Conclusion. The 1970 general election

Labour lost the 1970 general election, ending what was then only the second time the party had held office backed by a comfortable Commons majority. Unlike Clement Attlee's 1945–51 administration, however, Wilson's had few positive achievements to its name. The consensus among the government's innumerable critics on the left was that this was a failure of will more than circumstance. As Ralph Miliband wrote, the government 'could have had all the support it required from trade unionists, had it been seen to be genuinely engaged in the creation of a society marked by greater social justice'. The point was, however, that the likes of Wilson were uninterested in promoting equality because they were preoccupied with maintaining the status quo.¹

Regarding the concerns highlighted in this work, the government's detractors similarly claimed that, had they wanted to, ministers could have: promoted comprehensive education with greater enthusiasm; pursued a more radical version of industrial democracy; introduced equal pay for women far sooner; taken a firmer line against racism; been more accommodating to the concerns of youth; and promoted popular participation with less suspicion. While such matters did not all directly determine Labour's electoral fate, the party's failure to secure re-election suggests that it had not adequately come to terms with at least some of the cultural changes fostered by the 'Golden Age'. The picture was, however, not universally bleak. With that proposition in mind, this final chapter reviews how the party approached the 1970 campaign, assesses the result and accounts for Labour's response, one that set it down a path that led to the wilderness years of the 1980s.

'Selsdon man'

Despite the economic problems of the previous three years, Labour members saw in 1970 with some optimism. In January, Wilson went on the offensive after the Conservative shadow Cabinet held a weekend

conference at the Selsdon Park Hotel. This gathering was meant to imbue the Conservative's post-1966 policy review with some coherence, but the media created the impression that it marked a dramatic departure from post-war policy. Certainly, Edward Heath, the party's leader since 1965, wanted to introduce more economic competition, cut taxes, reform industrial relations through legislation, tackle 'law and order' and tighten immigration controls. Yet Heath did not seek fundamentally to alter the direction of policy set down in the 1940s and he remained committed to full employment.²

It nonetheless suited Wilson's purpose to stress the extent to which the Conservatives wanted to change tack. He sought to create an enemy that posed such a threat to the existing order he could rally Labour's most disenchanted supporters back to the cause. In following this defensive strategy, the Labour leader nonetheless marked out a genuine, if crudely drawn, distinction between the parties over the appropriate use of the state to secure collectively desirable ends. Wilson invented 'Selsdon man' to personify Heath's supposed new Conservatism, which, he alleged, had turned its back on the more consensual approach of Harold Macmillan. The Prime Minister declared Selsdon man was consumed by the 'atavistic desire to reverse the course of 25 years of social revolution' by proposing a 'wanton, calculated return to greater inequality' that substituted a 'free for all in place of the welfare state'. He apparently wanted to 'replace the compassionate society with the ruthless, pushing society', 'reject the society that has been created since the war, a civilised society in which the community, working through Government and Parliament, provides for the needs of the community, on the basis that everyone counts'.³

Wilson's Cabinet colleagues, Judith Hart among others, echoed his message, stressing the contrast between the parties. Grass-roots Conservatives were, she alleged, selecting 'rampaging Powellite near-fascists' as parliamentary candidates and so posed a 'threat to all our civilised social values'.⁴ Even before the Selsdon Park meeting, ministers, including the normally temperate Edward Short, warned of the dangers of a 'massive lurch in society towards reaction'. While such a lurch was claimed to be embodied by Enoch Powell, it was also said to be generally evident in the defence of elitism, authoritarianism and racism, and in demands for capital and corporal punishment, the ending of the welfare state and a return to 'traditional' values in education.⁵ As the chair of the spring 1970 national conference of Labour women told delegates, the choice before voters was clear: 'to keep in forward gear with Labour – or to go into reverse with the Tories'.⁶

On the eve of Roy Jenkins' April Budget, Wilson secretly decided to hold the general election in June, in the hope he would to steal a march on the Conservatives, as they were preparing for an October poll. During

the following weeks, events seemed to confirm Wilson's decision. Opinion polls gave Labour a lead for the first time in years; the party's by-election performances became less grim; and it made a satisfactory showing in the local elections. Most economic indicators were also positive: in particular, the balance of trade remained in the black. As is common with Prime Ministers, Wilson implicated leading party figures in his decision, just in case anything went wrong. Few expected it would. When Wilson went to ask the Queen to dissolve parliament, the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party was keen for a June contest. Tony Benn was not alone in imagining Labour had secured a remarkably complete recovery in its fortunes; he described other Cabinet members as 'euphoric'.⁷

