Were the years 1951-1970 really marked by 'consensus politics'?

Harold Wilson, the Labour Prime Minister at the end of the 19 years framed in this question, once said that 'a week is a long time in politics'. The period 1951-1970 is a long time and to claim ascendancy for a particular characteristic over others risks limiting debate. Yet political scientists, journalists, politicians and academics commenting on the post-War pre-Thatcher period of British politics can be roughly divided into those who think that the period can be described as being marked by 'consensus politics' and those that do not. For me, the nays have it. I will attempt to wrestle a definition of the term out from the literature and I will show that 'consensus politics' does not apply to this period of British political history.

The term 'consensus politics' is difficult to define because it has been used in many different ways by different agents at different times. In his typographical analysis of consensus, Kavanagh[1] lists four definitions: consensus on ends, consensus on style, consensus on agenda and consensus relative to other periods. This typography might be helpful in teasing out a definition of 'consensus politics' from the wide debate and I will briefly discuss and give examples of each of these types in search of a synthesis of the idea of 'consensus politics'.

Many of those who believe that the period in question is marked by 'consensus politics' give examples of an apparent consensus on the goals of government from one government to the next. The 'consensus of ends' is usually supported with evidence that the goals of the Labour government of 1946; full employment, a welfare state and a mixed-economy, managed within a Keynesian economic framework [2]; were not discontinued by the incoming Conservative government of 1951. The argument for 'consensus politics' based on a 'consensus of ends' is supposedly reinforced by the analysis that these policy goals were continued into the second post-war Conservative government, elected in 1955.

Those holding the view that a 'consensus of style' marked this period are doing so, in the view of Young[3], in order to support a revisionist agenda. By painting the 19 years under examination as consensual, these commentators are able to make a contrast with the supposed socialist radicalism of Atlee and his government in the immediate post-war period and the success of later conservative governments. For Kerr, the consensus thesis

1 Kavanagh, (2002)
2 Hickson, (2004), p. 148
3 Holmes, (1989)

is an “heuristic framework *designed* to highlight specific contrasts between Thatcherism and its historical antecedents”[4].

'Consensus of agenda' is explained by Kavanagh as the organising of topic out of the political agenda. This is a negative understanding of 'consensus politics'. I find this type of consensus the most difficult to form into a cogent argument. Parsons[5] understands the policy making process as *always* reflecting the organisation of issues from a plurality of interest groups into or out of the policy making arena. To define the period 1951-70 as being marked by a 'consensus of agenda' therefore is not saying much of use: the policy making agenda is continually reshaped and redefined as a response to issues as they arise. Any perceived 'consensus of agenda' appears to me to be politics as usual rather than an exception worth marking.

The final typographical distinction is of consensus relative to other periods in history. 'Relative consensus' has weaknesses similar to those found in the arguments for a 'consensus of style' and can be deployed, as noted above, to support specific political agendas that become all to apparent on examination. Drawing contrasts or highlighting similarities between the intricacies of one period with and another in order to support a theory of consensus or otherwise can often tell us more about the author than it does about the periods contrasted.

So far, examining these threads in 'consensus theory' has not got us any closer to a definition. If anything Kavanagh's typography has changed the parameters of the debate on 'consensus politics'. In the place of rigorous investigation into the substance of the arguments of those who see 'consensus politics' as marking this period is the examination of the *type* of consensus debate. While his typography is a helpful prism, its continued use risks a de facto consensus on 'consensus politics'.

In order for a term to be of use in describing a period it needs to accurately describe a period. My argument against 'consensus theory' is based on the limited utility of term. Yet 'consensus politics' continues to have currency (despite public floggings[6]) and the era in question continues to be examined. Would another term better describe the period 1951-70? I think that 'osmosis' better describes the politics of the period. My synthesis of some of the ideas in the 'consensus politics' debate follows in support of my observation.

