> Editorial: 'Back to the Drawing Board?', *Socialist History Journal*, 18 (November 1991), pp. 1-3

<sup>713</sup> Sebastian Berg, 'Intellectual Radicalism after 1989: Theoretical and political discussions in a British and an American Journal', *Socialist History*, 30 (2007), pp. 43-59 (44)

<sup>714</sup> A. Cohen, 'The future of a disillusion', *New Left Review*, 190 (1991), pp. 9-10. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 46

<sup>715</sup> Lynne Segal, 'Whose left? Socialism, feminism and the future', *New Left Review*, 185 (1991), pp. 82-3. Quoted in *ibid*

trusting she will neither be dazzled by the fires of capitalist celebration (or crisis?) nor succumb to the absolute darkness of despair.<sup>716</sup>

In this 'climate of loss and suffering', the crucial task was 'the theoretical re-foundation and re-conceptualisation of their own politics', beginning with re-evaluating the works of Marx. As Berg shows, responses to this task ranged 'from a wholehearted defence of Marxism as a complete system of thinking to its transformation into a vague Marxian, messianic-utopian "spirit"' – as with Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*.<sup>717</sup> The same work of re-evaluating, re-positioning and rescuing was going on at the grassroots. Attempts were made firmly to separate the CPGB from the CPSU, in the hope of saving the former. Suggestions were made that the party should revive an indigenous English socialist tradition or even an older native 'communism' claiming the Diggers as ancestors.<sup>718</sup> Implicit in these arguments was the idea that the CPGB could somehow dissociate itself from the regimes in Eastern Europe and China, pointing out that 'In Great Britain the Communists have nothing to be ashamed of [...] no crimes were committed' and 'A selfless struggle has been conducted which had many historical links with struggles over centuries for democracy and human rights as well as political rights.'<sup>719</sup> This was not a new development and echoed the work of the Communist Party Historians in the 1930s and '40s which sought to demonstrate the native British roots of Communism as a basis for the party's Popular Front strategy. But this was no longer enough. Neither Margaret Peck nor Willie Thompson would allow themselves to seek solace in these kinds of platitudes:

We are the same as communist parties in eastern Europe. The only difference is that we have had (luckily for the people of this country) no power.<sup>720</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> Göran Therborn, 'The life and times of socialism', *New Left Review*, 194 (1992), p. 17. Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>717</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 46-7

<sup>718</sup> See for example letter to NT, 26 June 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>719</sup> 'The Future of the CPGB', Bradford Branch, 11 January 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>720</sup> *News and Views*, no. 55, March 1990, p. 17

The non-ruling CPs, though exempt for [sic] responsibility for the crimes and shortcomings of their counterparts in the bloc and often worthy in their criticisms and condemnations, have nevertheless continued to define themselves as part of the same tradition. The British Party, for example, sent a delegation to the Romanian CP congress in 1989 and accepted reciprocal greetings at its own.<sup>721</sup>

We have already seen Temple's claim that the 'internationalism of the 1990s will be as much informed by Greenpeace and Oxfam, *as communism once was* by Marx and Engels'.<sup>722</sup> But not everyone accepted that this had to be a choice. Instead they stressed the continued relevance of Marx to the problems of the present. One seventy-nine-year-old member told how in preparing a speech for a local Greenpeace meeting he 'was struck by the relevance of what I learned 50-60 years ago from Marx'. It wasn't that he was behind the times, just that he couldn't accept 'the total rejection of Marxism'.<sup>723</sup> Many members insisted that Marxism was more relevant than ever in the late twentieth century when 'The contrasts between rich and poor in developed societies and between rich and poor countries is increasing. The environment is threatened and radicalism and reactionary nationalism is increasing'.<sup>724</sup> The emphasis on the challenges of the present moment (and the imagined future) is a key feature of all the party's debates at this time. The editors of the second issue of the *Socialist History Journal* commented that 'It is scarcely imaginable that the *objectives* of the communist movement will not continue to dominate the human agenda, no matter how rightly and vehemently its methods and political structures may be repudiated.'<sup>725</sup> Even in his merciless analysis of the failures of Bolshevism,

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<sup>721</sup> Willie Thompson, 'History's Last Word? The Communist Party in Dissolution', *Our History Journal*, 16 (November 1990), pp. 2-8 (7)

<sup>722</sup> Draft press release: '70 Yrs of history "up for grabs"', 6 March 1990, CP/CENT/EC/24/09. Emphasis added

<sup>723</sup> Letter to NT, 24 April 1991, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>724</sup> Notes on discussion of Harlow Branch CP, sent to NT, March 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06,

<sup>725</sup> Thompson, Parker, Waite, 'Editorial, What Was Communism', p. 4. Original emphasis.

