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PLURALISM, THE PEOPLE, AND TIME IN LABOUR PARTY HISTORY, 1931–1964*

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ABSTRACT. Observing the increasing, yet still partial exploration of pluralism, complexity and multiplicity in recent Labour party historiography, this article pursues a pluralist approach to Labour on two central, related themes of its middle-century evolution. First, it probes the plurality of Labour's different conceptions of time, specifically how it lived with the ambiguity of simultaneously viewing social progress as both immediate and rapidly achievable, yet also long term and strewn with constraints. This co-existence of multiple time-frames highlights the party's uncertainty and ideological multi-dimensionality, especially in its focus both on relatively rapid economic or structural transformation, and on much more slow-moving cultural, ethical, and educational change. It also complicates neat characterizations of particular phases in the party's history, challenging straightforwardly declinist views of the post-1945–51 period. Secondly, time connects to Labour's view of the people. Whilst historians have debated between positive and negative perceptions of the people, here the plural, split mind of Labour about the progressive potential of the citizenry is stressed, one closely intertwined with its multiple outlook on how long socialism would take. Contrasts are also suggested between the time-frames and expectations under which Labour and the Conservatives operated.

I

If there has been any dominant trend in writing on the history of the Labour party over the past twenty years, it has been in favour of an emphasis on the complexity and multi-sided nature of that history. If there is a vogue in contemporary Labour historiography, it is, in short, pluralism. The economic and high political focus of much previous scholarship has been succeeded by a marked broadening of the spheres in which the party's history has been located, with a growing assertion of the importance of ideas, political culture, communication, ethics and character in influencing

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Labour's development.¹ This broadening of spheres has been closely linked to a pluralist view of causation, in which Labour's fortunes are portrayed as having been influenced by a diverse range of factors, and political history itself has been presented as, in Black's words, a 'fluid, multiple' phenomenon.² Labour's organizational pluralism has also been emphasized, the variety of its affiliated organizations, from trade unions to socialist societies, and the different levels of its decision-making structures adding further, as Worley observes, to the party's 'multiple character'.³

Yet, it would be wrong to exaggerate how conscious or coherent the move towards greater pluralism has been. The term itself is still relatively rarely explicitly used by Labour historians, and Beers's recent aside about the desirability of a 'pluralistic model' is a striking reminder of the absence of anything so systematic as a pluralist school of Labour historiography.⁴ Perhaps befitting an approach that stresses complexity, multi-sidedness, and few grand claims, pluralism's incursion has been a quiet, stealthy one with historians gradually, incrementally adding to the sense of Labour's story as a beast of many dimensions and parts.

If pluralism's historiographical advance has been somewhat covert, there have also been some striking omissions from its reach. This article seeks to offer an analysis in which pluralism, the multi-sided nature of Labour, is more overtly and fully foregrounded than is sometimes the case, through a consideration of two major, and connected, themes in the party's history. The first of these, time, has been relatively little considered by the party's historians. The second, Labour's relationship with 'the people', has, in sharp contrast, been examined in recent decades perhaps more than any other feature of the party's history, yet the role of pluralism and multi-sidedness within that relationship has been, at least in certain key respects, surprisingly underdeveloped.

Time, and more specifically the co-existence in Labour's thinking of short- and long-term time-frames within which social progress might be achieved, has received notably little attention from the party's historians. Yet, different perspectives on the time progressive advancement might take lay at the heart of Labour's political ideology, and its internal disagreements. At the core of this

¹ See, respectively: B. Jackson, *Equality and the British left: a study in progressive political thought, 1900–1964* (Manchester, 2007); L. Black, *The political culture of the left in affluent Britain, 1951–1964: old Labour, new Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003); L. Beers, *Your Britain: media and the making of the Labour party* (London, 2010); M. Francis, 'Economics and ethics: the nature of Labour's socialism, 1945–1951', *Twentieth Century British History*, 6 (1995), pp. 220–43; and J. Nuttall, *Psychological socialism: the Labour party and qualities of mind and character, 1931 to the present* (Manchester, 2006).

² L. Black, *Redefining British politics: culture, consumerism and participation, 1954–1970* (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 207.

³ M. Worley, 'Introduction', in M. Worley, ed., *The foundations of the British Labour party: identities, cultures and perspectives, 1900–1939* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 1–3.

⁴ L. Beers, 'Labour's Britain, fight for it now!', *Historical Journal*, 52 (2009), pp. 667–95, at p. 695.

was the issue of whether Labour was primarily about achieving a relatively rapid and radical transformation in the structures and institutions of social and economic power, or a much more long-term, evolutionary change in which underlying British values and culture moved in a gradually more egalitarian or co-operative direction. The role of the long term in the party's history has been especially neglected. The aforementioned recent research suggesting that Labour's vision of a more just or equal society might be as much about values, culture, ideas, education, and character as about economics, structures, and institutions has implications for the speed at which one might expect the party to achieve that vision.⁵ Assessing Labour's impact on changes in such intangible or relatively slow-burning spheres as, say, education, ethics, or civil liberties might necessitate a time-frame of many decades. But such developments have proved difficult to integrate into studies of the party, which are understandably often structured in short, self-contained phases of five- or ten-year governmental periods.⁶ In sum, the broadening in the spheres (for instance, cultural, ethical, educative, and economic) through which we now view the party's history needs to be accompanied by a broadening of our understanding of the time-frames in which Labour operated.

Throughout the period between 1931 and 1964, Labour saw socialism as something both fast and slow, relatively immediately achievable, yet also very long term. This pluralism of time-frames reflected differences between Labour's left and right. On the whole, the left wished to move faster, the right more gradually, though there were some noteworthy reversals of this. But perhaps even more striking was the plurality of longer- and short-term time-frames existing *within* the thinking of most leading Labour figures. In other words, individuals across Labour's ideological spectrum, and thus the party as a whole had split minds on the different ways in which their aims were short term and rapid, or long term and gradual.

Moreover, the historical resilience and continuity of this split mind was considerable. The article considers the reasons for the co-existence of Labour's different time-frames over a three-decade period in which, in three different stages, its idealism and vision met the realities of power in a sustained way for the first time: in the 1930s, as it constructed a detailed policy agenda, in government from 1945, and then in the 1950s, as it reflected and reassessed. Given, in a sense, how youthful Labour was in 1931, and how many tough, educative experiences in political realities it had undergone by 1964, it is perhaps the party's patience that is most noteworthy in the 1930s, and yet the strength of its continued determined impatience by the 1960s. In other words,

⁵ See, especially, Nuttall, *Psychological socialism*; Jackson, *Equality*; Black, *Political culture*.

⁶ Just a few examples are: E. Shaw, *Losing Labour's soul? New Labour and the Blair government, 1997–2007* (London, 2007); S. Fielding, *The Labour governments, 1964–1970* (Manchester, 2003); M. Francis, *Ideas and policies under Labour, 1945–1951* (Manchester, 1997); and K. O. Morgan, *Labour in power, 1945–1951* (Oxford, 1984).

one is struck *both* by the extent to which, even as early as the 1930s, Labour figures were notably hard-headed about how much of a long and difficult road socialism might be, and yet equally by the resilience of optimism even by 1964 in how much could change relatively quickly.

