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consensus
government politics



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Consensus Government Politics

Were the years 1951-70 really marked by 'Consensus Politics'?

In 1945 the Labour Party, led by Clement Attlee, won an historical general election victory when they defeated the Conservatives, by an astounding majority. Many Labour policies had evolved from their time spent in the coalition government and were not significantly different from those put forward in the Conservative Party Manifesto, at the time of the election. It is this overlap between Conservative and Labour policies and the continuity that existed as they alternated in government between 1951 and 1970 that will be examined. This analysis seeks to evaluate arguments surrounding the issue of whether this was a period characterised by consensus, and if there was a convergence between the two leading parties, was it more or less than usual.

Therefore, in order to assess whether the years 1951-70 were marked by consensus politics, it is necessary to analyse the theoretical context of how different political historians define the term consensus and whether it was prevalent during the post-war era. It is also important to consider the historical context and analyse the similarities and differences on issues and policy objectives of the two main parties.

Thus, it will be argued that the years 1951-70 did mark an era of consensus politics within several key issue areas; however this is countered by the fact that specific policy details and party ideologies still emphasised the underlying differentiation between the two parties.

The term consensus is from the Latin verb, 'consentio,' which when translated means 'to agree.' The historian, Dennis Kavanagh advocates that consensus can have, 'the following overlapping usages when applied to post-war policy.' Firstly, the style of government characterised by the increased interaction between government and major economic agents, such as trade unions and product interest groups.

Secondly, the range of politics enacted, which were based to a large extent on the Beveridge Report and Keynesian Economics, and this is defined to be the 'consensus of ends'. Thirdly, a negative consensus is one where there seemed to be an agreement on what was not on the agenda. This can be represented for example on issues such as the abolition of the monarchy as well as monetarist economic policies.

Finally, when analysing this period with respect to other eras, there seems to be a greater convergence of opinion and policies between the parties than at any other point in British politics, and this consensus is defined as relative or historical. However, Nick Ellison believes that consensus can have two different interpretations. Procedural consensus 'conveys little more than broad agreement amongst political elites about the basic direction of policy-making. A substantive consensus goes beyond general frameworks into a deeper ideological identification of purpose about aims and objectives of specific policies.'

Paul Addison's, 'The Road to 1945,' is often thought to be the first commentary on the issue of political consensus and asserts that there is a debate between, 'a consensus school of historians and an anti-consensus

school who contend that consensus is a retrospective myth invented by historians.' He claims that, ' the national unity of the war years gave rise to a new consensus which would define the boundaries of policy-making for the following three decades.'

Addison saw the ideas of the consensus as developing through the war and early post-war years, influenced by the ideas of Attlee's government who set the framework for policymaking over the next few decades. Additionally, he argues that critics of the post-war consensus have misinterpreted the definition put forward by advocates of the post-war consensus. He defines it as an, ' agreement between civil servants and ministerialists of both parties: an elite consensus...and continuity between the policies of Labour and Conservative governments,' and not just a broad consensus between the two parties.

However, it is important to note that they do not believe that there was a lack of disagreement during this period, just that this was contained and that ' continuity existed alongside a highly adversarial party system.' In particular, Kavanagh and Morris claim consensus existed over the need for a welfare state, importance of a mixed economy, often referred to as Butskellism, commitment to full employment, the retreat from imperialism and membership of the Atlantic Alliance. Peter Hennessy and Anthony Seldon established the Institute of Contemporary British History in 1986, and were supporters to the idea of a post-war consensus. As founders of the institution they, ' commissioned a series of texts on post-war history and invited Dennis Kavanagh and Peter Morris to contribute a study entitled ' Consensus Politics from Attlee to Thatcher.' They defined the post-war

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consensus to be, ' a set of parameters which bounded the set of policy options regarded by senior politicians and civil servants as administratively practicable, economically affordable and politically acceptable.'

The Labour party governed Britain from 1945-51, however by the time the Conservatives were re-elected in 1951, Labour had already created a comprehensive welfare state under the guidance of the Beveridge Report which, ' envisaged that social security should be part of a comprehensive plan for welfare and include a national health service and full employment.' The National Health Service provided free treatment to everyone and a Social Security system which provided benefits from the ' cradle to grave'.

