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'What kind of people are you?' Labour, the people and the 'new political history'

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Like their subject, historians of Labour have tended to be attached to tradition and sceptical of novelty – in short, rather conservative. Newer tendencies are nonetheless evident. These result, in part, from changes in Labour. New Labour's constitutional reforms, its engagement with issues of national identity and communication skills have been concurrent with recent work on the party's past in such areas (Chadwick 1999; Ward 1998; Wring forthcoming). These historiographical shifts have been accompanied in terms of method by what for the past decade or so has been known as the 'new political history'. This embraces work associated with the 'linguistic turn' and more generally a rethinking of the category of 'the political' (Lawrence 1998: chapter 3; Stedman Jones 1983a).

These developments have raised numerous questions about established ways of understanding Labour's history. It questions the extent to which politics can be seen as the upshot of social forces – an assumption familiar in studies relating Labour's fortunes and character to (primarily) the industrial working class, one famously advanced in Eric Hobsbawm's essay 'The forward march of labour halted?' (Hobsbawm 1981). This 'electoral sociology' approach is evident in arguments about the growth of class politics as an ingredient in Labour's rise, notably in work by McKibbin, Hobsbawm (Kirk 1991) and Laybourn (1995). It features, too, in debates about Labour's 'decline' since the 1950s, in political science literature about class dealignment, fragmentation of values and the diminished size of the working class. Common to both are the ideas that voters' attitudes are essentially shaped by economic and social structures, that they are politically socialised by those structures and that successful parties must respond to such developments (Hindess 1971).

Balancing this stress on the influence of social and economic change has been a recent emphasis on political factors – party, policies and ideas. Curtice (1994: 41–2) has argued that the British party system was in important ways immune to social change and that 'rather than the helpless plaything of sociological forces, post-war British politics has been vitally shaped by political choices'. Labour's early growth, post-war difficulties and renewal as New Labour were, then, much more of its own making. By this model voters made an 'instrumental' or 'rational choice'

of the party whose policy or governing performance was most likely to advance or had best defended their interests. Akin to electoral sociology, a close relationship between voters and parties is supposed. Attempts to interrelate expressive and instrumental interpretations have made the manner in which Labour addressed social change the factor that influenced attitudes towards the party (Fielding 1995a: 19–31; Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985: 170–5).

The 'new political history' shares much with the latter approach. It emphasises parties' attempts to build constituencies of support by the interpretation they place on change and 'interests.' As Lawrence and Taylor (1997: 18) maintain, critical here is that voters' interests and identities are not assumed to pre-exist their political expression and that parties should be seen as attempting 'to construct viable forms of social and political identity.' Schwarz (1998: 154) argues that 'in part the job of politics is to speak to those whose social positions are widely divergent and to project an imaginary community in which the people would wish to imagine themselves.' Parties are not reactive, but active agents. Language is important in this, but so are political communication, internal and informal party culture, and how these define and construct a party's audience – in short, political culture.

Besides theoretical shifts, regional studies stressing the specificity of social structures and the contingencies of local politics (like organisation or electoral marginality), and excavating a sense of popular politics in practice have further suggested that social explanations will not alone suffice in explaining political character and patterns (Savage 1987; Tiratsoo 2000).

But the 'new political history' does more than counter social explanations by restoring agency to party and political factors. Most ambitiously, at issue is what the category 'politics' encapsulates and how it is represented and contested. Germane to this chapter, the proximity (besides the ordering) of party–voter relations are problematised – although in the hands of Lawrence and Taylor (1997) electoral sociology's influence over historians is more rigorously critiqued than is rational choice (despite this also supposing a close fit between voters and party). Equations of the two are destabilised by seeing politics as a mutative category – whose methods, audiences and contexts were fluid. Situating 'politics' more broadly acknowledges its limits, its often non-pivotal place in everyday life and the dissonance as much as the dialogue between politics and the popular.

The 'new political history' alerts historians to the manifold relations between politics and the people. If parties are more than reflectors of social change, voters are more than passive receptors of ideas. The ability of parties to construct or mobilise support was not limitless. Parties were not at liberty to construct politics irrespective of their supposed audience and were also constrained by their lack of resources and by the resistance of voters to party appeals. Close correlation between party and people is further tempered by their partial knowledge of each other. Berrington (1992) suggests that there was a 'dialogue of the deaf' between political elites and the electorate, each working with perceptions of the other informed by myth, hunch and assumption.