Exploring time also opens avenues for reappraisals of periodization in the party's history. The Attlee government of 1945–51 in particular, and the broader 1931–64 period surrounding it, have often been seen as a high point, in a sense, indeed, an endpoint in Labour's history. Often building on Hobsbawm's identification of the socio-economic trends apparently constraining Labour's 'forward march' after the 1940s, historians have pointed variously to the reduced political strength of a relatively homogeneous male, manual trade unionized working class, decreasing party membership, or the perceived difficulties of the Wilson, Callaghan, or Blair administrations in matching up to the expectations of them, as evidence that Labour's high point of achievement, and its moment of maximum historical opportunity, may have resided in the 1940s, and been followed by a long decline.⁷ Yet, other research has opened routes to a more pluralist picture in which different Labour objectives advanced and declined at different times, at different speeds. The revival of historical interest in 'the political' has highlighted the possibility of political parties influencing or redefining socio-economic trends in their favour, thus reducing the centrality of single, linear narratives of a party's fortunes, and highlighting, as Stedman Jones has put it, the diverse, 'discontinuous conjunctures' in Labour's history.⁸ Question marks have also been placed on how inherently negative specific socio-economic changes need have been for Labour, perhaps most significantly, affluence.⁹ Tomlinson has also recently pointed to a need to reconsider the emphases on decline in the writing of twentieth-century British history more broadly.¹⁰ Crucially, too, if Labour was as much about expanding education and people's horizons as restructuring the economy, the period *after* 1964 may well, in these respects, have witnessed rather more advancement than that before it.¹¹

Labour's varying time-scales were further and fundamentally influenced by the final, linked theme of this article, the party's perceptions of 'the people'. The party's multi-layered, uncertain sense of socialism as something likely to occur perhaps quickly, perhaps slowly, was informed by a fluctuating,

⁷ See, for instance, E. Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of Labour halted?', *Marxism Today*, Sept. 1978, pp. 284–5; D. Howell, *British social democracy: a study in development and decay* (London, 1976), p. 10; E. Shaw, *The Labour party since 1945* (Oxford, 1996), p. 46; and P. Hennessy, *Never again: Britain, 1945–1951* (London, 1993), p. 454.

⁸ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of class: studies in English working-class history, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 242–3.

⁹ Black, *Political culture*, p. 191.

¹⁰ J. Tomlinson, 'Thrice denied: "declinism" as a recurrent theme in British history in the long twentieth century', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), pp. 227–51, at pp. 227, 249; idem, 'A "failed experiment"? Public ownership and the narratives of post-war Britain', *Labour History Review*, 73 (2008), pp. 228–43.

¹¹ On this, see Nuttall, *Psychological socialism*, pp. 141–4.

multi-sided view of the citizenry, part positive, part negative, about how far they might aid or constrain the party's objectives. This sense of the party's view of the populace as conflicted, plural, is under-represented in the now quite voluminous and highly illuminating literature on the relationship between Labour and the people. Much debate has centred on the extent of people's political radicalism in 1945: research by Fielding central in positioning the people's role as a relatively apathetic, non-radical constraint upon Labour, McKibbin, in contrast, recently reviving the view that 'radicalization was genuine'.¹² If Labour figures' own perceptions of the people are anything to go by, *both* positions actually contain much truth. Labour's enduring sense of the people throughout the 1931–64 period contained different layers: that they were decent and kindly, capable of providing the impetus for major reform at certain moments, most notably 1945, yet *also* that this decency fell short of the sustained reforming or egalitarian spirit the party most sought. Much focus has been on Labour's disappointment with the citizenry, Brooke charting the 'often painful process' since 1945 of Labour discovering the public's nature, and Black observing how the party in the 1950s seemed in opposition not just to the government, but to society more generally.¹³ Both are correct. Yet, equally significant was the persistent determination of most leading Labour figures to look more favourably upon the citizenry.

This article, thus, examines how Labour's time-frames for social progress were influenced by the party's increasing consideration from the 1930s of the 'real world' of what it felt people were actually like. In so doing, it seeks to point to overlap in the concerns of historians of the party's thought, and of its political culture. The two have tended to proceed separately, with the former sometimes little exploring how ideas were constrained by exposure to social realities, and the latter little addressing the implications of their findings for understanding Labour's overall intellectual vision.¹⁴ This article is a history of Labour's political thought, but sharing the political cultural interest in perceptions of 'the people', and defining thought inclusively, to incorporate the reflections of leading intellectuals, but also key leadership, 'labourist' and trade union

¹² S. Fielding, P. Thompson and N. Tiratsoo, *'England arise!' The Labour party and popular politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995); S. Fielding, 'What did "the people" want? The meaning of the 1945 general election', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 623–39; R. McKibbin, *Parties and people: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010), p. 138.

¹³ S. Brooke, 'Labour and the "nation" after 1945', in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor, eds., *Party, state and society: electoral behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 171; Black, *Political culture*, pp. 126, 193. See also S. Fielding, 'To make men and women better than they are': Labour and the building of socialism', in J. Fyrth, ed., *Labour's promised land? Culture and society in Labour Britain, 1945–1951* (London, 1995), p. 24; and S. Macintyre, 'British Labour, Marxism and working-class apathy in the nineteen twenties', *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), pp. 479–96, at p. 484.

¹⁴ Note, for example, the relatively limited cross-over between two of the most notable recent interventions in their respective spheres: Jackson, *Equality*, and Black, *Redefining*.

figures, whose analysis, if sometimes less systematic and more intuitive, could be just as penetrating and revealing.

The Labour party provides a case-study in pluralism, people, and time that also highlights the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of British political history as a whole. One point of contrast with Labour's chief political rival, the Conservatives, also offers something to the extended debate concerning the balance between success and disappointment in Labour's historical record.¹⁵ The brevity of Labour's time in office in the twentieth century has often been contrasted with the Conservatives', and indeed New Labour's striking ability to retain power. Yet, the different tempos, time-frames, and accompanying expectations that the parties had, which partly explain these contrasts, have been rarely noted. McKibbin has reflected on the very speed with which Labour established much of the new post-war settlement in the later 1940s.¹⁶ When in government, by its very nature as a reformist party, Labour tended to act fast, to be, as Black observes, 'in a rush'.¹⁷ This has significant implications. This very reforming intensity, in a sense the very success of early implementation, often left Labour more rapidly exhausted, politically, intellectually, even physically, than the Conservatives – most notably by 1951, and again by 1970. Pre-1997 Labour governed briefly, yet actively, often implementing large-scale structural reforms, contrasting with the more elongated time-span, yet in some ways more relaxed governing tempo, of New Labour and much Conservative time in office. Labour was perhaps, too, more engaged with its exemplary, educative role than the latter two political forces were, seeking to reshape social values, pursuing ethical change in a longer-term time-frame, even whilst in opposition. Comparing the parties in simple terms of number of elections won rather obscures these different tempos, time-frames, and methods of social influence. Evaluating the historical success of different political parties at different moments may, then, point to a need for a more complex plurality of different measures of expectation, achievement, and disappointment. Certainly, Labour marched to its own distinctive, multi-layered understanding of the British people and time.

II

Very different tempos simultaneously guided Labour's history in the 1931–45 period, some fast and short term, others slower and longer term. This section

¹⁵ Defending Labour's performance, see, for instance, D. Tanner, P. Thane, and N. Tiratsoo, 'Introduction', in D. Tanner, P. Thane and N. Tiratsoo, eds., *Labour's first century* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 2, 4–5; N. Tiratsoo, "You've never had it so bad"? Britain in the 1970s', in N. Tiratsoo, ed., *From Blitz to Blair: a new history of Britain since 1939* (London, 1998), p. 164. Pointing to the party's limitations are D. Marquand, *The progressive dilemma* (2nd edn, London, 1992); V. Bogdanor, 'The crisis of old Labour', in A. Seldon and K. Hickson, eds., *New Labour, old Labour: the Wilson and Callaghan governments, 1974–1979* (London, 2004).

¹⁶ R. McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 535.

¹⁷ Black, *Political culture*, p. 21.

focuses primarily on the factors shaping the faster tempos, the next section on the slower, and how the party lived with the ambiguities of the co-existence of the two. The heightened political intensity of the 1930s in fact gave added strength to both tempos, jolting Labour in two seemingly contrasting ways: into both a new emphasis on patience, detailed practicality, and the longer-term, and a new assertion of the party's uncompromising idealism, impatience with the existing society, and call for immediate, rapid results. These diverse responses and tempos seemed both an apt reaction to the problems of the depression, and reflected the party's complicated conclusions on MacDonaldisms between 1929 and 1931: to seek to continue his government-mindedness, yet also vigorously to assert its rejection of his apparent embrace of establishment thinking.