Willie Thompson clung to the challenges of the present as a way of explaining, if not excusing, the past:

The events of the past year [...] mark a historical terminus [...]. The human deprivation, ignorance and wretchedness which called the project into being are still as much present as they ever were, and having once been set on foot it is impossible to abandon. The historic mistake was in believing that the communist movement represented the project's final and definitive incarnation: the response now of the women and men who constitute its fragments is to work out what can meaningfully replace it.<sup>726</sup>

### The Collapse of Narrative

The debates over the possible futures of socialism focused not only on the contents of the reformers' strategies, but also on their modes of expression. The debates over MNT and FUTTF showed that it wasn't just the narrative which had changed; it was the mode of storytelling itself. A central line of criticism was that the new documents were un-Marxist in their style and thinking as well as in their conclusions. Rigorous dialectical analysis was out; soft-focus consumer politics were in. As Francis King put it, FUTTF was 'vague verbiage – meaningless chatter about 'new agendas', 'modernisation' and so on'.<sup>727</sup> Similarly, Jim Tait commented:

Words are important things. [...] The past five editions of the British Road to Socialism all used words that they said were programmes for a revolutionary transformation of society from capitalism to socialism.

From my observations of 'Facing up to the Future' the word revolution appears twice and never ever in relation to Socialism.

[...] Neither in solitary words nor organised concepts is there any semblance of a revolutionary strategy for socialism in the document.<sup>728</sup>

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<sup>726</sup> Willie Thompson, 'History's Last Word? The Communist Party in Dissolution', pp. 7-7

<sup>727</sup> Francis King, *News and Views*, no. 39, Feb 1989, p. 13

<sup>728</sup> Jim Tait, *News and Views*, no. 37, Jan 1989, p. 13. In FUTTF, the word 'revolution' is used in the context of technological revolution and a hoped-for cultural revolution in male behaviour.



David Allen noted that MNT overused the words 'progressive' and 'popular'. He felt that they had become 'Eurocommunist newspeak, as much part of our language as "worker" and "the state" are for Trotskyists.<sup>729</sup> To use the language of Laclau and Mouffe (so popular among the reformers), such terms had become empty signifiers. They came to represent all that was positive and acceptable; to signify an entire system of meaning. All that was not 'progressive' was necessarily negative – no distinctions or differences were permitted. Sean P. Tolland felt that FUTTF was guilty of 'fundamental errors in the analysis of "Thatcherism" owing to its 'basic lack of dialectics.' His main point was that authoritarianism and individualism were 'portrayed as being two distinct phenomena which are merely tangential', whereas, 'A dialectical analysis of "Thatcherism" would show how individualism and authoritarianism mutually penetrate each other and would portray them as part of an interconnected process of coming into being and passing away. [They are...] a living expression of the unity of opposites'.<sup>730</sup>

This difference in approach became particularly clear over the question of class politics. In place of traditional Marxist conceptions of class, the authors of FUTTF referred to a 'sense of class'. This was seized upon by the letter writers as proof that the document was 'very superficial and has little in common with Marxism'.<sup>731</sup> In particular, the authors were seen to be falling prey to Thatcherite notions of social identity, whereby it was possible to change class by buying your own home or a share portfolio.<sup>732</sup> Another letter writer mocked FUTTF's statement that 'Everyone comes to their sense of class through their sense of gender, and ethnicity, as well as regional and religious attachments'. There was, he said, 'No understanding, here, of an objective, Marxist, definition of class!'.<sup>733</sup> It is true that the section of the CPGB associated with *Marxism Today* placed a great deal of emphasis on exploring and analysing Thatcherism; however, it seems unfair to locate their

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<sup>729</sup> David Allen, *News and Views*, no. 44, July 1989, p. 12

<sup>730</sup> Sean P Tolland, *News and Views*, no. 39, Feb 1989, p. 15

<sup>731</sup> Francis King, *News and Views*, no. 39, Feb 1989, p. 13

<sup>732</sup> Ruth Wallis, *News and Views*, no. 36, Dec 1988, p. 13

<sup>733</sup> John Hanna, *News and Views*, no. 36, Dec 1988, p. 13

'impressionistic'<sup>734</sup> definition of class identity solely within this context. This fault line of material versus cultural definitions of class had run through the party, and particularly through the History Group, since the mid-seventies, if not earlier. In many ways, this could be seen as a consequence of the earlier trauma of 1956, leading to the Gramscian turn of the New Left. It was then that the initial rupture in the central Marxist narrative of class conflict had occurred: for some it had fragmented into myriad shards of identity and lived experience. For others it had hardened.