There was a large-scale housing programme to build new homes and remove slums, and full employment being actively pursued, which were both seen as essential to relieve poverty and improve the wellbeing and morale of citizens. Therefore, the foundations of the welfare state had already been laid out when the Conservatives were elected in 1951. Crucially, Churchill's administration did not choose to dismantle what Labour had produced, and largely accepted the main features of the welfare state.

Furthermore, government investment on social services, as a proportion to total government spending, increased from 39 per cent in 1951 to 43 per cent in 1955. This demonstrates a consensus of ends, as there is not only an acceptance of the principles of the welfare state but even the enhancement of it and therefore, highlights the post-war consensus by both parties on this issue.

Another main policy consensus area was in the management of the economy. During the Atlee government many large industries were nationalised, such as coal, railways, iron, steel and gas which forced a mixed economy policy agenda. Most of these industries already had a history of government involvement and required huge resources for investment and modernisation.

However, strong opposition from the Conservative Party did not start until 1947, when the legislation was concerned with road haulage and the iron and steel industry. The Conservatives became committed to continuing state regulation in key industries that were already state managed. This included fuel and transport industries, and with the exception of iron and steel and road haulage many of these industries remained nationalised under successive Conservative governments. Overall they accepted the nationalisation programme and did little to change the balance of the mixed economy until after 1980.

Perhaps the most important feature of the consensus was the commitment of government to provide full employment. This was a priority, not only of the Labour government of 1945 but of all subsequent governments during the period of 1951-70. This issue was very popular with the electorate, especially in 1945, with the memory of the misery of unemployment in the inter-war years still fresh in the minds of many.

Both parties adopted the Keynesian demand management techniques, which deem that it is possible to control unemployment through government borrowing and spending. Demand management influenced economic policies

and budgets, for both parties from 1947 onwards, and further, this interventionist approach was adopted by both parties as, ' Conservative governments consequently...pursued a broadly Keynesian macroeconomic policy complete with the commitment to full employment.'

Henceforth, when analysing the trade off between high inflation and low unemployment, both Labour and Conservatives agreed that maintaining low unemployment was the priority. This convergence of opinion is emphasised when, ' The Economist invented the mythical composite personality of Mr Butskell, a combination of the names of Rab Butler, Conservative Chancellor 1951-1955, and his predecessor Hugh Gaitskell, Labour Chancellor 1950-51.' This was to symbolise the convergence and continuity of economic policy, between the two Chancellors, of pursuing full employment, at the expense of low inflation, by the means of Keynesian demand management techniques.

In addition, Peter Thorneycroft, Conservative Chancellor 1957-58, wanted to shift government policy from accomplishing full employment to tackling inflation by reducing government expenditure in public services. However, Macmillan, Prime Minister at the time, was resolute that the former was imperative to government policy and this led to Thorneycroft's resignation, along with Treasury Ministers, Enoch Powell and Nigel Birch, ' is commonly presented as the commitment to full employment and the welfare state and defeat for the Treasury and the objective of price stability...with Thorneycroft presented as an ' early martyr' for the cause of monetarism.' Therefore, this highlights the full employment policy introduced by Attlee was being continued by successive Conservative administrations, even though there seemed to be internal conflict regarding the issue. Furthermore, this can be

deemed as a consensus in negative terms as both parties believed that a monetarist agenda should not be pursued.

Furthermore, foreign and defence policies, which were put in place by Attlee's Labour government of 1945, remained consistent throughout the period. The programme of decolonisation began under Attlee and Churchill continued Labour's policy of gradual retreat by withdrawing the military presence in Egypt and by the late 1970s the empire had been completely dismantled. This demonstrates a continuity of government policy, however it is very rare that under different governments a radical shift in foreign policy occurs. Therefore, whether foreign policy can be included as a significant example in a post-war consensus is unconvincing.

Despite these similarities in policies adopted by the two main parties during the post-war era, many still argue that there was no clearly identifiable consensus. The revisionist movement started when Ben Pimlott claimed that fundamental conflicts between the Conservative and Labour Parties were still unresolved by the Second World War, and that it was time for the 'consensus term to join other phrases in the dustbin of historiography.'

Furthermore, Pimlott believes that when historians commentate on the past, it is consequently a commentary of the present and, 'thus the account of a past golden age of harmony is a way of underlining a sense of insecurity about the political debate today.' Therefore, Pimlott argues that due to the adversarial politics of the present, historians have been distorted on their analysis of the post-war era, which has amplified the theory of consensus politics and further argues that, 'consensus in politics is very rare; and that,

further, the so-called post-war consensus is actually a mirage, fading the more closely one tries to inspect it.'