Voting, then, might be regarded as a compromise, representing some, not all, 'interests.' Hobsbawm (1982: 27) has argued that 'modern political choice is not a

constant process of selecting men or measures, but a single or infrequent choice between packages, in which we buy the disagreeable part of the contents because there is no other way of getting the rest'. (Hobsbawm adds that while his argument 'applies to all parties . . . non-communist ones have generally made things easier for their intellectual adherents by refraining from formal commitments on such subjects as genetics or the composition of symphonies'.) For historians, votes are then a weak guide to how well a party's version of events is received, since many voters have an imperfect knowledge of parties – and even where voters are more conversant with parties votes cannot be read as a full endorsement of everything a party stands for. Thus parties may enjoy electoral success with a fragile, rather than mass, popular following. Organisation and communication were in this respect as vital components of political discourse as were policy and rhetoric.

Given this relative autonomy of politics, it follows that what a party says about social change is a more reliable guide to that party and its vision of its constituency than to social change. Also, how parties conceived of the people was at least as important to understanding politics as was what the people were *really* like. As Lawrence (1997: 97) suggests, 'the perception of social reality among an imperfectly informed elite [of politicians] mattered far more than the objective processes of structural change taking place around them'.

This is not far removed from a 'high politics', or 'primacy of politics', approach. In this the 'centre of attention', as one of its practitioners – Bentley (1996: 13) – has outlined, are the preoccupations of leading politicians. This focus on the 'people at the top', policy-making circles and parliamentary elites, while confined to a narrow sample of opinion, was conscious, like the 'new political history', of the self-defining aspect to politics – that it was more than a signal of external social factors. It was the intellectual universe and assumptions of politicians (including the notion that politics was ultimately a meter of social change) that were vital.

As Morgan (1983: 285–7) comments, this approach 'applied most naturally to the established Gilbertian world of the Conservative and Liberal parties'. It was of less value for understanding Labour, which conceived of itself as a grass-roots movement, countering 'from below' this very establishment and privilege. In other ways, institutional studies of Labour centring on the balance of power between Left, Right and unions, or emphasising how Labour has become mired in 'parliamentarism', have been similarly sourced (from party conference, parliament and leading figures and thinkers) and have duplicated something of the 'high' approach.

One interpretation of Labour thus questioned is the left-wing critique that Labour(ism) thwarted the radical potential of the working class. In accounts, like Miliband's 1961 *Parliamentary Socialism*, of Labour's limited progress towards socialism, popular opinion is a strong, silent presence. *Pace* Miliband, recent work on Labour and popular attitudes, like Fielding, Thompson and Tiratsoo's *England Arise!* (1995: 211), has asked why the view 'that the people's politics may have inhibited Labour's attempt to build socialism has never been seriously countenanced' by historians. Such revisionism has been characterised by critics as 'blaming the working class for the failings of the Labour leadership' (Thorpe 1997: 4).

The 'new political history' is, then, useful in understanding Labour within a less reductive framework than either the 'high' (emphasising elite influence) or 'from below' (privileging subaltern forces) approaches and in more novel terms than the Left–Right positions adopted within Labour. Attentiveness to the interactions of popular and 'high' politics also entails a more catholic range of sources.

But for all that there remains common territory, as Pedersen (2002: 40–4) suggests, between the 'new political history' of Lawrence and Taylor and recent developments in 'high politics'. The focus on political culture stems from more than just the linguistic turn or critiques of Marxist and social-based accounts of politics. Moreover, anticipations of the newer approaches – notably alertness to the fragility of voter–party relations (if uncertain of how to treat this) – are evident in older accounts. I illustrate this by mining an intentional mix of historical works to probe the novelty as much as the uses of newer approaches. In addition, proposing a more contingent relationship between Labour and the people, something I contend was more generic to politics than historians have generally allowed and more than simply a function of differences between labour movement and working-class culture, I argue that Labour has often imagined the people to be a brake on its progress.

Labour and the people

Touring England in 1954, journalist and social commentator Harry Hopkins encountered classic immigrant city politics in Liverpool: 'rafts bound together by strands of race, religion, sectional interests and jealousy, afloat on an ocean of ignorance and apathy'. His critical observations on voters were shared by and acquired from local politicians. Of a Labour MP on a depressed housing estate – who otherwise could 'not be accused of a lack of sympathy with the working-class tenants' – Hopkins asked: 'Why not plant trees?' The MP replied: 'Trees? Oh, they'd pull 'em up in no time. Why, you cannot even keep a light bulb in a corridor two minutes' (1957: 133–4, 124).