The extent to which the old forms of expression broke down in 1989/90 can be seen in an extraordinary series of minutes and letters generated by a working group established to plan a series of 'education' meetings. The nine members of the groups found themselves unable to agree on the contents of the meetings, or even on a basic approach to them. As one member of the group put it: 'The Party remains divided between those who seek to retain out-moded 'Marxist education'' and those who recognise that profound changes must be catered for'.<sup>735</sup> There was a sense that they were arguing over the very nature of communism: its past and its future. This was understandably painful and contentious. After one meeting, a member of the group wrote to another, 'Not for some years have I been present at a meeting which generated so much indignation and resentment'.<sup>736</sup> One of the most fundamental disagreements was over the format of the talks: should one speaker give a lecture on a subject, or should two or more speakers provide alternative viewpoints?<sup>737</sup> This seemingly organisational matter had important philosophical implications. Could the CPGB any longer claim to speak with one voice? Did it have any right to give lectures on the correct viewpoint? Questions were also raised over the contents of the proposed meetings. The original plan was to look at subjects like class, imperialism and revolution, dealing with the future of the party only at the

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<sup>734</sup> David Crosher, *News and Views*, no. 36, Dec 1988, p. 16

<sup>735</sup> Letter from Frank Stone to NT, 30 June 1990, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>736</sup> Letter from Pat Allen to Pat Turnbull, 8 July 1991, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

<sup>737</sup> Minutes of the Working Group on Education, 15 & 29 July 1991, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

end of the series of meetings. This was vigorously opposed by one elderly member of the group who felt that 'The explanations given by CP literature and speakers in the past cannot even begin to provide what is needed today' and insisted that the subjects needed to be far more 'tentative'. She went on to argue that the party needed to break out of the Marxist historical framework and open itself to the possibilities of the future:

I am absolutely against the proposed form of six talks, however they are presented – with two speakers or with any number. It is the approach that is wrong – nothing but a trip down memory lane.

We have nothing to lose but our old certainties – which have turned out to have been not as certain as we thought. We have a world of exciting new possibilities to win. We may win or we may not, but if we don't accept the challenge we shall certainly dwindle away into the past and not count for anything in the future.<sup>738</sup>

The final titles were indeed 'tentative'; question marks abounded: 'Socialism – the Death of a System?'; 'Capitalism Triumphant?' This is an important episode as it shows how deeply the crisis had penetrated the mindset of the Party. It was no longer acceptable to impart information or philosophy; instead it was time to ask questions and to admit doubts. No longer was the CP narrative based on the certainties of the past; instead it was open to the possibilities of the future. History was no longer a fixed narrative, it was an unfolding process.

### The Communist Party Historians

This brings us to the central importance of written, analytical history to the CP's identity. The Communist Party Historians' Group, established in 1946, was one of the party's key contributions to wider intellectual debate,

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<sup>738</sup> Vivien Pixner's notes, read out at meeting of the Working Group on Education, 1 July 1991, CP/CENT/SEC/14/06

particularly through the seminal journal *Past and Present*, founded in 1952. Although the group continued to meet until 1992, when it renamed itself the Socialist History Society, it lost valuable members in 1956 and its reputation dimmed thereafter. Although Steve Parsons has shown that the 1956 membership exodus was not restricted to intellectuals,<sup>739</sup> it is clear that the Historians' Group had a particularly strong reaction to Krushchev's revelations, quickly forming 'the nucleus of vocal opposition to the Party line'.<sup>740</sup> Almost all of its members left the party; most spectacular was the resignation (under threat of expulsion) of John Saville and E. P. Thompson after beginning a journal, *The Reasoner*, in order to discuss the revelations and (a few months later) the invasion of Hungary. Saville explained that they were both 'emotionally, politically and morally shocked at the revelations of what Stalinism really meant' and that 'as Communists and historians we saw clearly that we were obliged to analyse seriously the causes of the crimes which in the past we had defended or apologised for'.<sup>741</sup> The idea that this was their obligation *as historians* is key. Eric Hobsbawm, who famously stayed within the party, made the same point: 'what had been done under Stalin and why it had been concealed was literally a question about history'.<sup>742</sup> Yet, as Perry Anderson has remarked, Hobsbawm's complaint that 'We were not told the truth about something which had to affect the very nature of a communist's belief'<sup>743</sup> showed rather a disconnect between 'militant and historian' – in the case of the Soviet past, 'not independent sources critically checked, but the word of authority was expected to deliver the truth'.<sup>744</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> Steve Parsons, 'What happened inside the CPGB' in *Our History: The Communist Party and 1956*, Speeches at the Conference, pamphlet 88 (Socialist History Society, February 1993), pp. 24-38 (26)

<sup>740</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (New York; London: The New Press, 2002), p. 206

<sup>741</sup> John Saville, 'The XXth Congress and the British Communist Party' in *Socialist Register* (1976), pp. 1-23 (7-8)

<sup>742</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 207

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid*, p. 204

<sup>744</sup> Perry Anderson, *Spectrum* (London: Verso, 2005), p.284

Hobsbawm was the first to admit that his (and the other British Marxist historians') approach to the party's history, and even to the twentieth-century history of the labour movement, was very different from their approach to other historical subjects. They were under 'constraint', particularly with regard to 'some notoriously tricky problems' in the party's history. Even on the occasions when they attempted to write such a history (particularly in 1952/3), they found that 'The gap between what historians thought it necessary to write and what was regarded as officially possible and desirable to write at this stage – or even much later – proved too large.'<sup>745</sup> Hobsbawm also quotes an unnamed colleague's comment at the Historians' Group meeting on 8 April 1956: 'We have accepted Soviet articles on contemporary history in a way we did not for earlier centuries. We stopped being historians as regards the history of the CPSU or current affairs.'<sup>746</sup>