Harriet Jones, another revisionist, concludes that there was not an unusual level of post-war consensus. She also contends that due to an unusual degree of political conflict during the 1970s and 1980s, have affected the judgement of the post-war period and led to the misguided belief in a post-war consensus.

She suggests an alternative interpretation of the post-war political climate claiming wartime collectivist values combined with the emergence of the Cold War, creating a domestic climate in the post-war period which, 'made the resolution of class conflict within a capitalist framework an overriding imperative of elite policy formation.' However, Jones concedes that critics have oversimplified the post-war consensus thesis resulting in its incorrect interpretation by some as an absence of significant political debate.

The fundamental differences that historians of the 'anti-consensus' school advocate that there were still, 'deep ideological divisions both between and within the parties, and the policies which are most often associated with consensus politics were actually the product of conflict.' When analysing the mixed economy, the Labour Party wanted to extend government control to other industries but the Conservative Party wanted to denationalise specific industries. Henceforth, in 1953, under Churchill's administration the iron and steel industry, which was nationalised by Labour in 1949, was denationalised. This was then renationalised by Labour, under Wilson in

1967, and demonstrates that there was a divergence of opinion on these two specific industries.

In, 'The Myth of Mr. Butskell,' Scott Kelly dismisses the consensual view that Butler and Gaitskell's policies converged. He argues that, 'divergence between Gaitskell's vision of a controlled economy and Butler's of a free one represented a fundamental disagreement over the aims and methods of economic policy.' Butler was against economic planning, believing it would constrain economic activity and distort market forces.

He advocated that government should propose a more expansionist economic policy, which would lead to economic confidence, which stimulates greater private investment and results in economic growth. In contrast, Gaitskell always argued that by removing controls in the economy, as Butler advocated, 'would lead to the government having to choose between deflation and unemployment on one hand or inflation and a balance of payments crisis on the other.'

Therefore, Gaitskell believed that controls and fiscal planning could be used to maintain a consistently high level of demand and assurance of full employment. The arguments formed by Kelly, demonstrate the great differences between Gaitskell and Butler's policies, which political historians who argue for a post-war consensus seem to dismiss, even though they are ones that are well-founded.

Another issue which does not adhere to a bi-partisan consensus was housing strategy. Though both parties were committed to improving welfare provisions during this period, their approaches were different. During this

period, both parties had a significant number of new houses built, Labour completed over one million in six and a half years and the Conservatives average for each year was just under 300, 000. The houses built by the Labour Party were mainly local authority houses that could be let out for ' fair rents' but those built under the Conservative governments were mainly private houses built for owner occupation, helping to create a ' property-owning democracy'.

Between 1945 and 1975 the number of owner occupied houses had increased from 28 per cent to 55 per cent, though public rented houses only increased by 14 per cent from, 16 per cent to 30 per cent. This demonstrates the ideological conflicts between the two parties and it affects the manner in which government policy is implemented. Further, with regards to education policy, debates within the Labour Party on changing the structure of the secondary education system did not emerge strongly until the late 1950s, and although they wanted to integrate public schools into the state system, the Conservatives were in favour of keeping them independent.

However, in 1965 Labour successfully launched comprehensive schools to replace existing grammar and secondary modern schools. The Conservatives Party were opposed to this overhaul and retained many of the grammar schools. The ideological divergence on education policy has again lead to differing policy initiatives and emphasises a specific flaw in the post-war consensus between the two parties.

It is arguable therefore, in broad policy terms, it can be interpreted, that because successive Conservative governments continued on with Attlee's

social and economic reforms, that there was indeed a political consensus. However, when analysing policy details in a more critical manner it can be argued that, in the years 1951-70, the aims of the parties always differed profoundly, in areas such as the economy, education, housing and privatising key industries.

The definition of post-war consensus surrounds the debate of whether it existed. Addison argues that the consensus was not just between the parties, but between civil servants and ministerialists of both parties. Therefore, he has been misinterpreted and faced some undue criticism from revisionists of the anti-consensus school by Pimlott and Jones, who both argue that consensus itself was a myth, created by historians reflecting on a golden era.

This analysis has considered both the theoretical and historical context of whether the years 1951-70 were really marked by consensus and concludes that though there was a convergence on several issues, more than at any one time in post-war British politics, the underlying ideologies of the parties made sure it never became absolute.

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