Such expressions of disappointment in the people, for their failure to live up to the vision and hopes socialists had of them, were legion. Labour's relations with the people were troublesome for a party claiming to be *The Voice of the People* (Labour Party 1956). As one local activist bluntly put it, Labour canvassers had to 'learn to suffer fools gladly or they would go crackers' (Lamb 1953: 190–2).

Disaffection with the people – the supposed agents of socialism or the beneficiaries of Labour's efforts – is recognisable in Bevin's annoyance at their 'poverty of desire' (Drucker 1979: 21) or Douglas Jay's refrain that 'the man from Whitehall really does know better what is good for the people than the people themselves' (1937: 317). It is also an age old disaffection. Bevin's phrase was borrowed from John Burns who in a 1902 pamphlet – 'Brains Better than Bets or Beer' – argued that 'the curse of the working class is the fewness of their wants, the poverty of their desires' (quoted in Waters 1990: 47).

Sometimes it wasn't so much their *lack* of desire as what the workers *did* desire that concerned socialists. The mass media (a particular villain) was held to be not

only deceiving people, but pandering to their trivial interests. *The Daily Chloroform* and the *Obscurer* were popular papers in Tressell's symbolically titled setting for *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, 'Mugsborough'. In 1921, former Independent Labour Party (ILP) activist Shaw Desmond's equally instructively titled *Labour: The Giant with Feet of Clay* quoted Robert Blatchford arguing that what 'was troubling the factory girl was not the downtrodden proletariat or theory behind International Socialism, but . . . what the Duke said to the Duchess in the conservatory' (1921: 38).

Labour was as uneasy as the Conservatives at the prospects of mass democracy after 1918. Ramsay MacDonald had long worried at the fitness of Britons to participate in democracy, believing them too swayed by emotion or mass psychology. Social progress required reform of the people – 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear' was how he put it in 1919 (quoted in Macintyre 1977: 483). Labour was also disappointed not to reap greater electoral benefits from the expanded suffrage – in *The Faith of a Democrat* (1928) Philip Snowden complained: 'the people for whom [the socialist] works and sacrifices are often indifferent and seldom show any gratitude' (quoted in Macintyre 1977: 479).

If *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* is any guide – as its enduring popularity with the Left suggests it to be – such was their disdain at popular ignorance that socialists were prone to doubt the entitlement to vote of many. 'With feelings of contempt' for his workmates' conversation, the socialist Owen berated Crass (for admitting 'I don't never worry my 'ed about politics'): 'You are not fit to vote' (Tressell 1991: 21–7). Such prejudices were still aired privately after 1918. For a member of the Socialist Vanguard Group, a 1940s' Labour sect, it seemed contrary to socialism that 'the ignorant masses should be able to veto the decisions of the more intelligent few' (Hadfield 1946). More common were calls to make voting compulsory, in despair at apathy. A Labour canvasser in Lowestoft during the 1950s felt that this would allow time for 'the important work of political education', and dissentients concurred with the aim of establishing voting as a 'social obligation' (Lowestoft Labour Party 1958).

Even at the apogée of Labour's success in the 1940s, *England Arise!* has argued, popular attitudes proved resistant to the sorts of moral transformation the party's socialism attempted and envisaged. Popular pastimes were subject to criticism. In the affectionate 1951 account *This Football Business* – applauding the 'brilliant football' of 'Middlesbrough and Spurs' – Huddersfield MP (and fan) Bill Mallalieu outlined less sports-friendly thinking, prone to surface on the Left. Reviewing 'the spectators', he noted that some thought 'watching is a sign of decadence, that watching other people play instead of playing oneself is demoralising, that the post-war increase in the number of spectators is a sign that Britain is riding down the circus path of Ancient Rome' (1951: 4–5). Mallalieu's Bevanite colleague Ian Mikardo was more forthright, condemning gambling (and by inference gamblers) in *A Mug's Game* (1950). Baker (1996: 99, 119) claims that the Attlee Governments 'did not always consider that which interested the working class, like greyhound racing, 'to . . . be in the best interests of the working class', and they 'despaired of some aspects of the way of life of those they "represented"; politically but not socially'.