This lack of critical engagement was a serious weakness in a party which placed so much emphasis on a rigorous analysis of the past. Not only were Stalin's distortions of history and historical sources a moral offence, they also attacked the very notion of a 'scientific' history, based on deductions from empirical research. As Johnstone pointed out in 1979, 'As materialists our starting point must be reality.' The position of the CPSU, in which facts were selected in 'the service of the prevailing political line', made it impossible to learn from mistakes or to draw correct conclusions from the study of history. In support of his position, Johnstone quoted Marx: 'Is it not the first task of the scientific researcher to go directly to the truth without looking to the right or to the left?' and Lenin: 'We need full and true information and truth should not depend on the question of whom it should serve', noting laconically that this letter of Lenin's was itself suppressed until after the XXth

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<sup>745</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party' in Maurice Cornforth (ed), *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), pp. 21-47 (28-9)

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41

Congress of 1956.<sup>747</sup> Martin Jacques felt that in 1978 the party was finally emerging from the kind of Stalinism which refused to see that 'that you cannot move from one phase to another without adequately evaluating the phase you have come from'.<sup>748</sup> The opening-out of party history gained strength over the following decades, until Gorbachev 'called upon scholars to "fill in the blank pages" of the country's history, realizing that the success of the reforms being initiated required a critical confrontation with the legacy of Stalin and his successors'. This process was 'painful and threatening' to Soviet historians, after 'decades of suppressing the truth or making it adhere to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy'. Yet they soon began to 'enthusiastically take up the challenge'.<sup>749</sup>

On a smaller scale, a similar process is apparent in the CPGB. It is striking that in a movement with so many first-rate historians, Martin Jacques was able to comment that 'Now I think it is fair to say that, not least in Britain, the development of Communist history has not had a very good record'. It was, he felt, 'essentially narrative, descriptive and often celebratory'.<sup>750</sup> This was not for want of trying. In the aftermath of the 1956 revelations, the Historians' Group 'demanded a serious history of the CP', this led – by Hobsbawm's account – to 'frustrated meetings' with the party leadership who would only countenance a celebratory history – 'a record of battles fought, heroic deeds, sacrifices for the cause, red banners waved'.<sup>751</sup> In a 1979 article for *Our History Journal*, Monty Johnstone highlighted the disjunction between 'the demand for an objective evaluation of our past' as raised by 1956 and the central party's view of history, as shown in a 1937 statement from the Secretariat, which spoke of 'the urgent need for a history of the British Communist Party, in view of the increasing number of new

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<sup>747</sup> Monty Johnstone, 'What Kind of Communist Party History?' in *Our History Journal*, 4 (February 1979), pp. 5-9 (7)

<sup>748</sup> Martin Jacques, 'Why Study the History of the CP?' *Our History Journal*, 2 (July 1978), pp. 5-8 (6)

<sup>749</sup> Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), p. 164

<sup>750</sup> Jacques, 'Why Study the History of the CP?' p.6

<sup>751</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 209

members coming into the Party, as well as the increasing interest on all sides in the Communist Party.' This was unlikely to be the 'frank and balanced account' the Historians' Group had called for.<sup>752</sup> The 1957 History Commission resulted in the official party histories, written by James Klugman under "'Collective" Party control' with Klugman 'having to submit drafts to R. Palme Dutt (who vetted them with particular assiduity), Harry Pollitt (until his death in 1960), Johnny Campbell, Robin Page Arnot and Andrew Rothstein – with the requirement that all of them should be satisfied!<sup>753</sup> Hobsbawm believed that Klugman 'knew what was right, but shied away from saying it in public.'<sup>754</sup> Johnstone sought to demonstrate that Klugman began to speak out as he contemplated writing the third volume of the history. In a letter dated 16 June 1976 he wrote of his intention that the next history would include his '*own considered views of what was correct and what incorrect*' and would address the CPGB's relationship with the Comintern, dealing with the 'difficult periods' as well as the 'good periods'.<sup>755</sup> In the event, Klugman's death cut off this project but the third volume of the party's history was written by Noreen Branson with the 'co-operation' of the Executive Committee, but not under its control.<sup>756</sup>

Another major step was the publication in 1990 of the transcript of the leadership's debates over the onset of war in 1939, after many years of speculation about their contents. In 1979 the History Group had held a conference on the 1939 change of line and requested a copy of the stenogram of the debate from the Institute of Marxism-Leninism but 'drew a blank'. It was only in October 1987, with the changes resulting from Gorbachev's leadership, that a further request 'received a sympathetic response' and in 1989 the document was received by the British party.<sup>757</sup> It

