

Conservative dominance essay sample

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' The main reason for conservative dominance in the years 1951 to 1964 was labour disunity' Assess the validity of this view. (June 2011) Labour disunity was a huge contributing factor as to why the conservatives were able to dominate from 1951 to 1964. However, there are also other factors that assisted conservative dominance. Whether that be conservative strengths, good timing, the end of austerity or their handle on public opinion, all factors contributed to the dominant years. However, how long the conservatives actually dominated is also a question. Did they dominate for the whole period, or just part of it? The years 1962-1964 question conservative dominance and how labour reunited. One of the major reasons why Conservatives were able to dominate politics so much between 1951 and 1964 was because the Labour Party failed to provide effective opposition. Firstly, there was the identity problem. By 1951 the Labour party had still to decide exactly what sort of party it was and what aims it should pursue. Many felt that the welfare state was just the first step towards true socialism, whereas others felt it was as far left as the party should go. The radical end of the party had supported Attlee but had felt that he should've gone further. With a new leader they felt the time was right to express their dissatisfaction. This lack of identity, sense of direction and organisation within the party would eventually cause the split between them. Gaitskell was always associated with the right wing of the Labour party and was regarded with suspicion by the labour left. Disagreements and personal feuds, between ' Gaitskellites' and ' Bevanites' became an almost permanent feature of Labour in opposition after 1951. ' Bevanites' wanted large trade unions to have a major say in shaping party policy. On the other hand the

more moderate Gaitskell refuted the left on both issues therefore causing a split in the party. He believed that these radical policies would steer the party down an unelectable road and he became convinced that this after the 1959 election. Lynch said that Hugh Gaitskell was 'undoubtedly one of the most gifted politicians of the day'. However, this so called 'gifted politician' failed to solve the disunity of the party before the 1959 election, where Labour were crushed, intensifying the split within the party further. Poor labour policies will also be seen as a reason including the party's anti-Europe line and an ill thought out pension policy were part of this. The party offered some moderate policies but did not appear progressive or forward-looking.

As a result, the conservative government increased its Commons majority from 58 to 100 seats. Many of the 'Bevanites' within the party were also unilateralists and wanted to get rid of atomic powers (CND) - some for economic reasons others because of the pro Russian sentiment. This campaign for unilateral disarmament prompted the demonstration at Aldermaston, in Berkshire in 1958 where 8000 people took part. Unilateralism became a powerful magnet for anti-government protests almost a substitute for opposition in parliament. Many Labour left-wingers joined in. The links between CND and the Labour left may as well have turned some voters away from Labour in the 1959 election. Frank Cousins (leader of TGWU) led a fierce attack on Gaitskell over Britain's nuclear weapons in 1956. The battle over the future direction of the Labour party was fought at the annual party conferences at Blackpool in 1959 and at Scarborough in 1960.

The Scarborough conference became a legend in labour's history because of Gaitskell's 'fight and fight again to save the party we love' speech after he was defeated over nuclear disarmament. The Blackpool conference was equally as important as it highlighted labour's missed opportunity to modernise and abolish Clause IV to nationalise key industry. The split between these two groups within the party, their contrasting personalities and ideologies on how it should be run and progress forward, consequently halted their progress throughout the 1950's, and therefore aided the conservative dominance. Failure to exploit opportunities was also another labour problem. The 1956 Suez crisis provided labour with a great opportunity to get back on the attack. If there had been a general election in 1957 then things may have favoured labour. However, Suez did not split the conservatives and labour were left with few targets to aim at in hoping to gain more supporters. The Labour party's inability to counter conservative mistakes was a direct result of their disunity.

As well as labour disunity there are other factors to consider as to why conservatives dominated. Firstly, the reorganisation of the party machine led by Lord Woolton after the dislocation caused by the war and the shock defeat for the conservatives in 1946 proved pivotal for the conservatives in improving their ideas (new conservatives with new ideas) and general organisation. The conservatives recognised the extent of public approval for the legacy of the Attlee government. Most Conservatives grasped the political realities of the time. There can be no outright rejection of the welfare state, nor a total reversal of nationalisation. Attitudes towards industry, the trade unions and social policy were going to have to be very

different from the 1930s because the experiences of the war years had made people far more ready to accept the need for state intervention and planning. The post-war years had seen living standards rise, proving to be very popular with the general public as well as the importance of maintaining full employment. The conservatives were anxious to avoid being seen once again as the 'party of mass unemployment'. Moreover, the NHS had already assumed iconic status meaning the conservatives evolved their view and became less hostile to the welfare state.

Partially by conviction and partly by necessity, the new government accepted the existence of the so-called postwar consensus. This acceptance proved to be a vital strategy by the conservatives. By pleasing the public and staying in touch with the Attlee legacy the conservatives proved they could give the public what they wanted and increase their support. In addition, 1951 marked the end of 'austerity' and the start of the long post-war boom. Conservatives were lucky in their timing as they came to power at time of beginning of economic recovery. Men's weekly wages were going up (£8. 30 in 1951 and £15. 35 in 1961), massive increases in personal savings, and a boom in car ownership. Home ownership increased, helped by the access to cheap mortgages. Harold Macmillan as housing minister at this time achieved his target of 300, 000 homes year. The arrival of new towns such as Corby and Stevenage in 1940's as well as farm yields increasing due to state subsidies, food rationing was able to end completely in 1954. This surge in the ownership of consumer goods (e. g TVs washing machines), wages increasing and food production, as well as the introduction of

advertising when ITV was launched in 1955 conveyed the affluence in the 1950s.

