

Post-war consensus was a myth

[History](#)



In 1945 Clement Attlee was elected Prime Minister of Great Britain. In the ensuing years, certain historians believe that there was a political consensus, a debate which was laid out by Paul Addison in 1975. ¹ However other historians such as Harriet Jones have disagreed with this and argue that this post-war political consensus was a myth. Other historians such as Kavanagh and Morris have defined consensus as " a high level of agreement at both elite and popular levels".

This essay will argue that there was consensus among the British political elite, however, it will also argue that, at 'popular levels' there is the view that a consensus between these supporters of the conservative and labour parties did not exist. The argument that post-war consensus was a myth is supported by the differences between their policies, as seen in the 1950's election manifestos.

In 1950 the Labour party were pursuing a policy of nationalisation of key industries within the British economy, for example the coal, electric and steel sectors. This is clearly stated in their manifesto with their defence of this policy arguing that " in 1949 output was 28 million tonnes higher than 1945" this, in the Labour party's opinion, showed that " nationalisation... has saved the British industry from collapse" ³.

Indeed, it can be seen from Attlee's own writing that nationalisation had always been an aim of the Labour party, as portrayed in his 1937 book *The Labour party in perspective* where he called for " the state ownership of all major industries" ⁴, however, historians such as Marr have pointed out that there is a distinct difference between the Labour party's ideology and what

they could practically achieve, which indicates that, as a political party, they were being ruled by their hearts and not their heads.

This is an argument that was echoed by the Conservative party at the time with their opposition of their nationalisation policies. The conservatives 1950's manifesto stated that " monopoly and bureaucracy should give place to competition and enterprise",⁶ this approach to economics typifies the conservative party's capitalist outlook, which shows all too clearly that a post-war consensus on economic matters-between the two parties-was a myth. Kavanagh and Morris' definition of consensus, with their separation of the elite and populace triggers another argument that consensus was a myth.

The historian Harriet Jones argues that a consensus did not exist between the political parties' supporters did not exist as the grass root followers found it difficult to establish common interest and goals, even Addison admits that " the post-war plans of the coalition were never more than short term compromises"⁷this shows that a consensus could not have existed long term because of the deeply rooted ideological differences which according to Harriet Jones were very deeply apparent during Winston Churchill's peace time government which was elected in 1951, which can be seen in the Conservative's manifesto which is peppered with constant references to the " socialists" and the " crushing burden" which they impose upon the nation.

This illustrates that a consensus never existed thus it was a 'myth' because of the incompatibility of the two parties with the deep ideological differences which perturbed them from working together. Some believe that the election

results of 1945 are a good indication of this incompatibility as the Labour victory was a land slide victory, this resounding defeat of the conservatives highlights that there were distinguishable differences between the two factions of the British political system.

Arguments in favour of a political consensus following 1945 also exist, during this period the majority of policies followed by the two parties were essentially the same and were heavily influenced by the Beveridge report of 1942, which is considered the founding stage of the welfare state. This consensus of policy can be seen as certain areas of the party's political strategy didn't change from one government to the next, such as education and foreign policies which showed that there was a common vision for post-war reconstruction. In 1944 the government passed the Education Act which reformed the British secondary education system, which according to Peter Hennessy was " the first great legal marker of the classic welfare state".

This act was written by the conservative minister Butler, but was implemented practically by his labour successor following the 1945 election, showing a level of consensus as both parties had the same direction. Butler himself believed that a political consensus existed after 1945 especially between himself and Wilkinson the labour education minister as he said " both of us spoke the language of Keynesianism". This shows on this issue there was a definite political consensus that existed in the post-war era amongst the political elite. This feeling of consensus amongst the two parties can also be seen through the study of other policies which didn't really change between the different governments, for example foreign policy.

In 1945 Ernest Bevin became the foreign secretary and essentially continued the policies of Sir Antony Eden with whom he had worked closely during the wartime coalition. Kavanagh and Morris point out that following the labour victory in 1945 Attlee laid out his main foreign policy aims which included "retreat from the Empire... [to pursue... Britain's role as a nuclear power and membership of the Atlantic alliance]",¹¹ which they argue were policies that were accepted and pursued by conceding conservative governments as well. The retreat from the Empire which meant granting colonies independence and promoting the concept of the Commonwealth was a crucial change in direction for Britain during this era.

The similarities in policies which concern the creation of the Commonwealth can be seen through the comparison of election manifestos. The labour party's manifesto recognises "the desire of the Commonwealth countries for complete national self-determination... [Which]... has immensely helped strengthened the essential unity of the Commonwealth."¹² This is echoed in the conservative manifesto as they lay out that "we pledge ourselves to give our active support to all measures to promote the welfare of the British Empire and Commonwealth... the more frequent the meetings between the principal ministers from the countries of the Commonwealth the better."¹³ This shows a high level of agreement between the two parties on the matter of Empire and Commonwealth.

Further similarities between the Labour and Conservative foreign policies in the post-war era can be seen, as they both had the desire to "adhere to the ideals set forth in the Charter of the United Nations", "pursue the aim of closer unity in Europe" and "seek to work in fraternal association with the

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United States of America. " 14 This aptly shows that both political parties in Britain sought to view their foreign policies through the kaleidoscope of Churchill's Three Circles Theory.

The fact that many of Bevin's policies, which were laid out during the 1945-1951 Labour government, went unopposed by successive government of both political parties show there was a large scale of consensus between the political elite during this era. It has been argued that this consensus between the political elite existed primarily because of the close bonds that had formed as the parties worked together during the wartime coalition.

During this era the political elite had common interests, similar backgrounds, and shared experiences which historians argue caused the influential and powerful leaders of the parties to have similar policies and approaches to politics, which gives support to the idea of a post-war political consensus. The similarity of their approaches can be explained by the fact that during the wartime coalition, all personal and political differences had been swept aside in order to work towards the common goal of victory and the defeat of Fascism. This can be seen through the study of the poignant image that portrays Churchill, Bevan, and Attlee appearing together on the balcony of the health ministry on VE day.

This image shows the close working relationship that existed between the two leaders and historians argue that this ability to work closely together evolved into the post-war consensus and both leaders and parties aimed for the rebuilding of the nation and construction of " a new Jerusalem. " 15 Kavanagh and Morris argue that this common goal of reconstruction led to a

consensus across the whole sphere of British party politics, as the people who were leading the country and their respective parties had a very similar and coinciding direction. They argue that there were differences between the parties but these were only "differences of rhetoric... and of emphasis". This links closely to Butler who stated that both parties spoke the language of Keynesianism, but they "spoke it with different accents and differing emphasis." This shows that a consensus existed at an elite level where it was most effective and apparent. 16

To conclude if we define consensus as Addison did as "an historically unusual degree of agreement over a wide range of economic and social policies" 17 then this essay has shown a consensus did exist in British politics in the post-war era as on certain key policies the Labour and Conservative governments had the same direction. Moreover Kavanagh and Morris argue that when Churchill was re-elected in 1951 most major "welfare... foreign and colonial [policies were] largely untouched", I believe this demonstrates the similarities of both parties policies and direction, which shows that consensus existed between the elite of the era. Although there were differences between the supporters of the political parties on ideological grounds these differences played a very insignificant role in fermenting the parties' direction as essentially a political consensus existed as both governments worked together in order to make Great Britain great again.