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<sup>752</sup> Johnstone, 'What Kind of Communist Party History?', p. 5

<sup>753</sup> Ibid

<sup>754</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 209

<sup>755</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, p. 6. Original emphasis

<sup>756</sup> Jacques 'Why Study the History of the CP?', p. 8

<sup>757</sup> Monty Johnstone, 'Introduction' in Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War: The Verbatim Record of the*

was, according to Kevin Morgan, an 'exhilarating' discovery which allowed the individual personalities to speak 'like an old sepia photograph [which] suddenly becomes voluble and argumentative.'<sup>758</sup> This was particularly exciting for Morgan who had been frustrated by the 'curiously impersonal' tone of the official histories and by the striking lack of biographical material on party figures: 'Such were the Communist Party's loyalties and collective discipline that, even long after the event, [...] [n]ot only memoirs, obituaries and funeral odes, but periodicals, speeches, even the interviews given years later to oral historians, usually adhered to a convention of collective responsibility.'<sup>759</sup> In this sense, then, 1989 could be seen to have provided both the archival materials and the political space for truly analytical histories of the CPGB to be produced.

Like 1956, the events of 1989-91 could be seen as an *historical* crisis, calling into question both past and future. As *Our History Journal* put it:

It can be seen that our understanding of our history is very much conditioned by our expectations about the shape of the future and looks radically different after 1989 from what it did before. The past is not what it used to be.<sup>760</sup>

The Historians' Group's journal, *Our History Journal*, immediately announced that the next issue would be devoted to 'A review of the processes since the Russian Revolution which have led up to the present state of affairs'. This would 'aim especially to disentangle aspects of development which were intrinsic to the nature of the Soviet Union and its allied regimes from occasions where other decisions might have produced very different

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*Central Committee Meetings of 25 September and 2-3 October 1939* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990)

<sup>758</sup> Kevin Morgan, 'The CPGB and the Comintern Archives', *Socialist History Journal*, 2 (Autumn 1993), pp. 9-29 (10)

<sup>759</sup> Kevin Morgan, 'Parts of People and Communist Lives' in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds) *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2001), pp. 9-28 (12-14)

<sup>760</sup> Editorial, *Our History Journal*, 16 (November 1990), p.1



outcomes.' The editors also could not resist noting that 'The orientation of this journal for the last several years, to concentrate on the history of the international communist movement and to face its most discreditable aspects has been amply vindicated, for they have proved in the event to be very consequential.'<sup>761</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that the historical work of CP members did not stop with the dissolution of the party. The final issue of *Our History Journal* noted 'the firm intention of both the Historians' Group and the editor to continue publishing' not least because 'the requirement to explore and analyse socialist history has never been more urgently felt.'<sup>762</sup> In fact, publication did continue under the new name of *Socialist History Journal* and every attempt at continuity was made. The publication schedule was not interrupted and the first two issues of *Socialist History Journal* even continued the numbering of *Our History Journal*, appearing as numbers nineteen and twenty. It was not until 1993, when the new publication merged with *Our History*, that a new numbering system was adopted. Throughout this time, the *Journal* had continued to publish scholarly work on historical subjects, alongside analyses of the global crisis.<sup>763</sup> Analyses of the party also began to appear rather quickly, including Willie Thompson's *The Good Old Cause* in 1992 and Andrews, Fishman and Morgan's *Opening the Books* in 1995.<sup>764</sup> The work of writing the now 'unofficial' history of the party also continued with the final volume *Endgames and New Times* appearing in 2004.<sup>765</sup> The parallel tasks of analyzing and preserving the past can be seen in a Socialist History Society newsletter from November 1993, which both notified members of a

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<sup>761</sup> Editorial, *Our History Journal*, 15 (April 1990), p. 1

<sup>762</sup> 'Editorial: Back to the Drawing Board', *Our History Journal*, 18 (November 1991), pp. 1-3 (3)

<sup>763</sup> See for instance, Stephen Roberts, 'Thomas Cooper: a Victorian Working-class Writer', *Our History Journal*, 16 (November 1990), pp. 12-25; Rodney Hilton, 'Class Analysis of Feudal Society', *Our History Journal*, 17 (May 1991), pp. 33-37

<sup>764</sup> Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992); Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan (eds) *Opening the Books: Essays on the social and cultural history of British communism* (London: Pluto Press, 1995)

<sup>765</sup> Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The final years of British communism 1964-1991* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004)

forthcoming conference entitled 'What went wrong in the USSR and Eastern Europe?' and also asked them to consider coming forward for an oral history project, being undertaken with the CP Archive and Manchester University, 'building an archive of memoirs of CP members from all eras of the Party's history.'<sup>766</sup>

### A New Narrative

The expected progress of history had been disrupted, and so had its narrative, its certainties, its *shape*. Eric Hobsbawm's plans for *Age of Extremes* underwent a dramatic shift. Rather than a 'diptych' of 'Age of Catastrophe' and 'Golden Age', proposed to his publisher in 1988, Hobsbawm ended up writing a triptych with the years from 1973 re-cast as 'landslide':