The Prime Minister's decision was made with little reference to the state of the party in the country, although at the end of April he did tip off the National Agent as to his intentions.⁸ While by the spring it was thought members' morale had greatly improved since the previous autumn, many activists – especially trade unionists still resentful of wage controls and *In Place of Strife* – remained to be won back. A joint meeting in May of the Cabinet and National Executive Committee (NEC) was consequently warned by officials that, if a contest was held too early, it would be 'very much a "Do it Yourself campaign"'. Transport House wanted an autumn poll, to allow for the return of more activists and to give local parties time to relay their organisational foundations.⁹ In line with the party's focus in 1964 and 1966, Wilson was confident he could deliver victory in 1970 by projecting an attractive personal image through the voters' television screens.

A revived organisation?

Labour's experience in the marginal constituency of Halifax typified that endured in many other parts of the country.¹⁰ Immediately after winning the seat in 1966 the constituency Labour party (CLP) suffered a dramatic decline, so that, as early as the spring of 1967, it was short of both members and money. Activists became increasingly disenchanted: price rises, Common Market entry negotiations, devaluation of the pound and prescription charges were all criticised at meetings of the general management committee (GMC). A resolution demanding that ministers 'cease their numerous deviations from socialist policy', in order to 'preserve the fast dwindling solidarity within the Socialist party', was defeated only through the chair's casting vote. By early 1968, members who remained on the books retreated into inactivity: meetings became inquorate; it proved impossible to find enough candidates to contest all wards in the local elections; and in the autumn the agent resigned to

seek a constituency that could pay his salary. Loyalist speeches from the constituency MP, Edith Summerskill, which stressed Labour's support for the social services, cut little ice. Despite a few initiatives, such as a new bingo scheme to raise revenue and the introduction of coffee evenings to reach potential recruits, the party was falling apart. The CLP had even ceased to function as a social institution: in 1969 the annual flower show was cancelled.

If this experience was common enough, Halifax was unique in being able to rely on the expertise of Sara Barker, Labour's former National Agent, who settled in the town after her time at Transport House came to an end. When in January 1970 she offered her services, the GMC responded 'with acclamation'. Barker's survey of the CLP showed how dire the situation was: only four out of fifteen ward sections were functioning, and there were just ninety-eight paid-up members. The party would recover, she informed the GMC, only with the 'hearty co-operation of every Labour worker', and she concluded her address 'with an eloquent appeal for Socialist loyalty, for personal involvement in the life and service' of the party. Barker's efforts in the town revealed the possibilities but also limits to this venerable Labour voluntarism. During the spring, Barker conducted a remarkably energetic revival campaign. Through circulars, personal letters and home visits, existing ward organisations were urged to contact ex-members; where wards had disintegrated, Barker cajoled activists to re-establish them. As a result, by the time Wilson called the election on 18 May, the number of functioning ward sections had doubled and membership stood at 230. Yet the CLP was still judged to have 'literally no organisation to enable it to fight an election'. The position elsewhere was, if anything, even worse. The elderly activists of South East Bristol were taken so unawares by the election that they did not have enough envelopes in which to put their candidate's address.¹¹

Once Wilson announced the election date, most gaps in the party's ranks were filled either by new faces or by activists who had left the fold after 1966. In London, at least, organisation and morale were thought comparable to those in 1964: as a senior organiser in the capital noted, it was 'the happiest election I have experienced and the enthusiasm was tremendous'. Some even optimistically imagined Wilson might have won if Labour had not peaked too soon.¹²

Wilson's personal campaign, the focus of the national party's efforts, was informed by his desire to appear confident and responsible: 'presidential' was the often-used term.¹³ Inspired by the Queen's then novel practice of mingling with crowds, Wilson indulged in numerous 'walk-about', after which the Prime Minister visited local party offices to enthuse activists, which in practice meant delivering brief, banal speeches to tame audiences. There was, however, a bit more to Labour's campaign than smiles and sunshine. Wilson's basic proposition was that

his government had been economically 'responsible', even at the risk of losing electoral support. Yet, as he informed those watching his last television broadcast of the campaign, economic strength was not an end in itself. 'The socialism I believe in', he stated, 'means above all using all our resources for making Britain a better place to live in and for a Labour government this means sharing prosperity in a way which is fair and just'. Thus poverty had to be rooted out and bad housing eradicated, while the social services, health provision and educational resources all had to be strengthened. 'It means, above all', he concluded, 'accepting that individual misfortune is not just a private concern but a community concern, that we are all members one of another'.¹⁴