Nor did the Second World War always have the radical effect commonly supposed. In Wesker's 1960 play *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, Ada announces that she and Dave will give up politics after the war:

I'm not so sure I love them [the people] enough to want to organize them . . . Six years . . . working with young girls who are . . . lipsticked, giggling morons . . . Dave's experience is the same – fighting with men whom he says did not know what the war was about. Away from their wives they behaved like animals . . . the service killed any illusions Dave may have had about the splendid and heroic working class. (Quoted in Hayman 1970: 25)

Evidence suggests that these critical impulses peaked in the 1950s. Denis Healey asked an audience during the Suez crisis: 'What kind of people are you to allow a liar and a cheat to be your prime-minister?' (quoted in Epstein 1964: 140) Such sentiments were most apparent in the Left's unease at popular affluence – consumerism, home ownership, television and 'pop' culture. For Dick Crossman, 'the luxuries, gadgets, entertainments and packaged foodstuffs which so many workers enjoy in our affluent societies' were 'irrelevant . . . immoral . . . vulgar' (quoted in Dodd 1999: 171). No less than did poverty, affluence excited the Left's disdain. Disapproval of poverty slid easily into condescension of prosperity, those experiencing it and the popular tastes it was inferred to have revealed. J. B. Priestley's derogatory synonym for the consumer society, 'admass', was shorthand also for the masses' susceptibility to it. The equation was made countless times in Priestley's *New Statesman* columns: 'If our papers are trivial . . . it is because our people are trivial' (quoted in Black 2003: see chapters 4, 5 and 8).

The Left struggled to articulate a politics of pleasure. Dodd (1999: 172–3) has suggested, noting the popularity with the Left of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and its lament for passing working-class values, that Labour 'preferred its supporters . . . heroically labouring rather than frivolously playing'. The Left's cultural and leisure preferences, and its strictures on what the people needed, carried little authority (and not a little authoritarianism) given the expansion of popular choice. Need came more easily to its vocabulary than choice. 'Wrong' choices and people's right to make them (rather than the 'right' choices being an obligation) were the price of highly prized liberties in a liberal, pluralist society, not least in a Cold War context (Weight 1994).

From the socialist mind emerged a familiar figure – the 'affluent worker' – a consumerist progeny of the Labour Aristocrat, born as the empire passed away, but still a signifier of the corrupting effects of capitalism and the corruptibility of the people (Black 2003 124–54). As a construction of the socialist imagination the 'affluent worker' was a recurring demon. The secretary of Oldham Labour Party estimated in 1908 there were 'many hundreds of mill-workers in Oldham who own their own houses, also have shares in mills and it is this class of workers that our opponents play on'. To 'know that the working class in Oldham are . . . the best paid in Great Britain' was to 'understand why we don't move so quickly' (Olechnowicz 2000: 10).

The idea that materialism corrupted or waylaid workers from exercising their rightful political consciousness was accompanied by a host of less attractive

characters making clear socialist suspicions of the people: in the 1950s, 'Jimmy Green' (green by both name and political nature); and, between the wars, 'Henry Dubb' ('Quair' 1953: 139). The gendering of these epitomes relays something of the pre-1918 assumptions current in party culture, although women (notably as consumers) were regularly singled out for criticism. Francis (1997: 217) argues that Jay's 'Whitehall gentleman' revealed 'hidden assumptions about the essential "infantilism" of women.' According to Macintyre (1977: 487–8) Dubb 'represented the apathetic mass whom Labour could never convert', but also 'consoled the elect in their conviction that they were right and their audience manifestly dim-witted'. Despite projecting a less-than-flattering image of cloth-capped voters, Dubb featured in Labour propaganda. 'Labour's Own Press Campaign', securing *Daily Herald* sales, showed Dubb being clubbed on the head by a press baron – the cerebral consequences of buying the baron's paper (Labour Party and Trades Union Congress 1929).

Disappointment at post-war social change was a *leitmotif* of activist nostalgia. Arthur Barton depicted 'Uncle Jim' in his 1967 novel, *Two Lamps in Our Street*:

He saw slums wiped out . . . council houses multiplied . . . a forest of television aerials and car of sorts at every other house . . . the bairns' bairns come down the street in pseudo-Edwardian finery where their ragged parents had played. And he puzzled over the emptiness of heart and mind that a security beyond his modest hopes had brought . . . An old fighter whose victory had turned sour . . . 'What went wrong, hinney?' he asked. (Quoted in McCord 1979: 260–1)

Annoyance at what the people *didn't* do, rather than what they *did*, remained common. Labour's *Leeds Weekly Citizen's* columnist 'Candida' (1953) argued that on price rises the Conservatives were able to 'trick' the people, because too many 'expect so little of life and ask far, far too little'. It is in this context that Hobsbawm's review of Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* in *New Left Review* should be read. Agreeing that parliamentarism and its leaders ('sheep in sheep's clothing') constrained Labour's radicalism, he added that 'a fundamental weakness of the movement' was 'the damned modesty of the British worker's demands' (Hobsbawm 1961: 64–6).