4 Kerr, (1999), p. 73, emphasis added
5 Parsons, (1996)
6 After Butler, (1993)

Taking 1951-70 in isolation discounts contrasts with other periods. Yet taking these years in the context of the socio-political landscape that preceded them is necessary in order for us to understand the importance of the political themes of the Fifties and Sixties. World War had ended in 1945 and the Labour Party won the General Election with a massive majority on a manifesto based around the immediate implementation of welfare measures that were proposed during the war-time coalition Government, principally the Beveridge Report of 1942. That the Labour Party won this election is significant. Pre-war governments were usually formed by the Liberal Party. The Conservatives were the major party in the war-time coalition. A significant point in 'consensus theory' literature is the Labour victory and I draw attention to it now to highlight not the 'radicalism' of the Atlee government of 1945-51 – (as the Conservatives would have implemented Beveridge Report recommendations sooner or later)[7] – but a centre-left swell in the nation. Did Labour win on the back of a realignment of politics to the left-of-centre in part due to the war-time experience[8] of the nation? Kavanagh argues that this observation is exagerated[9], but the strength of electoral support for a social-democratic party of Labour with a manifesto of nationalisation and greatly increased state provision of services, indicates this this is the case.[10]

The Nation had voted ostensibly for social democracy by endorsing 'Beveridge Now' in the 1945 general election. This was a significant shift to the left for the state and its apparatus: for example, in establishing the various departments needed so administer the welfare payments and the National Health Service. The Civil Service was traditionally conservative and was geared towards the administration of a nation at war; the agenda of the Labour government of 1945-50 was a major shift for it.

With this background of significant change in society and government, let us return to the period in the question. In 1950 the electorate decided to return Labour to government. The Conservatives were at this time unable to define themselves in the prevailing order of society. Later the Conservatives pledged to end the 'queuetopia' of Britain under Labour

7 Kavanagh, (1997), p.31
8 See Frazer (2000) p. 348
9 Kavanagh, (1997), p.31
10 Election results sourced from Goldsmiths VLE

and won the election in '51[11]. They wanted to run Labour's socialism more efficiently[12], and initially only minor changes to domestic policy in practice were made. This continuation of policy signals to me an 'osmosis in politics' rather than 'consensus (in) politics'. There was no consensus developing from Churchill's second term in office. Besides, many of the policies around which some authors see a consensus began to take shape *within* Churchill's wartime coalition government; the best example of this is Beveridge report from 1942:

> "The argument between Tories and Socialists is not whether the welfare state is a good or bad thing; the scramble is for the credit of having invented it. No British politician would now suggest abolishing it, any more than he would suggest abolishing state-paid policemen or firemen."[13]

Perhaps there is no 'consensus' to be found in this early period, rather simply an acceptance and a pragmatic continuation of 'radical' Atlee policy? If the Conservative continuation of policy signals agreement with it, this is because they were involved in the initial formulation of policy. I find the argument that agreement on domestic policy signals consensus has weaknesses for this reason.

The party of social democracy, Labour, were to be kept out of power by the electorate for the following twelve years, through two general elections, and by a significant margin each time. The Conservatives continued the expenditure commitments of the welfare state and the National Health Service and began to diminish the 'queuetopia' of post-war Britain, ending rationing on various goods in their first government of the 1950s. Rationing was a war-time measure limiting the supply of goods. Continuing it in to the 50's was a necessity for the economic growth of the nation, but it was never intended as permanent or the austerity measure it became. Government would have ended rationing; no party can claim credit. I make this observation to show that in some aspects of domestic policy, when 'consensus' is understood as simple agreement on practical measures, 'consensus politics' can be seen in the period 1951-70.

The economy and economic policy is a area where 'consensus theory' makes significant

11 Time Magazine "Osmosis in Queuetopia": The Tory campaign manifesto tried to sound as Laborite as possible and the Labor manifesto tried to sound as Tory as possible. This political osmosis, familiar in U.S. politics, is relatively new to Britain. Unless the Tories can break out of the "me-too" pattern and wake the voters to a sense of Britain's economic and political perils, it is hard to see how the Tories can win." This observation was made 1950, by 1951 the Conservatives were returned to power.

12 Ibid

13 Ibid

steps towards coherence. An observation was made during the early 1950s to the effect that whichever party was in government there was little change in handling of the economy. The term 'Butskellism' was coined at this time to show the small difference between the outgoing Labour Chancellor Gaitskell and the incoming Conservative Butler. The apparently indistinguishable approach of these Chancellors leads some authors to present this as consensus in these early years.

Other issues arose to test the Conservatives, and therefore the 'consensus politics' thesis, during the 1950s. Early in the first government denationalisation of the industries aken into public ownership by Labour happened. De-nationalisation shows a major departure from the economic policies of Labour and is also a marked contrast with Labour's philosophy of the role of the state in the market. Yet not all nationalisations were reversed: this demonstrates to me not 'consensus' but 'osmosis': the Conservatives and Labour both practising politics that gave good example of their respective philosophies of government and the state, but within the boundaries of the policy arena and with pragmatic support for policies from 'the other side' that were working.