Workers

Immediately before the poll, Wilson believed his stress on Selsdon man had decisively turned the tide against Heath.¹⁵ Defeat therefore came as a massive shock and numerous short-term influences were blamed, in particular the publication of a bad set of trade figures. The England football team's three-two reverse at the hands of West Germany in the World Cup was even thought significant. To be fair, leading Conservatives were also unsure quite how they managed to beat Wilson.¹⁶

More substantively, the result was noteworthy in three respects. First, while representing a great recovery from Labour's nadir of 1967–8, at 43 per cent the party's share of votes cast was its lowest since before 1945. Secondly, at 4.7 per cent, the swing to the Conservatives was the largest post-war shift of support between the two parties. Finally, turnout fell to a post-1945 low of 71.4 per cent, from 75.8 per cent in 1966 – and a full 12 per cent less than in 1950. While there were a variety of possible causes for the last, contemporary analysts thought that, Selsdon man notwithstanding, many voters felt Labour and the Conservatives were just too similar to make voting necessary.¹⁷

As the weeks passed, an increasing number in the party were struck by the fact that a significant proportion of abstainers came from the 'traditional' working class, those whose support Labour had once taken for granted. The NEC elliptically conceded that Labour had 'failed to stir the enthusiasm, beliefs and interests of the voters' and lost 'that natural link through which people see in the Labour Party the expression of their own aspirations'.¹⁸ Members of the Scottish Council were rather more direct; they believed Labour's campaign, with its focus on personality, had been the primary cause of a 'quiet and lifeless election'. They argued Labour should have presented itself as a 'fighting enthusiastic radical force', on the basis that this would have aroused working-class voters.¹⁹ The implication for left-leaning activists was clear: as Salford

Table 9.1 The composition of the Labour vote, 1964–70

Category	1964	1966	1970	Difference, 1964–70
All	44.8	48.7	43.8	–1.0
AB (upper and professional middle class)	8.9	15.5	10.4	+1.5
C1 (lower middle class)	24.8	29.9	30.5	+5.7
C2 (skilled manual working class)	54.4	58.5	55.4	+1.0
DE (semi/unskilled working class)	59.1	65.2	57.3	–1.8
Men	48.3	52.4	47.3	–1.0
Women	41.7	45.4	40.6	–1.1

Source: D. Butler and A. King, *The British General Election of 1964* (1965), p. 296; D. Butler and A. King, *The British General Election of 1966* (1966), p. 264; and D. Butler and M. Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (1971), p. 342.

East’s executive committee concluded, Labour lost because Wilson had failed to carry out left-inspired and pro-union conference decisions. Voters saw little difference between the parties because Labour had not properly represented the workers’ interests.²⁰

Much party analysis read like a mirror image of that produced after 1959: Labour had apparently lost ‘traditional’ supporters while retaining much of its hold on ‘younger couples in the newer housing areas’ established in 1964 and 1966.²¹ The impression from marginal constituencies such as Bristol North West was that, after 1966, Labour’s problems were mainly located in areas in which council estates predominated, whereas matters were less troubling where private housing was common.²² Experienced regional organisers like Jim Raisin even believed Labour’s best hope was to cultivate those who first voted for the party in 1966, to compensate for the decline in working-class support.²³ Less impressionistic evidence from National Opinion Poll surveys suggests (see Table 9.1) that in 1970 Labour was indeed better represented among the middle class than in 1964, but enjoyed less support from unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers.

While one leading Labour woman blamed defeat on ‘working class folly’, in that normally loyal voters had been ‘bemused and beguiled into voting Conservative’, more humble female activists, albeit hardly left-wing ones, thought workers had abandoned the party because they ‘had not been fairly dealt with’ by the government.²⁴ This latter perspective prevailed at the party’s conference in the autumn of 1970.²⁵ Especially in light of Heath’s proposed industrial relations legislation, delegates argued that Labour should fall in line behind the unions and oppose what was described as the new Prime Minister’s ‘own special

brand of maidenly lower middle class warfare'. Jack Jones was but the most eloquent exponent of the view that all the people's interests were best served by the actions of shopfloor militants free from government meddling. The union movement was, he declared, the 'shield and defender of workers everywhere'. Jones' speech brought NEC member and MP Walter Padley, no radical, to tears because Padley thought it summed up 'what it was all about – the class war'.²⁶