What had changed was not the facts of world history since 1973 as I knew them, but the sudden conjunction of events in both East and West since 1989 which almost forced me to see the past twenty years in a new perspective.<sup>767</sup>

Even this about-turn was not drastic enough for some. Perry Anderson has suggested that Hobsbawm's picture of the post-war 'Golden Age' does not fit the evidence of violence and misery in those years, but is governed by his commitment to the central historical role of the 'initially gradual, and then hurtling descent of the Soviet experiment'.<sup>768</sup> Along with many others, Anderson himself insisted that understanding the true nature of the past was a precondition for the 'refoundation of the socialist project' and far more important than 'Mere repudiations'. He found comfort in Robin Blackburn's *After the Fall* which showed that 'Serious reflection on the political and intellectual legacy of the modern socialist movement [...] reveals many riches that were forgotten as well as roads that were mistaken'.<sup>769</sup>

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<sup>766</sup> Socialist History Society Newsletter, November 1993

<sup>767</sup> Ibid, p. 313

<sup>768</sup> Anderson, *Spectrum*, pp. 302; 314

<sup>769</sup> Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, p. 362

In 1978 Martin Jacques had suggested that an honest, evaluative history of the party would have the benefit of giving coherence to 'what would otherwise be [...] a disparate set of experiences and outlooks, traditions and ideologies, that exist within the Party.' It would be a positive experience, allowing members 'to understand that the Party actually has been through many changes and developments and shifts and [...] to understand it in terms of that process and not in any way to despise it'.<sup>770</sup> Thirteen years later, the final edition of *Marxism Today* (except for the special 1998 issue) attempted what could be seen as a version of that task. It combined articles on the party's troubled past with those on the political struggles still ahead. In typical *Marxism Today* style, the serious sat alongside the playful; the centrefold of the magazine was a boardgame entitled 'Moscow Gold', featuring such nuggets as 'The Party is over. Advance to the End of History (you can't miss it)' and 'Perestroika Prospect. Become a Designer Socialist Overnight. Advance to Mandelson Rise.' The rules also declared that 'To avoid competition there will be no winners. You have nothing to lose but your principles.'<sup>771</sup> This self-aware parody was a clear attempt to absorb the collapse of the CPGB into a new narrative structure.

The task of constructing a new narrative identity on both a personal and collective level necessarily involved gallows humour, just as it involved emotional repudiations of the past, denials of reality and claims to have issued warnings long ago. The New Times rhetoric of innovative, post-party, 'new' politics provided an alternative identity for those who wanted it. This offered an opportunity to be in tune with the times, to be on the side of history. Others began the work of unpicking and analysing the past because, as Willie Thompson argued, 'if there is to be any rebirth of the left in Britain or beyond, it surely has to start from a sober understanding, free from

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<sup>770</sup> Martin Jacques, 'Why Study the History of the CP?', p. 8

<sup>771</sup> Chris Granlund, 'Moscow Gold: You bought the magazine now play the game', *Marxism Today*, December 1991, pp. 32-33

sentiment or nostalgia, of the reasons why history has proved – so far – not to be on our side.<sup>772</sup>

A further level of analysis was concerned with what history would make of the communist experiment. How would it be treated by future historians? This was the 'crucial question' according to the editors of the *Socialist History Journal*: 'whether this failed enterprise, which has dominated, either positively or negatively, the history of the twentieth century, will ultimately serve as an inspiration to the future or as a dreadful warning.'<sup>773</sup> As early as 1992, Perry Anderson was trying to predict the 'possible futures' of socialism within the pages of history. Would it be regarded by future historians as akin to Jesuit experiments with egalitarian living in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Paraguay? Would it be able to perpetuate its message even as the movement fell by the wayside like the Levellers? Or would the fate of communism be more similar to Jacobinism or Liberalism? Would the CPGB's future be 'Oblivion, transvaluation, mutation, redemption'?<sup>774</sup> While Britain's communists had to resign themselves to no longer being at the vanguard of historical development, no longer *making history*, they could console themselves with the task of historical analysis. As Eric Hobsbawm put it, 'there is nothing which can sharpen the historian's mind like defeat'.<sup>775</sup>

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<sup>772</sup> Willie Thompson, 'End of Our History? The Terminus of the CPGB', *Socialist History Journal*, 19 (May 1992), pp. 3-6 (6)

<sup>773</sup> Thompson, Parker, Waite, 'Editorial, What Was Communism?', *Socialist History Journal*, 2 (Autumn 1993), pp. 1-5 (3)

<sup>774</sup> Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, p. 375

<sup>775</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998 [Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997]), p. 317