An initial examination of two of the most representative party figures from the 1930s highlights immediately the different socialist tempos contained even *within* the same Labour individual. One example is intellectual, R. H. Tawney, who was respected broadly across Labour's ideological spectrum. The other, party leader from 1935, Clement Attlee, was charged with politically uniting the party in the context of both the acrimony after the 1931 party split, and the differences between a left, newly drawn to British adaptations of Marxism, and emerging younger revisionists. Here, straightaway, one witnesses through these central, and centrist (in Labour terms) figures, the mixed mind of Labour, a mixture that was both political and psychological. There was an advocacy of patience and impatience, restrained political sobriety and unyielding radical urgency, focus on the immediate, yet an eye on holding back.

Rebuking the party for its argumentative factionalism in the early part of the decade, Tawney, in his *Equality* (1931) warned Labour that it must display 'sense' and 'self-restraint', not 'hysterics'.¹⁸ Yet, just as important was exhibiting 'extreme resolution' in the implementation of a programme of common ownership of industry, which was 'radical', and needed to be on a 'substantial scale'.¹⁹ Key social policy priorities, notably the abolition of fees in secondary schools, were also 'gross scandals'; the time-frame for dealing with them was, thus, 'immediately'.²⁰ Attlee appeared to epitomize personally Labour's quest to appear dryly respectable, and emphasized in his *The Labour party in perspective* (1937) the need for the party to move from denunciations and 'general principles' to specific 'steps' and a focus on 'power'.²¹ Yet, this was accompanied by a bold assertion of socialism's urgency, immediacy, and qualitative difference from the existing society. The party's role was not to effect mere 'alterations', but to 'replace' an existing society that was 'wrong'.

¹⁸ R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (4th edn, London, 1952), p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 232.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

²¹ C. R. Attlee, *The Labour party in perspective – and twelve years later* (London, 1949), p. 40.

Labour stood for 'great changes', and even its short programme would take the country 'a long way on the road' to the desired endpoint.²²

The sense of urgency had a longer-term impetus, the feeling that the party, as it moved into its fourth decade, could no longer plead relative youth in defence of its as yet limited influence on British government. Consciously focusing, in his book on socialism in *The next ten years* (1929), on the specific and immediate, in both policy terms and time period, G. D. H. Cole reflected that whereas 'pre-war socialism could afford to seek after perfection, because it was not in a *hurry* [my italics]: post-war socialism needs practical results'.²³ Labour's demonstration of its ability to tackle unemployment would have to be 'speedy', if it wished to retain power, and this demonstration might have to come before the longer-term aim of moving towards a socialist economy.²⁴ Similarly, Tawney insisted that the next Labour government should implement its programme with 'speed'.²⁵

There was also an underlying philosophical optimism which underpinned the confidence in a socialism rapid, immediate, and assured. For most leading figures, the fairly linear, Victorian rationalist view of progress had been relatively little undermined by the apparently complicating intellectual problems posed by either the destruction of the First World War, or Freudian psychology's probing of the subconscious. Indeed, as Macintyre suggests, at this stage, the war, in its apparent uprooting of the old world order, served to heighten more than to dampen socialist optimism about the march of history in their favour.²⁶ This optimism was further boosted by the growing, if uneven, role of the state in social and economic affairs over the first three decades of the twentieth century. Noting this thirty-year trend, Tawney asserted that the move towards unified public direction and control of the major industries had 'in large measure, already been decided'.²⁷ Such tendencies, Attlee suggested, were 'impossible to contend against'.²⁸ Even one of Labour's leading younger thinkers, Evan Durbin, whose study of both zoology and psychology had qualified his optimistic rationalism more than most, concluded, whilst musing over the future of the Labour party in the autumn of 1937, that 'in British history – the left is always victorious'.²⁹ There was, still, a relatively uncomplicated sense of socialism as the obvious prescription for social ills which, whilst severe, were ultimately a sort of resolvable puzzle. Douglas Jay, writing in 1937, offered socialism as a 'cure'

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 101, 198.

²³ G. D. H. Cole, *The next ten years in British social and economic policy* (London, 1930) (orig. publ. 1929), pp. viii, 414.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

²⁵ Tawney, *Equality*, pp. 127, 232.

²⁶ Macintyre, 'British Labour', p. 496. See also J. Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought', in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo, eds., *Labour's first*, p. 39.

²⁷ Tawney, *Equality*, p. 26.

²⁸ Attlee, *Labour party*, p. 198.

²⁹ E. Durbin's notes on '[The] future of the English Labour party', n.d., London, British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), Evan Durbin papers, 1/3, fos. 17, 19.

for poverty.³⁰ The country's problems were, Cole suggested, a 'tangle', which needed 'straightening out'.³¹ Early success with a number of key nationalizations, Tawney assured readers, would lead to the 'mopping up' of other industries.³²

It would be wrong to suggest that Labour figures' appraisals of the people in this period was that they were a thrusting, mass, progressive force, further strengthening the above grounds for optimism about rapid socialist advance. But the citizenry was generally seen as progressive *enough* to be broadly, and increasingly, an asset to Labour's pursuit of change. This reasonable measure of optimism about the people had three supporting pillars. The first was not to consider the matter too closely. The people were still something of a slightly distant Other in Labour thinking and writing in the 1930s, a phenomenon the party was certainly beginning to think about, but did not yet seem crucial to an agenda centred primarily around central government policy.

Secondly, the mass unemployment of the decade seemed such potentially fertile terrain for the party to secure popular support that distinguishing what might be deep-rooted socialist sentiment from what could be support more conditional on the particular problems of the time seemed like nitpicking. On the left, Harold Laski, whose blend of radical Marxism, ethical egalitarianism, and liberal pluralism made him a notably multi-layered appraiser of the nature of the people, was to develop some question marks about the citizenry as the decade wore on, but, at this stage, in his *The state in theory and practice* (1935) he was confident of their egalitarian instincts, 'the constant drive of human impulse towards the establishment of greater equality in society'.³³ Here, popular sentiments did matter, because of Laski's call for the working class to use their political and numerical strength to seize political power.³⁴

There seemed, thirdly, also to be some longer-term patterns affirming the people's progressive potential. Attlee noted that the contemporary social conscience was strong by historical standards. The philanthropic focus of earlier generations had been replaced by a more fundamental willingness to examine the whole system of social injustice; people sought to address causes now, not just results. Workers were increasingly politically intelligent and confident, and a cultural levelling between the classes meant the class divide was now primarily an economic phenomenon. The 'increasingly high standards of education of the workers', Attlee concluded, 'are making the task of the socialist easier'.³⁵

The confidence that socialism could be relatively rapidly and straightforwardly implemented was reinforced by a large measure of unity around a specific and primarily economic policy agenda. Prioritization of the economic could equally point to socialism being long term or short term. The complex

³⁰ D. Jay, *The socialist case* (London, 1937), p. ix.

³¹ Cole, *Ten years*, p. 414.

³² Tawney, *Equality*, p. 232.

³³ H.J. Laski, *The state in theory and practice* (London, 1935), p. 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9, 143.