In complete contrast, the revisionist John Mackintosh considered the conference 'a curious, muddled, rather sad affair', as defeat had encouraged 'a return to the womb, a retreat into primitive attitudes on the part of a large section of the Party', behind an unqualified defence of the unions.²⁷ If Mackintosh criticised the left for its conservatism, new thinking was hardly evident among the party's leading revisionists. Once the shock of defeat had passed, Tony Crosland produced a Fabian pamphlet, described as 'a coherent statement of democratic socialism for the 1970s'.²⁸ Yet Crosland merely concluded that *The Future of Socialism* remained relevant, meaning a 'clear reaffirmation of ideals' was all that was required. He simply reiterated his belief that growth was 'an essential condition of any significant allocation of resources', without which Labour could not promote equality. Consequently, a future Labour government would have to reject those Treasury orthodoxies that had thwarted the pursuit of growth during 1964–70. It would also have to apply an incomes policy, which meant overcoming union opposition. Very much as he had done immediately after 1959, Crosland stated that Labour should not be afraid of the latter course, for it was a 'broad-based, national people's party; [so] it must not be deterred from finding national solutions to national problems'.

Other revisionists, less restrained by leadership position, called for Labour to loosen its ties with the unions in particular and the working class in general. Even before defeat, Christopher Mayhew, who had resigned as one of Wilson's ministers, noted that many workers were deeply conservative on subjects such as black immigration, abortion and capital punishment, much more so than the middle class. Moreover, while Labour aimed to create a classless society, the unions upon whom it relied organised themselves exclusively on the basis of class, and so emphasised conflict over reconciliation.²⁹ In private Crosland, Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey, Labour's three most significant revisionists, echoed such thoughts, which had also been aired after 1959. They agreed it was necessary to 'minimise the Party role of the trades unions' and appeared to think they could rely on the CLPs to achieve that end, as activists were moving away from the left.³⁰ This betrayed a profound ignorance of grass-roots opinion, something that would not have mattered so much in the past, when Hugh Gaitskell could rely on the union block vote to neutralise leftist sentiment. However, having alienated the unions

while in government and still managing to lose office, after 1970 the revisionists no longer controlled the levers of power in the party. In frustration Mayhew joined the Liberals in 1974; he was but the first of many to take leave of Labour.

Women

In February 1970, the ex-Cabinet minister Fred Lee wrote to Wilson to say that equal pay was a 'subject which properly put, can be political dynamite in bringing in the women's vote'.³¹ According to survey evidence, however, in June women abandoned Labour at about the same rate as men, and that from a much lower base. The main reason for this shift was widely believed to be inflation, an issue the Conservatives exploited with alacrity: Heath had even declared the contest a 'shopping basket election'. Labour women certainly thought his promise to deal with rising prices 'at a stroke' played an important part in determining female affiliations.³²

Labour's reaction to its failure with women was mixed. For their supposed susceptibility to Conservative propaganda, Lena Jeger criticised housewives for being 'politically less mature' than their husbands.³³ Barbara Castle, however, suggested Labour itself was largely to blame, if even working-class women believed that the party was too concerned to increase male wages to be bothered with keeping prices down.³⁴

In any case, not all women responded to Labour's period in office in the same way. Data generated by the British Election Study suggest that between 1966 and 1970, compared to their male counterparts, women in the working class, as well as those under twenty-five and over sixty-four years of age, moved strongly against Labour (see Tables 9.2 and 9.3). However, women aged between twenty-five and sixty-four and those in the intermediate class moved relatively closer to the party. In crude terms, Labour did worst with young and old working-class women but better among white-collar, middle-aged women. It is possible to suggest why: the former group contained most full-time housewives – those in their twenties or thirties with children to care for and others over sixty drawing their pensions – while the latter included most of those in full- or part-time employment. Hence, if not quite 'dynamite', Labour's announcement regarding equal pay helped it retain the loyalties of women in work, while those whose main concern was with consumption were less impressed. Overall, however, prices rather than wages – that is, the domestic sphere rather than the workplace – continued to dominate most women's horizons.

Defeat only increased enthusiasm at Transport House for organisational change. From seventy-one in 1970, the number of women's councils

Table 9.2 Women and Labour voting, by social class and age, 1964–70

Category	1964	1966	1970	Difference, 1964–70
<i>Social class</i>				
Professional	17.2	19.8	23.4	+6.2
Intermediate	24.3	25.4	32.9	+8.6
Working class	63.4	68.1	53.2	–10.2
<i>Age</i>				
Under 25	57.2	64.2	51.9	–5.3
25–44	50.3	52.4	44.8	–5.5
45–64	42.2	48.2	43.5	+1.3
Above 64	44.5	50.3	29.3	–15.2

Source: I. Crewe, A. Fox and N. Day, *The British Electorate 1963–1992* (Cambridge, 1995), Table 1.14.

