

Was there  
consensus in post  
war british politics  
politics essay



In the context of politics, the term consensus can be defined as a broad agreement exists between parties on important areas of policy[1]. Despite first being used as early as the 1950s, the word 'consensus' came to prominence in 1975 when Paul Addison used it to describe the perceived similarities in the goals and policies of the alternating Labour and Conservative governments in the post-war period. The end of World War II was arguably a "catalyst for the implementation of ideas"[2] which had been building for decades prior to the outbreak of war. However, the supposed consensus which existed began to disintegrate in the late 1970s.

Commentators, including Brian Harrison, have pinned its demise to 1975 and the appointment of Margaret Thatcher as Conservative party leader due to her "struggle (against) those who pursued consensus"[3]. Crucially, the notion of consensus has not been met with universal acceptance; historians, including Pimlott, have suggested it was a myth, proposing that "consensus is a mirage; an illusion that rapidly fades the closer one gets to it"[4]. In spite of this however, it will be argued that there was indeed agreement between the major parties on fundamental issues. However, the parties often differed in terms of attitude and approach, thus suggesting that 'consensus' is too strong a word to describe this period. Concurring with Hennessy that "post-war settlement"[5] is perhaps a more appropriate description, this essay will take a thematic approach, assessing the degree of consensus in regard to three key areas: economic policy; social policy; and finally foreign and defence policy.

Perhaps the most significant area in which to measure the extent of political consensus is through the assessment of economic policy in the post-war

period. Public ownership is an area in which, ideologically at least, Labour and the Conservatives should have had divergent views. However, during the late 1940s, coal, gas, electricity, iron and steel were all nationalised and, by the early 1950s, 20 per cent of industry and commerce was state-controlled[6]. Crucially, it was a Labour government responsible for the nationalisation statutes in the 1940s while the Conservatives remained opposed to such measures, pledging to reverse the statutes and return industry to the private sector. Whilst such plans were never realised, it would be too simplistic to make the assumption that this meant a consensus had been reached. Rather, a convincing case can be made to suggest that a compromise, as opposed to agreement, was reached, with the Conservatives accepting public ownership “unwillingly”[7]because they sought to avoid causing further disruption. However unwilling the Conservatives may have been, it is clear that, at least until the early 1970s, public ownership remained a point of consensus between the two main parties; the only significant change in this field occurred in 1964 with the renationalisation of iron and steel by Wilson’s Labour government.

Moreover, strategy towards employment is arguably another key aspect of post-war economic policy which initially points towards a consensus between the two main parties. Following the mass unemployment which characterised the inter-war period, the Second World War virtually eradicated this problem. Understandably, both Labour and the Conservatives sought to maintain this at the end of the war, as outlined in the White Paper on Employment in 1944 which stated that the “maintenance of a high and stable level of employment”[8]would be a key priority for post-war governments. The belief

in Keynesianism and commitment to full employment was maintained for three decades, with unemployment averaging less than 3 per cent between 1945 and 1970[9]. Whilst at first this appears to be a clear indicator of consensus, a strong case can be made to suggest that both parties were motivated by pragmatism, believing that full employment was “ good politics”[10]as it kept morale high and people in work, thus increasing their likelihood of re-election. Furthermore, it is clear that the Conservatives were arguably reluctant partners in the commitment to full employment. Whilst Labour declared its support for introducing measures in the private sector to help achieve full employment, the Conservatives showed a greater degree of reticence. Throughout the 1950s, the Conservatives pledged only to “ maintain”[11]present policy, with Kavanagh suggesting this was merely an attempt to “ live down their reputation as the party of unemployment in the 1930s”[12]. Subtly, this suggests that the only real source of consensus was in the rhetoric of both parties who both claimed to be advocates of Keynesian economics despite, however, speaking “ it with different accents and differing emphasis”[13].

What is more, a third significant aspect of economic policy which, on the surface, suggests a strong degree of consensus in the post-war period concerns trade unions. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, trade unions retained their important role in politics for another thirty years after the Labour defeat in 1951 because, as Peter Dorey asserts, both parties “ accepted the desirability of working with, rather than against”[14]trade unions.

Demonstrating the extent of the consensus, in the late 1940s, the Conservative party asserted its “ acceptance of, and commitment

to"[15]trade unionism. A convincing case can be made to suggest that both parties had converging views on trade unions because they appreciated the symbiotic relationship between government and the unions. The avoidance of the 1953 railway strike is a prime example of this; the strike was prevented following close negotiations between the government and National Union of Railwaymen, demonstrating what could be achieved by close co-operation between the two[16]. However, it is important to assess the nature of the perceived consensus. Significantly, trade unions have been described by the likes of the historian Matthias Matthijs as Labour's "paymasters"[17]due to the large proportion of party funding they provided. In contrast, the Conservatives were independent from the trade unions and were, thus, more critical of trade unionism, seeking to reform the way in which unions functioned. Therefore, it is clear that, despite sharing the same fundamental belief in the importance of trade unions, both parties had differing attitudes and approaches as a result of their conflicting interests.