This affluence, a result of the end of austerity, was to some degree, received by luck and timing but partly from the conservatives taking full advantage. Furthermore, the controlling role of individuals, as well as the remarkable ability of Conservatives to manage changes of leadership without too much blood being split in power struggles is another reason why the Conservatives were able to dominate throughout the period. Harold Macmillan or ‘Supermac’ had a strong reputation before coming prime minister. As housing minister and fulfilling his promise in bring 300,000 new homes a year in the 1951 housing manifesto he proved himself as a political success. Macmillan, was also a safe choice, especially compared to the alternative Butler, who had many enemies, even within his own party. Anthony Eden, the main cause of the Suez crisis, had disappeared and so did the crisis with him. Suez hung over British foreign policy for another 50 years, but did not really dent Conservative political dominance at home, favouring them in the period. As Prime Minister, Macmillan commanded a remarkable aura of confidence and political mastery. For five years, Macmillan appeared to be in full control of affairs. The postwar economic boom was continuing.

The Labour party was in disarray, increasingly preoccupied with its own internal battles. Macmillan seem to have the media in the palm of his hand, using the new political opportunities provided by television with flair. His theoretical style, elegance and calm nature is also noted by historians. The Sunday Times journalist James Margach thought Macmillan was , with Attlee, ‘one of the two most left-wing prime ministers of my 40 years reporting
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politics'. This idea of Macmillan proves he was a post-war consensus politician with the interests of the people at the forefront of his policies.

Macmillan and most of his cabinet, such as Rab Butler, minister of labour, Iain Macleod, and education secretary, Edward Boyle, were capable and efficient political managers, in tune with public opinion. In October 1959, after just more than 18 months in power Macmillan was able to call a general election at a time of his own choosing, when consumer prosperity was high and coinciding with April tax cuts, making it favourable to himself and his party.

Macmillan's ability to keep in touch with public opinion, his ability to manage the economy (especially to produce expansion in time for elections), his capability to push forward the boom and his sense of charisma, his ideologies and theatrical style is why he was able to lead to conservatives to such a long period of dominance. However, in assessing the question and the period that it claims conservative dominated there is notable challenge to this. The conservatives did indeed dominant from 1951 to 1962. However, their hold on the economy politics and their dominance was severely weakened from 1962-64. Macmillan's failure to join the EEC was a symbol of failure in bringing about economic modernisation and a sign to the government that they were 'no longer surfing on a wave of prosperity and economic success. It became evident that the hopes of radical modernisation of the infrastructure made only stuttering progress with the conservative party. The cycle of 'stop-go' economics had been broken meaning Britain was still step behind foreign competitors.

Macmillan, in an attempt to rectify this introduced the 'pay-pause' in 1961 to hold down wage inflation and the NEDC in 1962 in an attempt to get

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economic cooperation between government, employees and unions. Both failed to improve the economic situation. Politically there were also problems in the conservative party. The key political event was the brutal reshuffle known as the 'Night of the Long Knives'. Macmillan believed this purge of his cabinet would rejuvenate the government and give them some much needed flair. The effect was the opposite, it actually severely weakened the party. Moreover, the first personal disaster to strike Macmillan was the 1963 Profumo affair. It left him embarrassed as his defence secretary lied about his actions and in turn portrayed a poor, inefficient, untrustworthy government in the short term. The political impact didn't add up in the long term, but the image of Macmillan as an old and out of touch with the position was reinforced. Furthermore, Macmillan was undermined by serious illness and resigned in 1963 without indicating who should take over.

Confusion set in and the image of the conservatives was once again effected. The Vassal sky affair along with the Duke or Argyll Case also assisted this growing image. The two events scandals were not a direct reason as to why the conservatives lost control but reflected badly on the whole establishment. It is clear through economic and political problems throughout the years 62-64 that the conservative dominance was no longer intact and deteriorated rapidly. In summation, while the Attlee legacy was still popular, Labour division and disunity helped the conservative party stay in power for such a long period. Their lack of identity, split between 'Bevanites and Gaitskellites', poor policies towards Europe and the pension plan all contributed to conservative dominance. From this, you could say that the

view is extremely valid and the labour had a huge impact. However, this is forgetting the huge conservative strengths.

Whether that be Macmillan's personal dominance, their perfect timing, the air of affluence in the post-war boom or the pleasing of the public opinion in their policies, the conservative strengths were also a reason they were dominant from 1951 to 1962. Moreover, the conservative lack of domination from 1962 until they fell from power in 1964 was partly their own fault but partly labours. The economic problems in modernisation and failure to join the EEC in 1963 can be seen as their own fault. On the other hand, the fact about managed to unify in term of direction was another reason why conservatives were no longer dominant. If labour had gained this unity earlier then they could have imposed more pressure, and taken power sooner, rather than leaving it until the powerful and likeable Harold Wilson came along. Therefore, both Labour disunity and conservative strengths contributed to their dominance until 1962, when their hold deteriorated and labour began to pull together. With this, the view holds a certain validity in the way labour disunity was a factor but overlooks the strengths of the conservatives and the period which they were actually dominant.