## CONCLUSIONS

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, in the period since the late 1970s both the Conservative and Labour parties can be seen to have gone through a significant shift in temporal positioning. Whereas the parties previously emphasised the duties which the past imposed upon the present (of preservation and of justice), it is now the present which is served by the past. Particular interpretations of the past are used to provide legitimacy for particular courses of action, to orient identity and to supply lessons for the present. The past is an ever-present rhetorical device, used both within and between parties in order to hold opponents accountable for their own (or their predecessors') actions and to claim legitimacy on the basis of past records. However, I have suggested that above and beyond these uses of specific narratives of the past, it is the overall sense of history as a *process* which really serves to confer authority on political activity. Political actors have a strong sense of themselves as *part* of history and this lends a particular strength to their calls to seize the moment and take action. Even in positioning their actions as a break in the ongoing narrative, party political actors have tended, paradoxically, to present this as the return to a different narrative based on a more accurate interpretation of the past.

Far from a complaint in the tradition of Ralph Miliband that Labour has been absorbed into a parliamentary narrative at odds with the experience of its supporters, I argue that this temporal positioning is in tune with wider cultural trends. Since the late 1970s, commentators have noted a growth in public nostalgia, whereby 'pastness' has come to denote 'authenticity'. This is mirrored by the political use of the past as a marker of sincerity, integrity and commitment. The flipside of this nostalgia is that the past is constructed as *past*. While a connection with one's roots may be desirable, it must be balanced by an avoidance of anachronism. To be perceived as 'stuck in the past' is a political liability. The result of these combined trends has been the closing down of the past as a political force, as discussed in chapter one;

instead it has been repackaged as a 'heritage' and celebrated for its very pastness.

At the start of this thesis, I suggested that parliamentary politics encourages a sense of lived continuity with the past. Moreover, the *appearance* of continuity is itself a source of authority and legitimation. This could be seen as an example of the aesthetic of pastness, which Fredric Jameson discussed in the early 1990s. Jameson suggested that postmodernity is characterised by an a-historicity, in which an authentic relationship to the past has been replaced by affective, personal encounters with pastness, which creates a 'whole new emotional groundtone' of 'intensities'.<sup>776</sup> He felt that 'nostalgia films' and historical novels operate 'a new connotation of "pastness" and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history'.<sup>777</sup> In the case of political parties, this aesthetic is reinforced by the political system itself. From the archaic rituals of Parliament, to the 'continuity effect' of longstanding political parties, the aesthetic of pastness underpins the political system. However, this is increasingly becoming the pastness of the 'beachcomber' and the 'antiquarian', derided by John Casey.<sup>778</sup> Previous understandings of the political past emphasised its capacity to make demands upon the present, from Casey's 'customs and pieties' to Raphael Samuel's radical 'history from below'. A past which can be picked up and put down at will, venerated then forgotten about does not retain any of this power. It is a political prop, not a political force. Instead, the parties now focus upon the requirements of the present (the need to fight campaigns, lead governments) and the possibilities of the future.

I have called this temporal attitude 'affirmative presentism'. It looks forward to a future and has a progressive belief in the power of the political process to bring about change. This is a significant shift from conservative pessimism

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<sup>776</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 6

<sup>777</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>778</sup> John Casey, 'Tradition and Authority', p. 85

but it does not share the utopian future-focused aspects of socialism either. Instead it is focused on the particular moment of the present, portrayed as the edge of the horizon, staring into an unknown future. Although I have suggested that the emphasis on parliament as a means of incremental progress has affinities with the whig interpretation of history, this is not a 'grand narrative' approach to history. It is characterised by an openness to the future and a willingness to re-interpret the past. Yet these reinterpretations involve a certain sleight of hand. While it has recently become common for politicians and commentators to borrow from the language of cultural theory in emphasising the need for parties to construct 'narratives',<sup>779</sup> the belief in a stable and knowable past, able to provide both models and warnings, remains remarkably consistent. Political actors, from Conservative right to Marxist left, display a marked suspicion of epistemic doubt.

We have seen that in the debates over the National Curriculum for History, postmodern doubt tended to be grouped together with leftwing 'history from below': both posed a threat to established, Conservative narratives of British history and nationhood. However, these were still knowable, usable pasts, in which it was possible to show how, when and why traditions had been invented and nationalisms forged. Conservatives and progressives simply relied upon two different usable pasts, telling different stories for different purposes. In fact, postmodernism was just as problematic for Marxist historians as for Conservatives. The problem, as Harvey Kaye outlined, was that in rejecting a teleological, ordered, comprehensible view of history, postmodernists were unable to conceive of a way of improving the world, 'of making *new* history, let alone new *forms* of history'.<sup>780</sup> Kaye, writing in 1991 saw the New Right and postmodern left arriving at a similar end point; both

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<sup>779</sup> See for instance, Peter Hain, 'Gordon, you are without a narrative', *Independent on Sunday*, 8 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/peter-hain-gordon-you-are-without-a-narrative-1639663.html>. Accessed 23.10.2009

<sup>780</sup> Harvey J Kaye, *The Powers of the Past: Reflections on the Crisis and the Promise of History* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 148. Original emphasis.