³⁵ Attlee, *Labour party*, pp. 101, 112, 194, 198.

structural, and indeed motivational, changes that socialist proposals for economic transformation often entailed could be suggestive of quite a long-drawn-out time-scale. Equally, as in the 1930s, an economic emphasis pointed to problems that were urgent, specific, and tangible, and policies, most notably nationalization and planning, that it appeared possible to implement reasonably straightforwardly. Unemployment, then, argued Cole, was by far the most 'pressing' contemporary problem.³⁶ Even Evan Durbin, who, as we shall see, emphasized strongly the pluralist, non-reductionist nature of his socialism, nevertheless argued in his major work *The politics of democratic socialism* (1940) that the priority must be placed on economic planning, and securing control over the levers of economic power above merely 'ameliorative measures' of social policy, because there would not be the resources for the latter until achievements were completed in the sphere of the former.³⁷ Jay stressed that a focus on government economic policy was the best way to further broader cultural or ethical objectives, as poverty was an over-riding bar to any real broadening of the people's horizons.³⁸

III

The high expectations of socialism discussed above, the sense of its large and immediate possibilities, represented the foreground thinking of most leading Labour thinkers in the 1930s. But even at this early stage, there were co-existing, complicating longer-term socialist time-scales, reflecting both an emerging pluralism, and a growing sense of the people as potentially more problematic for socialism than had been thought. If this period witnessed a late flowering Victorian rationalist optimism about progress, it also saw the construction of the first firm foundations of Labour doubts about it. The rise of Hitler and the mass deprivation of the depression forced it to confront darker realities. For some, the subject of appeasement crystallized these issues, Jay and Hugh Gaitskell, for instance, opposing the 1938 Munich Agreement. Jay's memoirs describe vividly the personal significance of his growing questioning of his prior assumption that 'monsters like Hitler could not exist in the real world'.³⁹ Durbin's modifications of rationalist optimism were more extended, his exploration of the non-rational psychological drives of the unconscious underpinning both his strikingly early delineation of the horrors perpetrated in Germany and Russia in the 1930s, and his sense that educational expansion would not bring the immediate or easy benefits that some reformers hoped.⁴⁰ Cole similarly

³⁶ Cole, *Ten years*, p. 423.

³⁷ E. F. M. Durbin, *The politics of democratic socialism: an essay on social policy* (London, 1940), pp. 292, 300.

³⁸ Jay, *Socialist case*, p. 2.

³⁹ Idem, *Change and fortune: a political record* (London, 1980), p. 56.

⁴⁰ Durbin's notes on 'Limits of intellectual education', n.d., probably 1944-8, BLPES, Durbin papers, 4/7.

concluded in a Fabian Tract in 1942, in a very Fabian style, that 'reasoning has, and probably always will have, a limited appeal'.⁴¹

These broader philosophical reflections were accompanied by more specific observations of some of the perceived limitations of the British citizenry, or at least the difficult political challenges raised by them. On the whole, these were not at this stage seen to have large problematic consequences for the overall policy agenda of the party. But seeds were being firmly sown. The party crisis of 1931, and subsequent disastrous electoral showing, followed by its significant yet still partial recovery in 1935, was beginning to bring home that many formerly Liberal voters might be as likely to turn now to the Conservatives as to Labour. Cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool consistently demonstrated the strength of working-class support for Conservatism in the interwar years. This began to result in some greater Labour probing of the nature of the working class, and questioning of how automatically socialist or egalitarian it might be. As it happened, this fitted quite neatly with a steadily increasing determination of the party in the 1930s not to be seen as exclusively reliant on an industrial manual working-class support base, but also to have at least some hold on the votes of women, service workers, and agricultural labourers. This reflected the electoral calculation of a need for broader support, but also a heightening ideological preference for being an inclusive, national party.⁴²

Moreover, the more focused the party became on the details of policy and aspirations to govern, the more closely it forced itself to inquire into aspects of the people that might be discomforting. Some of this was quite low key, with the motivations of the people regarded as a technical matter to be factored into the fine-tuning of economic policy. The writing of younger revisionist thinkers in the 1930s, such as Durbin and Jay, was partly designed to render questions of the nature of the people less problematic by focusing on the high policy of the state and its experts. Jay based his detailed economic prescriptions on the assumption that people would behave as 'normally self-seeking human beings'.⁴³ His well-known assertion in 1937 about the gentleman in Whitehall knowing best was complemented by his less-known subsequent interpretation of the war effort as illustrating how much could be achieved politically when an elite of the most talented combined their energies.⁴⁴

Other Labour assessments of the people were rather more dramatic, notably that of the normally reserved Attlee, who, for a party leader, was strikingly open about the electorate's perceived failings. Under the pressure of material deprivation, he lamented in 1937, people's horizons were 'often deplorably narrow'.⁴⁵ Mirroring Durbin and Cole above, it was people's intellect and vision, less than their character, that most concerned Labour. The most

⁴¹ G. D. H. Cole, *The Fabian society: past and present*, Fabian Tract, 258 (Nov. 1942), pp. 5–6.

⁴² On these latter points, see Beers, *Your Britain*, pp. 199–202.

⁴³ Jay, *Socialist case*, p. 318.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 317; *idem*, *Change*, p. 106.

⁴⁵ Attlee, *Labour party*, pp. 89–90, 118.

powerful constraint on the party, Attlee warned, was 'the lack of imagination of the majority of people'.⁴⁶ Contrasting somewhat with Laski's view of the egalitarian motives of the citizenry, Tawney's experience alongside the working class in the First World War led him to the view that they were no more imbued by the egalitarian spirit than the other social classes. An indifference to inequality was, he believed, a national characteristic, shared across class boundaries, and even by some professed socialists.⁴⁷

There were also some intriguingly diverse layers in the left's position on the people as the decade developed. An enduring question for the Labour left, and its historians, has been how far it has seen its radicalism as reflecting that of the people, or as pursued determinedly despite considerable limits to the people's receptiveness. Some recent historiography, notably Thompson, has hinted at the latter conclusion of a cruel choice between 'electoral suicide or ideological death'.⁴⁸ Laski, by the time of his *Parliamentary government in England* (1938), was reflecting that those Conservative and Liberal thinkers who feared the potential brute force of working-class power could, in some respects at least, rest more easily. He appears to have judged this both a positive and a negative. Education had operated positively to dissuade people from hasty or ill-thought-out political actions, and to broaden their time-frames; it had acted 'to make men take long views'.⁴⁹ Yet, they, and he, had also underestimated a more regrettable force, the continued hold on the people of 'ancient routines of thought'.⁵⁰

This had echoes, too, in an emerging pluralism on both the left and right of the party in the 1930s, which qualified, though it did not over-ride, the prioritization of the economic. If the 1930s was unsurprisingly a high point of concentration on economic problems, social, cultural, and ethical dimensions (and their relationship to the economic) were also increasingly asserting their right to a hearing. Tawney, for instance, assessing the debate over whether welfare policy should be considered secondary to economic policy, diverged from Durbin's over-riding prioritization of the latter, arguing that both should be pursued simultaneously, and would mutually reinforce one another, a point with which Attlee agreed.⁵¹ Jay forecast an increasing popular focus on

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

⁴⁷ R. Terrill, *R. H. Tawney and his times: socialism as fellowship* (London, 1974), p. 50; Tawney, *Equality*, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Though this was in specific reference to the last three decades of the twentieth century. N. Thompson, 'From *The future of socialism* (1956) to a future without socialism? The crisis of British social democratic political economy', in J. Callaghan, N. Fishman, B. Jackson, and M. McIvor, eds., *In search of social democracy: responses to crisis and modernization* (Manchester, 2009), p. 67. See also G. Foote, *The Labour party's political thought: a history* (3rd edn, London, 1997), p. 267, on Bevan's 'romantic view' of the working class.

⁴⁹ H. J. Laski, *Parliamentary government in England* (London, 1938), p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–20.

⁵¹ Tawney, *Equality*, p. 127; Attlee, *Labour party*, pp. 102, 140.

