

Lecture 4

The Era of 'Consensus', 1951-70

Dr Richard Grayson, Head of Politics

Definitions of Consensus

- 'consensus on consensus' - Rodney Lowe, 'The Second World War, Consensus, and the Foundations of the Welfare State', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 / 2 (1990), pp. 152-82, see p. 153
- Full employment
- Mixed economy
- Active government
- Welfare
- Conciliation of trades unions
- Expertise

Definitions of Consensus

What do we mean by consensus?

- Ends – seen in continuity between governments.
- Style – agreement on goals after process of negotiation and deliberation.
- Negative – agreed on what is not on agenda.
- Relative – compared to other periods.

Source: Dennis Kavanagh, 'The Postwar Consensus', *Twentieth Century British History*, 3, 2 (1992), pp. 175-190.

Debates on Consensus

- Ben Pimlott, 'The Myth of Consensus', in L.M. Smith, ed., *The Making of Britain: Echoes of Greatness* (1988)
- Harriet Jones & Michael Kandiah eds., *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (1996) – harmony of purpose?
- Kevin Hickson, 'The Postwar Consensus Revisited', *Political Quarterly*, 75, 2 (2004), pp. 142-154 - 'policy convergence coexisted with ideological divergence'

Prime Ministers



Churchill
1951-55



Eden
1955-57



Macmillan
1957-63



Douglas-
Home
1963-64



Wilson
1964-70

Elections

	1951	1955	1959
Con	321	344	365
Lab	295	277	258
Lib	6	6	6
Other	3	3	1

Elections

	1964	1966	1970
Con	304	253	330
Lab	317	363	287
Lib	9	12	6
Other	0	3	7

Conservatives 1951-64

Economy

- 'Stop-go' budgets in which interest rates and taxes are used to increase or reduce demand – *Butskellism*
- Iron, steel & road haulage denationalised in 1953
- Priority for tackling inflation rejected – replacement of Thorneycroft by Heathcoat-Amory as Chancellor

Other domestic policies

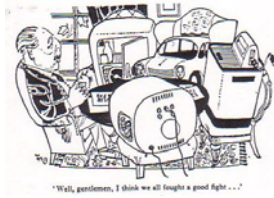
- Food de-rationed in 1954
- Housing – continued growth
- 1954 rail strike

Suez Crisis 1956

- To finance Aswan dam, Nasser nationalised Suez Canal.
- Oct 1956 – Israel attacked Egypt, UK & France intervened.
- US pressure forces withdrawal.
- Disputes in Parliament.
- Eden resigned on health grounds.

Harold Macmillan, 1957-63

- “You’ve never had it so good”
- Supermac (Vicky Cartoon, 1958)



Conservative Problems

- 1962 strikes by railways, postmen and nurses
- 1963 unemployment reached 800,000
- Liberal revival – Eric Lubbock wins at Orpington in March 1962
- Scandals
 - William Vassall
 - John Profumo and Christine Keeler

Labour in Opposition

- Hugh Gaitskell elected leader in 1955
- Row in 1960 over defence – Gaitskell loses, but wins in 1961
- Gaitskell defeated on Clause IV of Labour Party Constitution in 1959-60



1959 election video

Labour Revisionism

- Anthony Crosland - elected MP in 1950, but defeated in 1955 having moved seats.
- *The Future of Socialism* (1956):
 - Capitalism has changed so nationalisation no longer necessary
 - Equality of opportunity:
 - tax property and wealth rather than income
 - revenues of economic growth



White Heat

- Alec Douglas-Home PM 1963-64
- Harold Wilson leader in Jan 1963
- “white heat of the technological revolution”



Harold Wilson, 1964-70

- 1965: National Board for Prices and Incomes
- 1966 Queen's Speech: steel renationalisation, comprehensive education, EEC entry
- 1967: devaluation – ‘the pound in your pocket’
- TUC opposes wages policy in 1968
- Liberalisation of laws on homosexuality and abortion (both 1967), with capital punishment scrapped in 1965
- Economy improving by Sept 1969

The Unions

- 1965 Trade Disputes Act protects union leaders from prosecution over breach of contract
- May 1966 National Union of Seamen strike
- 1968-69 Barbara Castle
(Employment Minister)
puts forward *In Place of Strife*
- Legal sanctions on strikes without conciliation period – fails due to union and backbench opposition



Conclusions

- Major differences are over scope not principles e.g. nationalisation
- Significant differences between party activists
- Bitter disputes over Suez
- Major divisions increasingly between all parties and unions
- Key question – is convergence more or less than usual?