If laments peaked in the 1950s, they were not extinct in later years. O'Farrell's blithe account (1998) of the 1980s' Labour Party shows that a range of prejudices and assumptions about lifestyle continued to flourish. Tony Benn was heard to express 'disgust at the vulgar decoration of recently purchased council houses' (Dodd 1999: 171). All told, this mode of thought calls to mind Brecht's 1952 poem *The Solution*:

Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another? (Quoted in Rosen and Widgery 1996: 95)

Short of so doing, what *could* Labour do if the people didn't behave as the party hoped? As argued here, it could castigate them. Those blaming voters for Labour's election defeat in 1959 reminded Hugh Gaitskell 'of Oscar Wilde's remark: "The play was a great success, but the audience was a failure"' (Labour Party 1959: 106). The State, Jay's Whitehall experts, offered another recourse from the people's perceived shortcomings. Orwell highlighted the dilemma this posed: 'In the popular regard Labour is the party that stands for . . . a free health service . . . free milk for schoolchildren', he noted in 1949, 'rather than the party that stands for socialism' (quoted in Shelden 1992: 436–7). His fear was that without deeper popular support, Labour would be tempted to introduce change summarily. To Michael Young, the 1945 manifesto's chief author, Labour did seem to be erring from its supporters towards bureaucratic solutions, and he suggested a vacant cabinet seat to represent the 'unknown constituent' (*Guardian*, 16 January 2002). Herbert Morrison worried about the popular response to Labour's efforts and whether 'human imperfections will convert the dream of the reformers into just another bit of bureaucratic routine' (quoted in Fielding 1995b: 24). Public ownership, notably in 1950s' debates about commercial television, was in Labour's mind a device not only for economic democracy but for the cultural control and improvement of the people – to protect them (and Labour) from their own tastes (Black 2001).

England Arise! proposes that Labour was less bureaucratic than critics (Left and Right) have suggested. However, the Left's officiousness was not only a feature of its statism. A 1919 ILP poster, for instance, illustrated socialist change in terms of 'a grammar lesson' – the shift from 'my wealth' to 'our wealth' – that required the 'possessive case' be 'correctly used' (Independent Labour Party 1919). Clever as this was, the Left could easily come across as syntactic pedants or as self-righteous. Equally, attempts to encourage participation in civil society came up against the indifference of the majority and a generally unfavourable political culture. The fate met by alternative left-wing offerings hints at this. Travel, sports or cultural projects – from Clarion cyclists to Wesker's Centre 42 – invariably floundered against commercial competition and majority opinion or functioned as marginal sub-cultures alongside rather than counter to the mainstream.

Another response was to incorporate into its strategy the fallibilities Labour perceived in its audience. Tiratsoo (2000: 295–6) argues that as early as the 1920s Labour was aware of its limited appeal among urban workers and of the need to compound this with other support. Shifts in Labour's publicity (television, posters and modern marketing) from the 1960s took place as its circumspect opinion of voters lessened resistance to new techniques. Much as Labour disliked it, so it was argued, 'the average Labour-inclined ITV-viewing voter has got to be got at in the style to which he has become accustomed – simply, repetitively, irrationally' (Rowland 1960: 351). The weaknesses Labour perceived in its audience were to be an axis of its publicity (Black 2003: 155–87).

Theories

The New Left also theorised Labour's shortcomings in relation to those of the working class. Perry Anderson's article 'Origins of the present crisis' (1992: 33–7) proposed that 'in England a supine bourgeoisie produced a supine proletariat', with 'an immovable corporate class consciousness' but 'almost no hegemonic ideology'. This defensive consciousness and the paucity of theory were embodied in Labour, and its limitations were then for Anderson those of the material with which it worked. In short, 'the density and specificity of English working-class culture . . . limited its political range and checked the emergence of a more ambitious socialism'. Anderson's approach has been influential, notably on Stedman Jones's early work. Stedman Jones held that 'with the foundation of the Labour Party', in 1900, 'the now enclosed and defensive world of working-class culture had in effect achieved its apotheosis' (1983b: 238).