Table 9.3 Men and Labour voting, by social class and age, 1964–70

Category	1964	1966	1970	Difference, 1964–70
<i>Social class</i>				
Professional	17.1	20.0	25.3	+8.2
Intermediate	26.2	34.3	32.3	+6.1
Working class	65.0	70.1	60.7	–4.3
<i>Age</i>				
Under 25	45.5	50.3	52.3	+6.8
25–44	50.0	60.5	48.8	–1.2
45–64	46.2	51.4	45.8	–0.4
Above 64	45.6	49.2	44.4	–1.2

Source: I. Crewe, A. Fox and N. Day, *The British Electorate 1963–1992* (Cambridge, 1995), Table 1.14.

more than doubled a year later, by then being described as ‘the main unit of women’s organisation’.³⁵ This proved a severe emotional wrench for some stalwarts. At the last meeting of Flintshire and Denbighshire’s advisory council, due to be replaced by a women’s council, members spoke of nearly three decades of attendance and declared ‘they would miss it very much’, for the advisory council had been ‘so dear to their hearts’. The long-standing secretary recorded that, as she wrote those minutes, ‘I am not ashamed to say that I am wiping my tears away,

thinking of happy years spent together, with these delegates'.³⁶ Despite the exit of such stalwarts from the scene, the new bodies failed to create many bridges to wider society but, as the 1970s progressed, did become the site for much more radical political activities.³⁷

There is some evidence that Labour women were becoming slightly less tolerant of their accustomed place in the party, something which was brought to a head by the small number of female candidates selected to contest the 1970 election. The 1970 women's conference even discussed a resolution that called on the NEC to ensure future short-lists contained at least one woman. This was, however, remitted at the request of the National Labour Women's Advisory Council (NLWAC), which nonetheless promised to put the matter to the NEC, although delegates were warned CLPs would resent such a stipulation.³⁸ The NLWAC also established a sub-committee to look into the subject, but in the end it merely called on the NEC to ask CLPs to give greater consideration to the need to promote higher numbers of women candidates. This the NEC duly did, but few were optimistic that the exhortation would produce results and the emphasis remained on the need for a 'change of attitude' rather than structural reform.³⁹ It would take two decades before Labour forced CLPs to alter their selection procedures.

Black immigrants

Looking to the future, the young Neil Kinnock, candidate for a safe seat in 1970, told a pre-election gathering of Glamorgan Labour women that race relations would become as important to his generation as unemployment was in the 1930s.⁴⁰ It would have been surprising if many of Kinnock's audience wanted this prediction to come true for, just as they had been at the start of the 1960s, most Labour members – like the majority of their white compatriots – wanted the issue to disappear, by black immigrants becoming fully assimilated into the 'British way of life'.

While some party members exhibited a greater sensitivity to the issue than hitherto, Labour remained an imperfect means of promoting black integration; for example, only one non-white delegate attended the party's 1968 annual conference.⁴¹ Moreover, at the start of the 1970s activists in places such as Nelson in Lancashire and Handsworth in Birmingham continued to treat immigrants as different to whites, and still relied on intermediaries to reach the former.⁴² This suited white activists, as it won them black votes while maintaining the established character of their organisations; it also bolstered the prestige of those who liaised between Labour and their own communities. Few, however, now saw it as a way of advancing integration: it was instead employed as its substitute.

As the election approached, James Callaghan considered producing a White Paper to redefine British nationality so as to restrict immigration further. More for practical than principled reasons he abandoned the idea, only for Heath's government to take it up.⁴³ It would have been unusual for a Labour Home Secretary to take the initiative on this matter: the government had twice restricted black immigration but only because party leaders feared the state of public opinion meant they had no alternative. Partly because of Wilson's tightening of immigration, it was less salient in 1970 than in 1964. Yet, if Conservative and Labour leaderships managed to prevent most of their candidates referring to immigration on the hustings, this did not mean voters ignored it. A subsequent academic survey suggested that Enoch Powell's regular interventions after 1968 so encouraged the public to imagine Conservative policy was closer to their prejudices than was Labour that Heath won an extra 6.7 per cent of votes cast.⁴⁴ Fearing that very outcome, Wilson wanted to pay no attention to Powell, as he assumed any rebuttals would concentrate minds on a subject from which, given the state of opinion, Labour could only lose. He was therefore extremely annoyed when Benn reacted to Powell raising immigration during the campaign by publicly comparing his views to those the Nazis held about the Jews. While Benn thought the issue too important to ignore, his speech nonetheless brought little light to the subject.⁴⁵