'non-“material” things' once material poverty had been addressed.⁵² Laski, by 1935, whilst still focused on the material roots of social problems, also emphasized his openness to a multiplicity of causal factors: 'the admission of pluralism in historic causation is not the same thing as a denial of the primacy of the economic factor'.⁵³

The increasing implication of this was that the socialist task was a complicated, multi-layered, and demanding one, involving the raising of people's political consciousness. The growing pluralist highlighting of cultural, educative, and ethical aims for the party to accompany its economic one could point to slower, longer-term time-frames.⁵⁴ If 1931 marked a pause for thought within Labour, reflection on the preceding three decades sparked urgency that time was running out to deliver, yet also the thought that perhaps three decades was really not very long in the overall scheme of social change. Fabian, and leading party expert on colonial affairs, Leonard Woolf, adopting a historical approach to analysing the state of British democracy in his *After the deluge* (1931), outlined the longest imaginable time-span for progress, the whole history of humankind. Evolution, he noted, had brought people from their animal state to a level of development that would seem impressive from that original standpoint. But the long time it had taken to reach the current state of civilization ought, he suggested, to caution both supporters and critics of the newly emerging democratic culture and politics against expecting too much from it too rapidly.⁵⁵ The universal suffrage established in 1918 was merely a stage on the road to a real, deeper democracy, which depended on the emergence of a genuine democratic conviction in the culture and mindsets of ordinary voters. The rather apologetic disillusionment that this had not happened yet which had already set in amongst some progressives just thirteen years on, meant that they had not appreciated the long historical process at work. The great distance people had already travelled suggested vast potential for future change. It was perfectly possible for the average 'man in the street to become in a few hundred years as cultured and intelligent and politically sagacious as any member of the present cabinet'.⁵⁶

Durbin's charting in *The politics of democratic socialism* of the crucial importance of psychology and emotional education to socialism, specifically his sense that parenting, love, and a generally freer emotional outlook all had major implications for the achievement of the more co-operative, gentler approach upon which socialism depended, also had significant implications for his socialist time-frame. Changing politics by changing emotions 'would take decades', he observed, and even that was assuming that there was the appetite for this sort of enlightened approach, which, he made clear, there was not.

⁵² Jay, *Socialist case*, p. 2.

⁵³ Laski, *State*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁵⁵ L. Woolf, *After the deluge: a study in communal psychology* (Harmondsworth, 1937); orig. publ. 1931), pp. 209, 213–15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

The process would have to occur 'slowly', and 'from generation to generation'.⁵⁷ Given this time-span, one can understand Durbin's reflection in a speech in the summer of 1946 that he was 'often worried by excessive enthusiasm about Socialism', and how much it could achieve, a concern echoed in Jay's insistence that a socialist society 'is not a Utopia'.⁵⁸

Attlee emphasized that Labour could not ultimately sidestep the issue of the calibre of the people. Socialism was a more exacting creed than its competitors, precisely because ultimately it both demanded and depended upon the creation of the active, socially responsible citizen. So if Attlee's main time-frame was short, he also had a significant eye on the long run. The necessary eroding of the social snobbery and mean ideals which many people exhibited would mean travelling down 'a very long road'.⁵⁹ The achievement of the elusive and demanding egalitarian society Tawney envisaged would, he noted, require a 'prolonged' effort of intelligence and resolution.⁶⁰ There was also some early evidence, two years before Labour took office in 1945, of an explicit sense of the people as a brake upon change, Labour's wartime deputy leader Arthur Greenwood reflecting in a 1943 radio interview that 'a Party in Government can only move as far, and as fast, as the majority of the nation are prepared to go'.⁶¹ Even the radically idealist socialism of Richard Acland, fired by a strong Christian-based moralism, as well as a demand for extensive common ownership, also found space for reflection on the longer time-scale that such ethical transformation might necessitate. In his best-selling *Unser Kampf* (1940), written before he co-founded the Common Wealth party, and seven years before becoming a Labour MP, he cautioned that whilst exceptional individuals could develop altruistic qualities quite rapidly, 'great masses of people move much more slowly'.⁶²

The question remains of how Labour lived with, or reconciled, its diverse views of people, progress, and time. There was a partial resolution of its alternately supremely confident and deeply anxious view of the people, which emphasized 'middling' virtues such as essential decency, common sense, and quiet reformism. This was a perception of the British people that was located between apathy and radicalism. It focused on the ordinary virtues of ordinary people. The working-class trade unionist Ernest Bevin noted, in a 1934 broadcast, his admiration for the attitudes of working people, who possessed levels of 'understanding, ability and courage' that would surprise some.⁶³ Cole, similarly, stressed that socialism would not require 'superhuman intellectual

⁵⁷ Durbin, *Politics*, pp. 69–70.

⁵⁸ Durbin's 'Open air' campaign, summer 1946, BLPES, Durbin papers, 4/7; Jay, *Socialist case*, p. 318.

⁵⁹ Attlee, *Labour party*, pp. 113, 197.

⁶⁰ Tawney, *Equality*, p. 127.

⁶¹ A. Greenwood, radio interview, 7 Jan. 1943, Oxford, Bodleian Library (BLO), Arthur Greenwood papers, MS 6246, fo. 46.

⁶² R. Acland, *Unser Kampf* (Harmondsworth, 1940), p. vii.

⁶³ E. Bevin, broadcast, 30 Jan. 1934, in E. Bevin, *The job to be done* (London, 1942), p. 136.

capacity'.⁶⁴ Greenwood called in late 1932 for a socialism built on 'confidence in one's fellow men'.⁶⁵

If this reflected movement on one side, Labour feeling more warmth towards the people, it also appears to have represented some movement by the people in Labour's direction. Mandler has identified changes in interwar conceptions of the national character, in which the individualistic, adventurous, and slightly aggressive John Bull was increasingly replaced by a gentler, domesticated, if slightly bewildered archetype, partly encapsulated by the 'Little Man' of Sidney Strube's *Daily Express* cartoons.⁶⁶ This character was certainly not a socialist, but he was someone Labour could work with. One sees here, then, some increased alignment between Labour and the people, reflecting democratic and patriotic instincts in the party, as well as the fact that, as Beers has shown, they, and not only the Conservatives, saw the interwar electoral necessity in appearing as a party of the 'national' or 'public' interest.⁶⁷ This reinforces, too, Lawrence's pinpointing of 1945 as a surprisingly quiet election, symbolic of Labour's wish for the public to display its non-extraordinary or dramatic, but still politically crucial virtues of quiet seriousness and reflection, in preparation for the reforming task party and people would undertake together afterwards.⁶⁸

Equally, however, this did not mean Labour's view of the people was now a problem resolved. Its mixed perception of them remained, as it did of the party's view of time. It did not now seem either necessary or possible to resolve whether socialism was the business of the tortoise or the hare, a patient dream or a soon to be realized reality. Hence, the useful ambiguity in Cole's assertion that the change from capitalism to socialism would be 'complete, though gradual', or Greenwood's call for a socialism based on 'sensible extremism'.⁶⁹ This complexity was summed up neatly in the party's 1945 general election manifesto. The citizenry and prospective voters were congratulated: 'this war will have been won by its people'; yet also quite firmly scolded and warned about having lacked the necessary interest in reform in 1918: 'the people lost that peace'. Now, then, the people were on probation. Labour ultimately trusted their 'common sense', but the election would 'test' this.⁷⁰ There was a clear sense of the radicalism of the party's 'ultimate purpose', of the deep, ethical and transformational character of the desired end, a Britain 'free, ... progressive, public spirited', and of Labour's desire for change to be immediate and rapid, its offer of 'drastic policies'. Yet, equally evident was an incremental emphasis

⁶⁴ Cole, *Ten years*, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Greenwood speech, late 1932, BLO, Greenwood papers, MS 6246, fos. 8-9.

⁶⁶ P. Mandler, *The English national character: the history of an idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (London, 2006), pp. 143, 164-5.

⁶⁷ Beers, *Your Britain*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ J. Lawrence, 'The transformation of British public politics after the First World War', *Past and Present*, 190 (2006), pp. 185-216, at pp. 215-16.

⁶⁹ Cole, *Ten years*, p. 415; Greenwood speech, late 1932, BLO, Greenwood papers, MS 6246, fos. 8-9.