Concluding *Classes and Cultures*, McKibbin (1998: 534–5) echoes those themes. The reforming scope of the Attlee Governments was 'so circumscribed', McKibbin argues, because 'the expressed wishes of Labour voters were not much less circumscribed'. Labour's 1945 voters remained culturally conservative, more content with commercial culture than alternatives, and had little interest in reforming 'civil society'. Labour's failure was to not create a more conducive political culture – either constitutionally or by challenging the institutions and the mores at large in civil society.

Labour's social base, in short, governed its actions. This framework leaves little space for the frustrations expressed when Labour's ambitions conflicted with its constituency's, outlined in this chapter. But it does explain why, elsewhere, McKibbin (1990: 34–5, n.104) finds the 'popularity' of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* 'almost inexplicable', given its critical tone towards working-class attitudes. Yet this was the very source of its popularity – that Tressell's socialist character Owen voiced the doubts many on the Left harboured about the masses, their tastes and struggles with these. 'Leninist tract' Tressell's work may be, but such cultural elitism and moral (not to mention political) vanguardism were not confined to Marxist circles.

The pervasiveness of these critical sentiments derives from their eclecticism. Fabian faith in the dispassionate expert and non-conformism are well-established parts of Labour's cultural make-up. Collini (1991: 83) has traced 'the slightly patronizing tone and somewhat aggressive personal austerity' that were 'distinctive features of many of the Labour Party's intellectuals . . . until at least the 1950s' to ideas of altruism and service that from the late Victorian period 'enjoyed a long life among "progressive" members of the educated class'. Another Victorian liberal inheritance was a belief in elite, 'high' culture above commercial, mass, popular culture (Waters 1990: 191–5).

Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) mordantly imprecated the personal foibles (like dress or diet) of socialists, which he felt derived from Liberal non-conformism. The Left, as Wilson (1983) has it, long wore questions of fashion uneasily – whether discarding them as simply trivial and superficial or, donning the critical

theory of the Frankfurt School, applying them in critique of mass culture. Its puritanism meant that 'the charge of socialist dreariness' stuck. Socialist bugbears have been various – Hollywood, alcohol, debt and suburbia, among others. Samuel (1988) has highlighted attempts to escape materialist living, moral fads – the 'simple life', temperance, social purity – in socialist sub-culture, arguing that socialists were a 'people apart', convinced that they knew better – moral absolutists not pluralists. For Macintyre (1977: 484) Labour had a positivist view of human evolution from a primitive to rational mindset, which would account for its rhetorical references to the herd-like masses. For Fielding (2001) Labour's politics by mid-century adhered to a particular vision of the electorate – optimistic, worthy, but highly partial and disabled by post-war social change. Widgery (1989: 115) complained that at the close of the 1970s the Left was defining 'the political' too narrowly, and lacked 'cultural variety in communicating its ideas' to appeal to emotional besides economic interests.

Popular(?) politics

As the New Left demonstrated, Labour was not unique in exhibiting these critical qualities. Across the Western European Left, post-war affluence was commonly sniffed at (Sassoon 1997: 196). In America, too, Richard Ellis (1998: 73, 275) has highlighted a recurring tendency towards 'illiberal egalitarianism' in Left, radical movements from abolitionism through progressivism to the 1960s' New Left. Whilst reformers 'blame oppressive institutions for the current degradation . . . of people', this 'often seeps through to disdain for the people themselves, who appear quite content to live lives that to egalitarians seem shallow and inauthentic, materialistic and selfish'. Thumbing one's nose at the masses, however characteristic of protest culture, rarely assisted a mass movement.

In Britain mistrust of voters was not hard to detect among Conservatives. In 1933 Austin Hudson, chair of the Conservative London Metropolitan Area, bemoaned the party's supposed supporters: 'It is amazing to me to find the number of wealthy men and women who would be prepared to lose quite large sums of money at cards, yet who will not even subscribe £1 a year to assist those . . . fighting a battle in which they are so vitally interested'. Hudson had 'reckoned without the apathy of the average "Conservative"' (*The Times*, 4 April 1933). In Davies's pithy account of popular politics in the Calder Valley during the 1997 election – one voter tells: 'I'll be voting . . . I'll decide how when I've got five minutes' – a Conservative admitted that 'calling the electorate naïve' (which Davies felt explained much about that party's defeat) 'was not, for an aspiring politician, too clever' (1998: 203, 277, 299).