Related to industrial policy was labour policy and the goal of full employment. The Conservatives had to deal with the rise and rise of union power during their three terms in office. Early in the 51-55 government Churchill adopted a conciliatory approach to unionised striking rail workers, appearing to be in agreement with Labour on the remedy for industrial unrest. Whatever consensus this agreement signifies was diminished by the end of the third Conservative government (1959-64) when industrial strife and rising unemployment again dominated the political agenda. These challenges were to prove too great for the Conservatives: times had changed and any consensus on union relations had broken down. Labour, the traditional party of organised labour, was returned to government in the May of 1964.

Time in opposition had been time for introspection for the Labour party. Indeed it appeared that a new strain of British Socialism was emerging, one that had reconciled itsself with the market as the best means for creating wealth which could then be redistributed[14]. That said, the steel industry was renationalised when Labour came to government. For some though this was a symbolic gesture to the Left of the party. Gesture or otherwise, this sole nationalisation project does not amount to a wholesale reversal of the Conservatives round of privatisation; and as Labour had arguably revised its approach to democratic socialism

14 For a discussion on the 'Future of Socialism' and the redefinition of Labour during the 1950s see Crosland, A. For an assessment of the revision this represented see Briggs, A. in http://tinyurl.com/y7lzgp

through market mechanisms neither does it indicate 'consensus politics'.

The relationship between government and unionised labour continued to be of importance for the Labour governments of 1964-70. The relationship between government and labour was, as noted above, difficult for the Conservatives and continued to be turbulent for Labour. By the middle of the sixties full-employment appeared to have been dropped from the agenda, perhaps by a 'negative consensus', but more likely due to the frequent clashes with trade unions on economic policy, (for example, wages policy in 1968), in times of pressure on the economy. Regulation of trade union activity became seen as increasingly necessary. In 'In Place of Strife'[15] the Labour government proposed a series of measures which would have restricted trade union activity. The proposal in the White Paper never became legislation: Labour left government in 1970 and the Conservatives, who perhaps had needed the party of labour to reform labour relations, did not take this proposed legislation forward when entering government in June.

Another area of interest to consensus theorists and myth-busters alike is British policy towards Europe and European cooperation projects. The 1950s saw healthy debate and disagreement both between and within the two major political parties on the role of Britain in relation to the project of economic and political integration on the continent. The Conservatives toyed with both participation and alternative multilateral approaches, such as the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) agreements made in competition with the European Economic Community (EEC). Labour during the 1950s was critical of applications to the EEC, yet later, in the 1960s, became more pro-European. Governments of both parties made applications to join the EEC during the period in the question and both were rejected. A place in Europe was finally secured by the Conservatives in 1973, later renegotiated by Labour in '74 and with a referendum on membership proposed and won in 1975. Here we can see the long time line of European relations and see that both parties had times of confidence and times of crisis – these are, perhaps, the only similarities, between these actors over the period.

Osmosis can again been seen in debates on Europe. There were shifts in the policy of the two major political parties, showing a gradual process of absorption of ideas and politic from each other and from society at large. EEC membership was not secured until after the period in the question. That both political parties played the roles of advocate and detractor over this whole time line shows a lack of 'consensus politics'.

15 Government White Paper Cmnd 3888

In my introduction I stated that I did not find 'consensus politics' as marking 1951-70. I have demonstrated the utility of understanding this period with the prism of 'osmosis' - although this description is limited as it concentrates on the point where the political parties meet, the centre ground of British politics, and therefore downplays the spectrum of opinion within political parties. There is, after all, great complexity in all political periods and whatever term is used must reflect this. 'Consensus politics' is blunt and is limited in describing the contradictions and conflicts in politics. For Kerr 'consensus politics' needs to be abandoned completely as he see it as a constraint on understanding the complexity of British politics: “In its place, we need to begin to reappraise the dynamic and constantly evolving relationships and conflicts which structured the development of postwar public policy. This would enable us not only to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the earlier postwar period, but also to generate a better conception of the Thatcher years and beyond.”[16]

Word count 2734

16 Kerr, (1999), p. 85

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