Labour selected only one black parliamentary candidate in 1970, that being David Pitt, who first stood for the party in 1959. This time he contested the fairly safe seat of Clapham rather than, as previously, the Conservative bastion of Hampstead. Pitt, however, suffered a massive swing to the Conservatives, of 10.8 per cent, one far greater than experienced in comparable constituencies, and so failed to retain the seat for Labour. As an indication either that the party had done too little to promote integration or of the ingrained nature of white prejudice, a significant number of the party's accustomed supporters clearly felt unable to vote for a black candidate.⁴⁶

The young

Some in the party believed Labour had created a problem for itself when the government enfranchised eighteen-year-olds. Although the young might have been broadly sympathetic to progressive ends, it was not clear how many would vote: at best, they were an unknown quantity. As it transpired, in 1970 Labour won the support of just over half of voters under twenty-five; this was higher, if not dramatically so, than support registered among some older cohorts (see Tables 9.2 and 9.3). The extent to which this influenced the overall result must remain

unknown, especially as fewer than two-thirds of potential new electors were registered to vote.⁴⁷

Labour members' mistrust of the young, especially students, survived the events of 1968; it had, after all, long pre-dated them. Yet, as the party's National Youth Officer pleaded, activists should not write off students because of their far-left activities – if only because there were too many to ignore.⁴⁸ Since cutting its links with the National Association of Labour Student Organisations (NALSO), the NEC had not seen the need for another means of mobilising their support. To meet good this lack, Students for a Labour Victory (SLV) was established in 1970 – although that was largely the brainchild of Jack Straw, President of the Leeds Students Union, and Hugh Anderson, President of the Cambridge Union. They persuaded a reluctant NEC of the advantages of backing this nominally independent body.⁴⁹

It was hoped that SLV would appeal to students' apparent desire to see ideals put before self-interest and, while noting that in that regard Labour had fallen short – especially over immigration and Vietnam – it was said to have some achievements to its credit. Moreover, given the Conservative alternative, Labour was presented as students' only hope of ever seeing their ideals put into practice.⁵⁰ Although it was disbanded shortly after Wilson lost office, SLV led to the establishment of the National Organisation of Labour Students in 1971 as a permanent successor to NALSO, although it is doubtful whether this new body made more of an impact than its predecessor.

Labour remained stumped by the conundrum posed by the young in general. Bristol South East's aged agent, Herbert Rogers, was but one activist who, after 1970, made the familiar assertion that 'Something must be done to educate and organise the young voter', as it was 'useless to expect an intelligent political reaction' from untutored eighteen-year-olds.⁵¹ Many would have sympathised with Wilson when he reportedly dismissed one long-haired heckler during the campaign by stating that: 'You're too young to know anything'.⁵² At the very least, these attitudes did not help Labour attract youngsters on a significant scale – and during the 1970s its youth wing would once again fall victim to a small band of far-left zealots, this time those organised by Militant Tendency.

Participation

While the decline in the proportion of those voting in June might be read as a sign of increasing alienation from the political system, by 1970 most contemporaries believed the problem of 'participation' had receded. Certainly, in Scotland and Wales the nationalist challenge had evaporated. In 1969 Labour held on to Glasgow Gorbals in a by-election

against what was feared would be an insuperable challenge from the Scottish National Party; and the investiture of Prince Charles as Prince of Wales in the same year helped mobilise unionist opinion against Plaid Cymru. Apparently confirming voters' real feelings about independence from Westminster, the 1970 election saw the nationalist parties win only 11 per cent of votes cast in their respective countries.

More widely, however, Benn, whose speeches during 1968 had done much to highlight the need to reconnect the people to established politics, thought one cause of Labour's defeat had been its failure to address the concerns of those 'new citizens' who demanded more self-government.⁵³ His was not quite a lone voice. In 1969 an editorial in *Socialist Commentary*, reflecting the views of revisionists like Mackintosh, stated that student radicals had exposed real problems with representative democracy, in particular the remoteness of decision-making. Despite this, all the political parties, and Labour in particular, were 'geared to the traditional political process stemming from another era; their members seem to spend endless hours debating resolutions calling on the Government to do this or that, or condemning it for not doing the other – most of which is a futile exercise, altering nothing'. There was, it suggested, a pressing need to reconsider how the party related to society in light of its failure to make links with those 'practical idealists' among the young. However, the only concrete measure *Socialist Commentary* proposed was Benn's earlier (and by then frustrated) Citizens for Labour initiative.⁵⁴