'deny reason to hope that the future could actually be different from the present.'<sup>781</sup> In contrast to Kaye, I would suggest that it is not only end-of-history and post-history thinkers who are unable to conceive of new political futures. This is the consequence of presentist parliamentary politics as described throughout this thesis. We have seen Martin L. Davies' argument that the historicised mindset sets the present within the frameworks of the past, making it always 'the same old thing'. More than this, it also imagines the future in the same way. Making history is therefore seen as making *more of the same*. Claims to be 'historic' should be understood as attempts to be set within an orderly line of similarly historic actions reaching from the known past into the projected future.

Moreover, while it is clear that political actors are determined that their actions be interpreted 'correctly' by future historians, there is also a sense of fatalism, almost of melancholy, about these efforts which betrays the knowledge that no single 'truth' exists – or at least that it cannot be captured by history. As Margaret Thatcher reflected when she donated her papers to the Churchill Archive Centre, 'even the fullest written record in my experience never conveys the essence of a crisis [...] the mood of the moment is lost. Tension and trouble [...] are efficiently smoothed away by the note-takers.'<sup>782</sup> This is not the creation of an historic mythologised self (that was done through her political practice). The papers represent what is left when that has myth been analysed – historicised - away.<sup>783</sup> However, Thatcher continued,

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<sup>781</sup> Ibid

<sup>782</sup> Margaret Thatcher, speaking at the opening of the new wing of the Churchill Archives Centre, 30 October 2002. Available at: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=109441>. Accessed 26.11.2009

<sup>783</sup> The 'reality effect' of archives is itself a fascinating subject, which I have explored in Emily Robinson, 'Authenticity in the Archive: Historical Encounters with "Pastness"', in Rune Graulund (ed), *Desperately Seeking Authenticity*, (Copenhagen Doctoral School, 2010, forthcoming)



I would caution against politicians and historians imagining that a knowledge of the facts and access to past experience alone provides the answers to the most important questions. Convictions drawn from outside politics are also required in order to take the right political decisions. Our beliefs, and indeed our instincts must anchor us firmly, if we are not to capsize in the daily storms of office. There is more to leadership than enlightened pragmatism – but perhaps the papers in the Churchill Archives Centre will suggest that too.<sup>784</sup>

Even if a single past existed and an accurate knowledge of it were possible, it would not be enough. It is from 'beliefs', 'instincts' and indeed from 'outside politics' that political convictions are drawn. Thatcher seems here to view the past as the source only of 'enlightened pragmatism' based upon the 'lessons of history'. While this is valuable, she counsels, it can only take us so far. The image of the politician rooted in a present moment is clear.

Under Thatcher and Blair it was precisely the *political* past which was closed down. On the one hand, the past is seen as both knowable and comparable to the present – the source of lessons and examples. On the other, it is treated as distant, tame, even somewhat exotic, to be admired or rejected, investigated or invoked. Labour's 2006 centenary celebrations, for instance, managed to generate interest in the party's past and served as a focus for demonstrating continuity and solidarity. They did not however, leave 'a lasting impression' on the party. The aspect of ongoing historical political education which Dianne Hayter had advocated 'soon became just a means of promoting best practice in electioneering'.<sup>785</sup> Active, living memory is a political liability, able to provoke unpredictable emotions or uncontrollable judgements; an historicised past can be invoked and then forgotten.

Yet while the more distant past has been closed down, the political events of the past three decades themselves remain active both as memories and as

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<sup>784</sup> Ibid

<sup>785</sup> Dianne Hayter, 'Practioners: The PLP 1906-2006', pp. 162; 161

strands of ongoing narratives. The New Labour project is both a focus for self-conscious nostalgia and a continuing political reality, shaping the possible courses of action open to the government. The Conservative Party remains caught between past and future, reminded at every turn of the (still remarkably live and active) legacy of Thatcherism, even as it tries to repeat the success of New Labour's own supposed break with history. The 'progressive consensus' may have fallen out of fashion, but it remains a potent narrative, which may rise again with the prospect of a hung parliament, whereas the division between 'social liberalism' and 'classical liberalism' may yet return to unsettle the Liberal Democrats. In the midst of an economic crisis which has reopened the seemingly closed question of socialism vs. capitalism, and during the run up to a general election which may bring the Blair/Brown era to a juddering halt, any pronouncements on the pasts and futures of contemporary party politics seem unwise. In his first Prime Ministers' Questions as Conservative leader, David Cameron taunted Blair, 'I want to talk about the future. He was the future once.'<sup>786</sup> Whether Cameron will himself become 'the future' and how either Cameron or Blair will be remembered by future historians remains unknown. Their awareness that they *are* 'history', however, inevitably shapes their actions in the present.

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<sup>786</sup> David Cameron, House of Commons PMQs, 7 December 2005, Column 861

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