A further key area, which is essential to discuss in order to assess the extent to which there was a consensus in post-war British politics, is social policy, with particular reference to the National Health Service, welfare, and education. A strong argument can be made to support the assertion that there was indeed a great deal of consensus between the two main parties regarding the welfare state. By the fall of the Labour government in 1951, the foundations were arguably complete but, crucially, if the newly-elected Conservative government had reversed Labour's plans, the NHS and welfare state would not have come into existence. The very fact that the Conservatives chose to continue with Labour's plans implies a mutual

appreciation and “ acceptance of the key principles”[18]which underpinned welfare provision. In fact, every government, regardless of party, committed to “ maintaining and improving”[19]the welfare state, except for the Heath government between 1970 and 1972. Moreover, following the publication of the Beveridge Report in 1942, it is plausible to suggest that the NHS and welfare state represented more than simply a consensus on policy; instead, the report arguably profoundly influenced both parties and subtly suggests a consensus in their beliefs and principles. This assertion is supported by the likes of Rodney Lowe, who argues that there was now an understanding that government could assume a “ positive”[20]role in improving the lives of its citizens.

However, despite evidence of a strong, universal commitment to the welfare state between 1945 and 1974, there is evidence of greater divergence between the two parties over time, particularly with regards to the provision of social services and education. Crucially, in the 1960s, elements within the Conservative party began to “ doubt”[21]the concept of universal welfare provision, believing instead that selectivity would both reduce welfare spending whilst also targetting those who needed help most. These divisions continued to grow throughout the 1960s and early 1970s as right-wing Conservatives began “ claim(ing) that high levels of welfare spending were (...) undermining the economy”[22]. Similarly, with regard to education, on the surface at least, this appeared to be a source of consensus; the Education Act of 1944 was conceived by the Conservatives but enacted by Labour, suggesting a common vision for secondary education in Britain. However, as noted by Nick Ellison, there was conflict between the two

parties regarding comprehensive and private education. The division on this issue highlights the fundamental ideological differences which existed between Labour and the Conservatives; Labour's "egalitarian perspective contrasted markedly with Conservative education policy"[23]. Significantly, this illustrates the limitations of consensus, suggesting that party ideology was not compromised in the name of consensus.

Finally, a third broad area which requires discussion in order to determine the extent to which there was a consensus in post-war British politics is foreign and defence policy, with particular reference to Europe, decolonisation and the British Commonwealth. The debate surrounding European integration can be seen, on the surface at least, as evidence of consensus in the post-war period. Throughout the 1950s, both parties remained "opposed"[24] to various ventures, including the formation of the Coal and Steel community in 1950 and, later in 1954, the establishment of a European Defence Community. However, by the 1960s, both parties simultaneously came to accept that joining the European Economic Community was the best way to "protect British interests"[25]. Crucially, the issue of European integration highlights an important feature of the consensus; whilst governments of both parties shared the same views on European integration, this was not necessarily representative of the opinions of party members, thus stressing the "elitist nature of consensus politics and its divorce from party opinion"[26].

Furthermore, the policy of decolonisation, achieved through the granting of independence to colonies and the subsequent transition to a Commonwealth, marked a clear departure from the policies pursued by Britain prior to the

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Second World War. Despite the drastic change in direction, both parties appear, in rhetoric at least, to have shared a common vision for the British Empire in the post-war era. This is highlighted in their 1950 election manifestos in which both Labour and the Conservatives outlined their commitment to the Commonwealth and decolonisation. The similarity in the language used is striking; Labour outlined its desire to “strengthen”[27]the association between nations while the Conservatives pledged to and “promote and support”[28]the Commonwealth. On the one hand, this can be perceived as highlighting the true extent to which both parties shared a united vision for post-war foreign policy. However, manifesto rhetoric does not always truly represent the views of the party. Anthony Seldon concurs with this, claiming that Labour was “enthusiastic”[29]while the Conservatives were more “reluctant”[30]about the prospect of decolonisation. However, there are several aspects where there is generally less debate regarding the extent of consensus between the main parties. For instance, both Labour and the Conservatives recognised the value of maintaining a nuclear deterrent and were also of the same view regarding the importance of both Britain’s membership to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the maintenance of close links with the USA[31]. Thus, it is clear that, whilst there were key elements of consensus in post-war foreign and domestic policy, there are also several examples of disagreement.

Overall, in assessing economic, social and foreign policy between 1945 and 1974, this essay has highlighted numerous points upon which Labour and the Conservative party have shared a common vision for post-war Britain. However, there are also many examples of disagreement and divergence



between the main parties. Fundamentally, it is clear that both parties shared broadly similar goals and policies but differed in terms of their attitude and approach to achieving their shared vision. The key issue is one of semantics, however. Historians have differing definitions of 'consensus', making it all the more difficult to assess the extent to which there was a consensus in this period. If Addison's definition of 'consensus' as a "historically unusual degree of agreement over a wide range of economic and social policies"[32] is accepted, then it is impossible to deny the strength of consensus in the post-war period. Crucially, as Seldon notes, the use of the word 'consensus' can be unhelpful as it is ambiguous, with some historians "referring to a consensus over policy"[33] while others advocate the existence of a "deeper, more profound commitment to a set of common beliefs and values"[34]. However, despite the ambiguity of the word, the extent to which the two main parties agreed on fundamental issues during this thirty year period was arguably unparalleled. In spite of the disagreements which occurred, there were no major shifts in policy and the existence of a broad consensus, amongst the governing elite at least, is undeniable.