If particularly pressing for Labour's claim to be the people's party, elitism and disparagement of 'the people' were clearly endemic to British political culture. It was ingrained in the benign façade of the constitution (Colls 1998). Bagehot's *The English Constitution* of 1867 held government to be best rendered by 'the educated "ten thousand"', in comparison to whom the people were 'narrow-minded, unintelligent, incurious' (1983: 63, 246–51). Crossman (1963: 56–7) introduced a 1963

edition of Bagehot. Though optimistic that the ‘passivity of the people’ might soon pass, he noted post-war affluence had seen new concentrations of power occur ‘unnoticed by an indifferent electorate which behaves with that deference Bagehot claimed to be the essential precondition of political stability in a free society’.

If, as Taylor (2000) proposes, Labour was more attached (as a moderniser) to the constitution than has been assumed, it certainly absorbed some of its prejudices. Morrison, with Crossman among the party’s chief constitutional reformers, discloses some in his doting account *Government and Parliament*. In the section ‘Public opinion’, Morrison (1959: 169) inclined towards ‘a respect and not a contempt for the general body of good citizens.’ But (echoing MacDonald’s misgivings) where the people became ‘swept by an emotion’ which ‘leads them to wrong conclusions’ (regarding his decision as home secretary to end the Mosleys’s detention) Morrison turned to the ‘less sympathetic language’ of Liberal William Harcourt. Harcourt advised that, ‘to be firm when the vulgar are undecided, to be calm in the midst of passion . . . are the characteristics of those who are fit to be the rulers of men’.

If socialists were ‘people apart’, this was augmented by the otherness of politics itself. For Berrington (1992: 72) this boiled down to the fact that ‘the politician is a politician’ and thus ‘will be psychologically untypical of the electorate’, because while ‘for ordinary voters, politics is often peripheral; for the MP it is the chief, perhaps the only, interest in life’. As a function of the minority character of politics *per se*, this was true of elites and activists alike. Political sociologist Rose (1965: 94) estimated that one in every 250 electors was a party activist. Based around a study of Brighton’s Kemptown district, Forester (1973 and 1976: 99) found ‘constituency Labour parties’ to ‘have only played a limited role in the community’. Roberts’s account of early twentieth-century Salford likewise stressed politics’ limited presence. The ‘Conservative Club, except . . . at election times, didn’t appear to meddle with politics at all’ and was more ‘notable . . . for a union jack in the window and . . . brewer’s dray at the door’ (Roberts 1973: 16–17, 28). Most paid scant attention to the Marxist ‘rangers’ because ‘the problems of the “proletariat”, they felt, had little to do with them’. Despite this (and thereby emphasising how Labour’s electoral support was not contingent upon a strong appreciation of its policies) Labour’s support grew after the war and its 1923 triumph was wildly celebrated.

The limits to formal participation curbs reading politics as a barometer of social change or popular interests. Rose (1965: 93) hazarded that ‘the proportion of the adult population actively participating in politics’ was ‘scarcely higher’ than it had been before 1832. Labour might aspire to regard ‘electors, not as voting fodder to be shepherded to a polling station . . . but as partners in a common enterprise’, as Tawney put it (Forester 1976: 57), but apathy made this hard to manage. Labour was frustrated by the ‘apolitical sociability’ – the notion that ‘it was the Labour Party which dragged “politics” into everything, which took everything so “seriously”’ – which McKibbin holds (1998: 96–8) was characteristic of middle-class mores and an inter-war Conservatism that contrived to ‘not talk about politics much’. Yet while McKibbin’s (revealing) opinion that ‘never to talk about politics

or religion is . . . never to talk about two of the most interesting subjects in human history' might appeal to historians of politics – would, historically, most Britons share such enthusiasm?

Historians might decode 'apathy' in terms of activists' frustration or popular mistrust of party (or, as McKibbin infers, in terms of Labour's reticence). They might also situate it in terms of the limits to popular interest in politics or to a participatory political culture. In his account of inter-war leisure Jones (1986: 162–3) notes how attempts to pose a popular alternative to the pub, football ground and racecourse failed because 'the majority of workers . . . had neither heard about socialist recreational organizations nor bothered themselves with Labour's attitudes to the theatre or cinema.' Assessing Labour's encouragement of involvement in town planning decisions in the 1940s, Tiratsoo (1998: 152–3) has concluded that it was not only 'the character of the local planning process', but that 'popular attitudes acted to constrain rather than facilitate Labour plans'.