The loss of hitherto impregnable council majorities across the country during 1967 and 1968 had also forced some activists to rethink their relationship with the communities they hoped to serve. In 1967 Labour lost control of Salford City Council for the first time since 1945, and then failed to win it back the following year. This initially galvanised activists to criticise how they conducted politics locally. While many blamed government policy for the swing in Salford, it was nonetheless appreciated that their own organisation needed to be 'drastically overhauled' if it was ever to regain a majority. This sentiment led to the promise to create a 'new form of meeting' in wards, by cutting out routine and stressing political debate and the discussion of local issues.⁵⁵ Wards became more active than they had been for many years – running recruitment campaigns, distributing leaflets, organising petitions and holding public meetings – for they could openly oppose the shortcomings of what was now Conservative Council policy and exploit popular discontent over issues such as rehousing and traffic congestion. The party also became more involved with tenants' associations, bodies that in the past some had seen in threatening terms.⁵⁶

The response to defeat in neighbouring Manchester was more muted. Nonetheless, even there the chair of Newton Heath ward considered

the Labour Group of councillors should produce a 'Policy that the people want and not what they want them to have'.⁵⁷ Defeat also meant Ardwick ward revived its advice centre and ran it weekly – if only because the newly elected Conservative councillors did the same.⁵⁸ As the City of Cardiff Labour Party declared, the route back to power meant activists 'must start again with leaflets and knocking on doors and [holding] public meetings'. Labour 'must become a *Movement* and not just a collection of administrators', while wards should become more involved in their own communities by tackling problems themselves rather than simply reporting them to the relevant authority.⁵⁹

The extent to which this meant reviving old – rather than creating new – ways of doing politics should be clear. Even so, Labour's 1970 manifesto highlighted to an unprecedented extent the party's desire to increase more direct participation in decision-making. Although participation was still considered a marginal issue by many, it had nonetheless started to shuffle in from the wings. The creation of the Crowther-Hunt Commission meant constitutional change remained alive and if the motives of Cabinet ministers like Callaghan for establishing this body can be questioned, there were, it should be recalled, others who hoped it would lead to a federal Britain.

Conclusion

This work has been underpinned by the assumption that Labour's generally unimpressive post-war electoral performances were not the inevitable result of cultural change. In line with much of what has been described as the 'new political history', the relationship between party and society has been interpreted as being determined by a combination of the peculiar circumstances in which Labour existed and the party's own understanding of and response to that context.⁶⁰ It was, therefore, at least possible that the party could have done better, had members more accurately identified the nature and meaning of change and responded in the appropriate manner. Some elements in the party did react much more positively than has usually been supposed but, overall, Labour hindered rather than helped itself. However, the dominant response to that failure, or at least Wilson's loss of office – the 'return to class' – was probably even more disastrous for the party's longer-term fortunes. But that is another story.

The book's main focus has been on what was said and done (and not done) within the Labour Party. This is not because, on its own, the party's internal culture explained its electoral fortunes. After all, Labour won one of its most famous victories, in 1966, despite a crumbling organisation; and the party lost in 1959 and 1970 for reasons more

compelling than, for example, many members' hostility to the young. Instead, the work has concentrated on Labour's internal culture to promote a broader understanding of the post-war party, to demonstrate its possibilities and limitations at this particular moment in its history. One motive was quite basic. Little is known about this culture, which has led historians to make sweeping – and often inaccurate – generalisations about its character. If nothing else, therefore, this work should encourage a more empathetic appreciation of the party's plight: so far as Labour is concerned, it is time we understood a little more and condemned a little less. Moreover, ultimately, even if political scientists and historians cannot precisely measure its impact at any particular general election, Labour's internal culture played a significant part in what, at one point in the 1980s, looked like its terminal decline.

If Labour's inability to exploit change should no longer be seen as exclusively dictated by structural factors, this failure was, however, always likely. No party is able to interpret contemporary developments in a purely 'pragmatic' manner. As society is in constant flux – and in the 1960s that was especially the case – no one can hope to acquire a totally accurate knowledge of those capricious forces that shape this dynamic. Moreover, any picture of society a party may assemble can be viewed only through the inevitably distorting lens of its established ideological tradition, or 'discourse' if you will. Thus, readers should have been struck by how far Labour members – self-conscious reformers like Tony Benn as much as more conservative figures such as James Callaghan – looked on events via a framework constructed well before Clement Attlee became Prime Minister. This could be an optimistic outlook, being underpinned by the MacDonaldite confidence that most contemporary developments could be integrated within the party's wider purpose. It was, however, ultimately disabling, insofar as most assumed the party was under no obligation to change its nature to accommodate such developments better.