⁷⁰ Labour party general election manifesto, 1945.

on taking a 'step forward' and a 'first step', the future would 'not be easy', there would be no 'baseless promises', socialism 'cannot come overnight'.⁷¹

IV

Labour's view of time, and of the British people, could never be quite the same again after the achievements of its first ever majority government between 1945 and 1951. Before 1945, socialism seemed primarily of the future, and Labour's view of the past was predominantly critical. By 1951, Labour had now shaped part of this past, and was thus, in some sense, complicit in the current state of British society. Before, Labour had commented upon the people from a distance. Now, it had joined with them, as they elected it by a landslide, to effect a major programme of reform. This was, in a way, Labour's end of youthful innocence. It marked a significant shift in the balance between its position as critic of power and user of power. Moreover, it is striking how confidently the party now saw the thrust of contemporary socio-economic trends as being on its side, and how far it reappraised more favourably not only the 1940s, but British history before it. Speaking to the TUC conference in 1953, party chair Arthur Greenwood reflected on how, during the past century and a half, Britain had 'changed out of all recognition'.⁷² New party leader Hugh Gaitskell wrote approvingly in 1956 of 'the abolition of extremes in both wealth and poverty' in the previous half-century.⁷³

Yet, whilst these were profound and in many ways lasting changes in the party's outlook, they sat alongside equally considerable continuity. The essentially split-minded, multi-layered, mixture of optimism and realism about the time-frames for social progress, and about the people, which characterized Labour in 1931, remained by 1951, indeed by 1964, and arguably well beyond. In one sense, Attlee's was, seemingly, the most simply, unambiguously, almost mystically successful of Labour's governments, to historians, 'without doubt' the party's most effective administration, its 'finest hour'.⁷⁴ But in other respects, the developments of 1945–51 complicated and confused for Labour as much as they simplified; and its fundamentally split, multiple perceptions were preserved.

The government's very brevity created the first complexity. That it was so momentary in time, with much of the welfare state and nationalization programme implemented in just three years, spoke simultaneously of the magnitude and rapidity of its achievement, and yet also of how quickly the people then voted it out of office. The balance between constraint and opportunity that had existed in 1945 also pointed in different ways. The extent

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Greenwood's speech to TUC conference, 1953, BLO, Greenwood papers, MS 6246, fo. 144.

⁷³ H. Gaitskell, *Recent developments in British socialist thinking* (London, 1956), pp. 33–4.

⁷⁴ Morgan, *Labour*, p. 503; K. Jefferys, *The Labour party since 1945* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 10.

of what was achieved seemed all the greater because of the vast economic constraint under which the government operated. Yet, focus on the substantial *political* advantage of having had a clear, long-established, very pent-up policy agenda and a relatively united party made some wonder if this had been a moment of abnormal opportunity that had not been fully utilized. Highlighting that this was a political moment in which it was especially difficult to quantify what might constitute reasonable expectations of achievement, Richard Crossman simultaneously stressed his appreciation of the Attlee government's successes, and lamented 'how great were its failures'.⁷⁵ Perhaps most fundamentally, the successful implementation of the welfare state and nationalization appeared to be balanced, as revisionist historians have emphasized, by the much more limited success in pursuing economic planning, or achieving the maintenance of the 'Blitz spirit' as part of a fundamental transformation of the ethics of civil society.⁷⁶ More intensely so than for any Labour government, then, there was a combined sense of heroic achievement and 'what might have been'. Summing up the paradox, Morrison concluded in his 1960 autobiography that it had been 'the great Labour Government', yet at the same time one during which even Labour voters 'had not really been converted to socialism'.⁷⁷

Labour was confirmed, then, in the ambiguities of its socialist time-frames. The Attlee government's achievements boosted confidence in the rapid and immediate, yet the heightened experience of the complexities and constraints of government, and the increasingly pluralist nature of socialist thought in the 1950s drew fresh attention to slower, long-term pathways. This did seem like a moment when greater precision about socialist endpoints might be possible, and there was a rare willingness in some quarters to actually put a date on it. But it tended to be a medium-term one, close enough to indicate a new confidence, far enough away to betray ongoing uncertainty. Laski's view that the key change had already taken place was relatively unusual. Reflecting shortly before the war's end, he adjudged the battle at Stalingrad as a symbolic turning point in world history, marking the move from a capitalist and Christian era to one built around socialism and science.⁷⁸ More common was Michael Young's forecast, writing in 1947, that 'a socialist society may be attained by 1960, not by 1950'.⁷⁹ At the same time, the young Crosland was musing in his notebook on the likely state of socialist progress by 1970, concluding that, with material redistribution by then having gone as far as possible, the main focus would be on issues relating to culture and quality of living, as 'politics and economics fade away'.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ R. Crossman, *New Statesman*, 28 Nov. 1959, privately held, John Strachey papers, contracts box 1.

⁷⁶ See S. Fielding, "The people"; and Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, *England arise!*

⁷⁷ H. Morrison, *Herbert Morrison: an autobiography* (London, 1960), pp. 285–6, 290.

⁷⁸ H. Laski, *Faith, reason and civilization* (London, 1944).

⁷⁹ M. Young, *Labour's plan for plenty* (London, 1947), pp. 10–11.

⁸⁰ T. Crosland's notes, n.d., c. 1945–51, BLPES, Tony Crosland papers, 13/21, fo. 78.

Furthering the sense of different time-frames, the influential revisionist thinking of the period saw itself as *both* newly relaxing and newly intensifying the socialist tempo. There was the cerebral revisionist emphasis on pausing carefully to reflect on the best balance between socialism, freedom, and democracy, evident in Gaitskell's unusually explicit approval in 1956 for a socialism that was 'gradualist',⁸¹ and the liberal-Whig tempo apparent in both the title of Roy Jenkins's *Pursuit of progress* (1953), and its assertion of policy being about the quest for 'a most delicate balance'.⁸² Yet, there was also the intensified focus on the structures and ambience of social inequality which led Gaitskell impatiently to warn that we were 'still a long way' even from a meritocratic equality of opportunity, and the reforming zeal of Jenkins, who detected in his friend Crosland a certain complacency, his otherwise positive review of *The future of socialism* suggesting that it had exaggerated 'both the inevitability and the desirability of "quiet politics" in this country'.⁸³ Revisionist perceptions of the people furthered the double-sidedness, as they concluded that the opportunity afforded for further change by the apparent shift leftwards in the people was balanced by the sense that the very move to greater social justice had left people more contented and conservative. Writing in *Tribune* in August 1949, Tony Crosland suggested that in one respect the Attlee government had done 'the easy things'; it had implemented the long-standing, the large scale, and, in a way, the obvious: a welfare state and a nationalization programme, the measures, as Crosland put it, 'productive of quick reform and advance', leaving slower, longer-term tasks, such as educational reform, which 'would give no immediate or sensational results'.⁸⁴ Developing this theme further in 1952, Crosland pointed to a move towards further socialism that would 'take time', be 'prolonged', require a 'difficult effort of will', yet he was equally emphatic about an ongoing process of 'further radical advance'.⁸⁵

The case of revisionism raises the important question of how far, by slowing the pace of social change implicit in an ideology, socialism, it changed the fundamental nature of that ideology. In other words, the issue arises of how far Gaitskell's belief in gradualism, or the revisionist-pragmatist Healey's vision of a socialism moving forward 'by inches', constituted acceptance of the slower time-scales of Liberalism or Conservatism.⁸⁶ Where Jackson has suggested that 'at least some of the revisionists were revising the ends as well as the means of

⁸¹ Gaitskell, *Recent developments*, p. 15.

⁸² R. Jenkins, *Pursuit of progress: a critical analysis of the achievement and prospect of the Labour party* (London, 1953), p. 49.

⁸³ H. Gaitskell, *Socialism and nationalization*, Fabian Tract, 300 (July 1956), p. 4; Roy Jenkins, *Forward*, 5 Oct. 1956.

⁸⁴ Crosland, 'The way towards more socialist equality', *Tribune*, 19 Aug. 1949, BLPES, Crosland papers, 13/20, fo. 57.