Popular attitudes notwithstanding, parties often did not measure up to voters' expectations. Local elections in April 1970 saw *The Times*' letters' page illuminated by grumbling: '[A] lot is said about the apathy of the *constituents*. What about the apathy of the *candidates*?' A new voter (the voting age was cut to 18 in 1969) wondered, 'with such apathy on the part of the parties . . . how can they . . . complain about a similarly unimpassioned response on the part of the electorate?' Birmingham Borough Labour Party's chief organiser Richard Knowles found this 'less than fair', and retorted that 'the candidate and his friends are doing voluntary work for the community'. An Edgware voter was 'surprised that so many appear mystified by this apathy', as his 'experience . . . living in London for . . . 70 years' was that it was 'hard to find what difference either party makes to the day to day life of the private citizen' (*The Times*, 11, 13 and 14 February 1970).

Labour politicians discerned the gap between politics and everyday life. 'We must face it', Gaitskell (1954: 3, 10) admitted, 'politics is still looked upon in many quarters as a slightly odd, somewhat discreditable . . . occupation.' Bus conductors, Labour's soon-to-be-leader noted, announced Parliament Square by crying '[A]nyone here for the gas house?' Yet, ultimately, he 'suspected that the public view of [politics] as insincere . . . is due more than anything to a failure to realise the nature of party system'. In other words, Gaitskell believed the limits to politics lay in popular thinking not political discourse. Differences between political and popular interests had ramifications. Squaring the interests of members and voters was a thankless task for party leaders. Jefferys (1999: xiv–xv) has noted that (excepting MacDonald before 1931) the 'popularity among the party faithful' of Labour leaders has been 'in inverse relationship to the standing of a leader among the voters at large'. Wilson and Blair commanded more popular support, but less party affection, than Foot or Hardie.

As evident are tensions between Labour as a people's voice and as a socialist voice or, as Lawrence (1998: 263) has pointed out, between a desire to represent the people and to improve them. Belief in humans' capacity to improve presupposed a current need for improvement. Labour's progressive dilemma was to articulate reform without criticising (and risking losing the support of) those they hoped

reform would benefit – this often made building alliances of support difficult. Prescriptive and ethical language allowed the Tories to paint Labour as bureaucratic, interfering or moralising, where they were able to pose as dealing with people as they *were* not as they *might* or *ought* to be; though, as Green (1997) and Jarvis (1997: 140) maintain, Conservatives were also uncertain and untrusting of the fickle mass electorate – their popular support hard won more than innate.

Such criticisms were not the only or dominant attitudes within Labour, but a significant undercurrent across time and all quarters of the party. Macintyre (1977: 488) notes such sentiments in the 1920s were less prevalent amongst Labour's ex-Liberal, Trade Union and left-wing cohorts. Nor were non-conformist impulses absent from working-class culture. Rather this chapter, acknowledging that the Left could be frustrated by popular opinion and apathy, emphasises its frustration with what it alleged to be the people's complacencies and ambitions (or lack of), and contends that these disclose less about the electorate than about the ways Labour imagined them.

That earlier studies, like Forester's or Drucker's mapping of Labour's world, anticipate more recent concerns in their awareness of the complexities of relating parties and voters and how Labour's own culture has shaped visions of the people, suggests that the 'new political history' is not so novel. There is in it a strong trace of what Green (1997: 177) refers to as 'the primacy of politics' – insisting on the self-determining qualities of politics. Lawrence and Taylor (1997: 18) admit that the 'need for parties to mobilise and forge stable coalitions of interests is not an idea which is absent from the electoral sociology model', but that invariably this 'assumed that voter interests . . . are predetermined . . . only requiring recognition and expression by the parties'.

Traces of the newer approaches are evident in the old. Beer's classic study *Modern British Politics* argued parties 'aggregate the demands of a large number of groups in the electorate' and, while 'under pressure from such opinion', also (with the mass media) went 'a long way toward creating these opinions' (1965: 347–8, 406). Regarding parties akin to advertisers 'bidding' for consumers, Beer alleged that voters 'demands . . . did not arise autonomously from the immediate experience . . . but very largely from the interactions of that experience with interpretations offered by organizations, especially the political parties'. Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961: 339), too, while in many ways a traditional 'high' study, argued that Labour's difficulties at the end of the 1950s lay in its own 'fear of the electorate . . . never had Labour leaders been so haunted by a composite image of the potential Labour voter as quintessentially *petit-bourgeois* and therefore liable to be frightened off by a radical alternative'.

Whilst perhaps not so new, these approaches offer historians superior ways of understanding Labour. Rather than supposing it some unique organisation, peculiarly 'British' or warranting a specific approach ('Labour history') it situates Labour in a broader re-thinking of political history.

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