This reluctance to change the party in even some fairly modest ways was not informed just by political considerations, although some believed 'socialism' had achieved its least worst expression in the shape of the Labour Party. It was partly because members of any political party are unavoidably subject to society's prevailing cultural norms. These notions of how people should think and behave are, in fact, often more insidious in shaping perceptions than formal ideology, and can structure understandings of how a particular belief system may be made manifest at any one point in time. It is likely some readers were struck, for example, by contemporary claims that one could oppose black immigration and be a socialist. At the start of the twenty-first century this seems contradictory. Given a proper appreciation of the nature of British society during the 1960s, it should be understandable why to

many – but not all – loyal Labour members it was an unremarkable proposition.

During the ‘Golden Age’ many established norms were attacked, albeit by a minority (although an articulate and loud one). This assault challenged not so much the ends of Labour politics as much as its means. With regard to the latter, party members believed socialism (however it was conceived) would come gradually as a result of conventional electoral work that focused on winning power at Westminster. While one object was to reconcile differences, the party would achieve this by largely basing itself on the support of a white, patriarchal working class, although remaining open to the help and guidance of enlightened members of the bourgeoisie. It was not exactly clear at the time how far those who criticised this strategy were harbingers of History or eccentrics soon to find a place in Posterity’s dustbin. The Britain of 1970 was, after all, structurally very similar to that of 1960; if some keenly felt the impact of radical change, for others change was imperceptible. Therefore, party members’ often sceptical response to criticism was at least understandable: if Labour’s tradition generally pointed in the wrong direction at the time, the right road, to be fair, was never particularly clear.

When it came to arguments over cultural norms, Labour members broadly found themselves on one side of the argument, the one that favoured continuity – or at least incremental reform – over radical transformation. That so many were of the generation that remembered the 1930s and 1940s played a significant part here: theirs was a socialism of unemployment and austerity rather than affluence and freedom of expression. It was only in the years immediately following 1970 that party membership underwent a generational shift, when many of those who criticised the party in the 1960s tried to convert it to their way of doing politics.⁶¹ The impact of these younger radicals and militant feminists on the party’s electoral fortunes – one hesitates to lay all the blame for 1983 on their shoulders – suggests they hardly enjoyed a privileged insight into cultural change either.

In outlining Labour members’ reaction to their party’s defeat in 1970 it is, finally, striking how little their understanding of society had changed since the 1950s, perceptions that themselves harked back to the party’s earliest days and before. The ‘return to class’ confirmed by the 1970 party conference was not an about-turn resulting from minds having been changed by experience. It was instead a question of the left, whose views had hitherto been sidelined, being able to assert themselves, thanks to unprecedented union support, over a parliamentary leadership still attached to an essentially (but apparently discredited) revisionist strategy. Those who, well before the 1959 general election, believed Labour’s purpose was largely defined by representing the interests of mainly male-orientated unions could now exert an influence,

along with the newly arrived younger radicals, over policy-making previously denied them. This they did with alacrity.⁶²

In a similar vein, party officials noted that the 1970 campaign had exposed well known organisational deficiencies, principally a lack of money, of young and motivated activists as well as of experienced agents.⁶³ As of old, some considered these flaws could be overcome if the right evangelical spirit was allied to hard work in the constituencies. The former minister Arthur Skeffington was due to chair Labour's 1970 conference but, stricken by terminal illness, he was unable to preside. Skeffington had, however, written his chair's address, which Sir Harry Nicholas, the party's ineffectual General Secretary, read out to delegates as its mute author sat on the platform. Noting an apparent upsurge in enthusiasm for Labour immediately after the election, Skeffington, via Nicholas, appealed as follows:

*This time, comrades, we must tap that source of support. Every ward must have a membership drive. Try and get one or two collectors from among your new members. Organisation doesn't win elections but it helps! We need more members and more money, so that we can take full advantage of our next electoral opportunity.*⁶⁴

Skeffington was a dying man and his attachment to past methods was emotionally understandable; even so, both for him and for those who sat listening and agreeing with his words, time might as well have been standing still.

Notes

The place of publication is London unless otherwise specified.

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- 7 T. Benn, *Office Without Power. Diaries, 1968–72* (1988), pp. 274, 277, 281; Wilson, *Government*, pp. 979–83; letter from J. Haines, *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 August 1994.
- 8 M. Williams, *Inside Number 10* (1975), p. 263.
- 9 LPA, NEC, Organisation Sub-committee minutes, 5 May 1970, Progress report on the pre-general election campaign, NAD/34/5/70.
- 10 This account is based upon Calderdale Archives, Halifax CLP papers, TU: 28/5 and 6, Executive committee (EC) and general management committee (GMC) minutes, 1967–71, *passim*.

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- 33 'Labour must face challenges', *Labour Woman*, 60:6 (1970), p. 108.
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- 35 *Forty-Eighth Conference of Women*, p. 4.
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