⁸⁵ C. A. R. Crosland in R. H. S. Crossman, ed., *New Fabian essays* (London, 1952), p. 68.

⁸⁶ D. Healey, *The time of my life* (London, 1990), p. 472. A quotation by Healey of a Polish acquaintance, Lesjek Kolakowski.

socialism', one might add that the time of arrival was also under revision.⁸⁷ There is little doubt that the pace of revisionism, with its emphasis on pause and thought, chiming with the labourist, pragmatic Morrisonian emphasis on consolidation of the existing nationalized industries without further large-scale additions, did share similarities with the incremental progressivism of Liberals and liberal Conservatives. Longer time-frames allowed a longer time for different ideologies to intermingle and borrow from one another's strengths, a long-established historical process. Equally, the infusions of Liberalism and even Conservatism that revisionism allowed did not prevent it from still seeing socialism as a distinct and separate ideology, and revisionists' demands for change that was rapid were seen as part of that socialist distinctiveness, even as they sat alongside a slower, and much more centrist, moderate tempo.

Aneurin Bevan's thinking on time-frames illustrated a Labour left simultaneously pulled by a desire to seize the immediate, perhaps never to be repeated, potential of the moment, and a wish to alert people to the relative infancy of democracy and working-class empowerment, and its need to be given proper time to flower. He repeatedly placed the development of working-class political attitudes in a longer-term context, warning against the danger of expecting too much from them too soon. Writing in 1944, he observed that only 'with the twentieth century [had] the ordinary man stepped into history'.⁸⁸ The granting of voting rights in 1918 did not mean people had had sufficient time to develop the sort of outlook and democratic mentality that would enable them to use their new voting power in a socially responsible way. In this sense, Baldwin's interwar electoral success was unsurprising, Conservative voting reflecting the time the working class needed to mature politically.⁸⁹ Musing further in 1951, Bevan insisted that socialism required ordinary people to reach 'full stature', which meant their accepting the responsibilities and sacrifices that political choice brought, and not only the rewards.⁹⁰ The people, he reminded readers in 1952, had 'hardly started' to use their power.⁹¹

Yet, Bevan was equally drawn to the perceived urgency of the situation. Growing working-class political consciousness was not an ever-upward linear trend, it had to be nurtured by 'continuing education', consultation, and public control.⁹² As early as 1944, he was insisting that the moment for the working-class voter's decision was close at hand: 'he either steps back to the shadows of history once more or into the light of full social maturity'.⁹³ These competing time-frames partly reflected Bevan's mixed feelings on the issue of working-class agency, his focus on how power structures held them down matched by an equally insistent belief that this was not an excuse, that ultimately they could,

⁸⁷ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 222.

⁸⁸ A. Bevan, *Why not trust the Tories?* (London, 1944), p. 82.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–3.

⁹⁰ *Idem*, *Democratic values*, Fabian Tract, 282 (Jan. 1951), pp. 11–12.

⁹¹ *Idem*, *In place of fear* (London, 1978; orig. publ. 1952), p. 28.

⁹² *Idem*, *Democratic values*, pp. 13–14. ⁹³ *Idem*, *Tories*, p. 83.

should they choose, shape politics to their will.⁹⁴ He oscillated between optimism and pessimism in the 1950s, his sense of the long game alternating with anxiety that the people's moment was slipping away. At one more pessimistic point during the 1959 election, shortly before his death the following year, he lamented that the working class had had their opportunity, and had been seduced by the gadgetry of affluence: 'now it is probably too late'.⁹⁵

Perhaps the most illustrative framing of this mid-century point in Labour's history as both an unusually dynamic moment in itself, yet also part of a much longer, almost glacial process of historical change, was the LSE sociologist, and former Labour parliamentary candidate T. H. Marshall's *Citizenship and social class* (1950). Marshall observed a process of citizenship rights in Britain evolving over two and a half centuries. Civil and political citizenship having been achieved in the preceding two centuries, the twentieth century was witnessing the development of social citizenship. In some respects, the long time-span pointed to this, socialist-influenced, phase being an extended one. Marshall saw it as being 'of a different order' from the first two, because it encompassed 'the whole range' from basic economic welfare to the necessary broader educational and cultural fulfilment of the people.⁹⁶ The recently passed 1944 education act was merely another, imperfect stage in this process, providing secondary education for all, but in a meritocratic fashion which created winners and losers, 'a structure of unequal status', in a way which was likely to lead for further demands for change, as were some of the inequalities generated by the continued existence of the competitive market.⁹⁷ But if Marshall's evolutionary view of citizenship in 'continuous progress' pointed to the long term, he also saw the current phase as 'rapidly developing'. Indeed, the social rights already gained had been 'formidable' to the extent that 'our modern system is frankly a socialist system'.⁹⁸ As for the party as a whole, here, the socialist endpoint seemed both clearly mapped out, yet persistently difficult to pinpoint.

One crucial reason for this was that the people remained, in Labour eyes, a mixed bag – but *mixed*, not unambiguously negative. What had changed since the 1930s was that the picture seemed a little clearer. The experience furnished by both the 'people's war' and the alliance between the people and Labour in 1945 meant the sense of Otherness between people and party looked less, views of the citizenry appeared less speculative, more furnished by evidence of the people's actual engagement on the political stage. Also changing was Labour's greater sense that they could not fully sidestep the issue of the people through the technical excellence of state policy. Success in a democracy, Morrison

⁹⁴ *Idem*, *Fear*, pp. 78–9.

⁹⁵ Cited in J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the mirage of British socialism* (London, 1987), p. 364.

⁹⁶ T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and social class* (London, 1950), contained in T. H. Marshall and T. Bottomore, *Citizenship and social class* (London, 1992), pp. 7–10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 38–40.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 49.

concluded in 1953, depended upon 'the quality, the ability and the public spirit' of millions.⁹⁹ Arthur Greenwood advised the 1953 party conference that 'progress is not accomplished merely by new laws and better administration. It also depends on the interest and participation of the people as a whole.'¹⁰⁰

But what had not changed was the essential multi-sidedness of the party's view of the people. Labour felt it was now clearer, but clearer about both deficiencies and virtues. The disappointment with the perceived limits to the survival of the fraternal Blitz spirit in the 1940s, and with the apparent seductions of affluence in the 1950s, have been noted, and were considerable. But they co-existed with a revived hopefulness, from both the retiring generation of Labour leaders, and the emerging new one. The non-heroic, even humdrum, nature of the depiction was even more marked than in the 1930s, yet the confidence in the existence of this ordinary decency, and how it had elected and sustained a reforming Labour government, was more secure in Labour figures' minds also. For Greenwood in 1953, the desires of the people were 'basically simple and human'.¹⁰¹ Most people, most of the time, Attlee warmly reflected in 1954, are 'kindly'.¹⁰² 'The British', Morrison appraised in 1959, 'are a decent lot.'¹⁰³ Being in tune with the populace was now also praised as a virtue. In a broadcast tribute to Bevin in 1951, Attlee reflected that he 'understood the people'.¹⁰⁴ At a dinner in 1956 in honour of Attlee, Gaitskell discussed admiringly his predecessor's feel and sympathy for ordinary people, a feel that in fact made him 'most un-ordinary'.¹⁰⁵ Overall, Labour's unresolved mixed feelings about the people remained: profound disappointment and deep reassurance. Illustrating this mixed picture, Gaitskell confided to his diary in August 1947 that voters were 'utterly uninterested in nationalization of steel', against austerity, and tired of the government's excuses, and yet 'probably more tolerant of the Government and appreciative of its difficulties than many suppose'.¹⁰⁶

This mixed viewpoint was echoed in the perceptions of leading trade union figures of the time, who were often concerned to highlight the essential decency and common sense of ordinary people, especially in comparison to the perceived abstractions of Labour intellectuals, yet were equally inclined to showcase their realism about the limits to workers' enthusiasm for participation in industrial democracy, or collective solidarity. This was in the context of

⁹⁹ H. Morrison, *Our parliament and how it works* (London, 1953), p. 31, in Oxford, Nuffield College (NC), Herbert Morrison papers, box D.

¹⁰⁰ Greenwood's speech to Labour party conference, 1953, BLO, Greenwood papers, MS 6246, fo. 160. ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, MS 6246, fo. 156.

¹⁰² C. R. Attlee, *As it happened* (London, 1954), p. 106.

¹⁰³ H. Morrison, *News Chronicle*, 8 Dec. 1959, NC, Morrison papers, box B/1, fo. 28.

¹⁰⁴ Attlee, *Happened*, p. 203.

¹⁰⁵ H. Gaitskell speaking at a dinner in honour of Earl and Countess Attlee, 10 Feb. 1956, London, University College (UCL), Hugh Gaitskell papers, A117.

¹⁰⁶ Gaitskell's diary entry, 12 Aug. 1947, in P. M. Williams, ed., *The diary of Hugh Gaitskell, 1945-1956* (London, 1983), p. 27.

both the nationalization of key industries by the Attlee government (though, significantly, not the institution of industrial democracy) and a rise in trade union membership between 1945 and 1951 from 7.6 to 9.2 million, neither of which, however, appeared to alter the picture whereby a minority of union members were highly active and participatory, but a majority much less inclined to attend meetings or even vote in internal union elections.¹⁰⁷

Retiring after twenty years as TUC general secretary in 1946, Walter Citrine was praising of the fortitude of ordinary trade unionists in fighting for democracy against Hitler, yet also lamented that the improvements in their material conditions had not been matched by moral growth: 'it has scarcely entered into the thinking of millions of workers that power brings responsibilities'.¹⁰⁸ Mineworkers' union president Will Lawther, writing in 1952, welcomed what he saw as an increasingly intelligent, educated, and demanding workforce, but also pointed to the greater responsibilities workers must undertake if industrial democracy were, as he wished, to be extended.¹⁰⁹ Jack Jones, midlands secretary of the TGWU in the 1950s, and a firm advocate of 'shop floor' industrial activism since his organizing days in wartime Coventry, emphasized the wisdom the manual working class brought to the Labour party by virtue of their first-hand experience of the 'rough and tumble' of real industrial life; however, he also pointed to the average person's inconsistency, favouring trade union action when it benefited themselves, but willing to 'at the same time condemn as irresponsible a group of workers taking action elsewhere'.¹¹⁰

At its most fundamental, Labour's still conflicted view of the people informed and echoed uncertainty about its precise political purpose and underlying attitude to power. The party remained much more ambiguous than the Conservatives about how much it really wanted to be in government, to hold power, to join with the people, to be part of the mainstream. The Conservatives, though they, too, had objections to some of the drift of 'modernity' in the 1950s, were less qualified in their embrace of present-day society.¹¹¹ As for Labour, one is certainly struck, by 1964, by how far it *had* moved towards seeing itself as a mainstream people's party. It was on the brink of holding office for eleven of the next fifteen years, and was eventually able to at least momentarily claim, as Wilson did in November 1974, that it was now the natural party of government. Yet, equally noteworthy was the resilience of its iconoclastic, protesting, questioning attitude to and mixed feelings about power and

¹⁰⁷ Fielding, Thompson, and Tiratsoo, *England arise!*, p. 125.

¹⁰⁸ Lord Citrine, *Two careers: volume two of the autobiography of Lord Citrine* (London, 1967), pp. 24, 329–30.

¹⁰⁹ W. Lawther, *Can industrial democracy survive?* (London, 1952), pp. 12–14.

¹¹⁰ J. Jones, *Union man: the autobiography of Jack Jones* (London, 1986), pp. 173, 175, 229.

¹¹¹ On the complex layers within Conservative attitudes to social change and modernity see M. Jarvis, *Conservative governments, morality and social change in affluent Britain, 1957–1964* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 160–1, 167.

electoral success. Even Roy Jenkins, who was to occupy the highest offices more than any of the other Gaitskellites (who were arguably the party's strongest advocates of pursuing electoral success), mused intriguingly in his memoirs over 'the question of how much I was truly at ease with power'.¹¹² The 'transition' Gaitskell referred to in 1953 in the party's mentality 'from the pioneering stage to that of responsibility and power' was thus ongoing, qualified, and complex.¹¹³

V

Was 1945–51 a beginning or an ending? It is Labour's, and its historians', ongoing uncertainty in answer to this question which makes it so difficult to periodize the party's history. The very tangible and macro-level character of the achievements of the Attlee government – the NHS, full employment, nationalization – made it seem, both at the time, and often in later comparisons, as a particular high point, from the perspective of which subsequent Labour governments, with their more mundane concerns about precise levels of public spending, or their micro-level education policy agendas, were almost bound to appear less dramatically successful. Sociologically, too, 1945–51 and its immediate aftermath seemed to some like a not-to-be-repeated moment of maximum potential, with its culture of mass party membership, and unionized skilled working class from a still buoyant manufacturing sector.¹¹⁴

Whilst in these senses, 1945–51 was an apparent ending, in other respects, it seemed like just the start. This was, after all, only Labour's *first* majority government. Moreover, if it seemed like the beginning of the end for a political agenda focused primarily on the alleviation of social negatives, those very tangible material problems, more positive, participatory, and empowering agendas in areas like education and industrial democracy, appeared very much in their infancy. 'The first stage' of socialism in 1945, as Crossman saw it in 1952, had not, he contended, really involved the people, being administered from above by the cabinet and civil service.¹¹⁵ The focus on people's potential and opportunity and associated educational expansion was more the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s than earlier, Wilson regarding his 1964 government as engaging in merely 'the first stages' of 'releasing the talents and energies of millions of our people'.¹¹⁶ Really to address inequalities in educational opportunities,

¹¹² R. Jenkins, *A life at the center* (New York, NY, 1991), p. 562.

¹¹³ Proof copy of Gaitskell's foreword (Dec. 1953) for reprint of Evan Durbin's *The politics of democratic socialism* (London, 1954), p. 9, UCL, Gaitskell papers, A1 24. See also Gaitskell, *Recent*, p. 40.

¹¹⁴ For a sense of decline from 1945 to 1951, see, for instance, Hennessy, *Never again*, p. 454; Foote, *Labour*, p. 235.

¹¹⁵ Crossman, in Crossman, ed., *Fabian essays*, p. 28. See also Crossman's introduction to W. Bagehot, *The English constitution* (Glasgow, 1963), pp. 56–7.

¹¹⁶ H. Wilson, *Purpose in power* (London, 1966), p. xi.

Crosland warned in 1962, given the importance of parental influence, it would be necessary first properly to educate one generation, and then await their chance to 'stimulate the faculties of their children'.¹¹⁷ If education policy seemed an area newly ripe for development towards the end of the period of this article, interest in the broader rearing and nurturing of children, Durbin's distant dream, the implication of Edith Summerskill's assertion in 1948 that 'the citizen of tomorrow is the product of all those influences brought to bear upon him from birth', appeared to be an intergenerational long-term challenge that the party had only scratched the surface of by 1964.¹¹⁸ From a range of such perspectives, then, 1945–51 is somewhat normalized, an important foundation, but with much still to come. As Barbara Castle put it in 1960, Labour was now about to embark on the 'second stage of its historical task'.¹¹⁹ Here, then, was a more pluralist periodization of different beginnings and endings in different spheres of policy.

The question of whether affluence was corrupting or liberating the citizenry was at the forefront of Labour's appraisals of the people by the end of the period of this article. Black notes that socialists at this time were 'disappointed' by the people.¹²⁰ This was certainly true, and yet that same co-existing optimism about them and corresponding societal trends that has been identified since 1931 also held firm by 1964. Moreover, the party's previous defence of the people's character was now increasingly accompanied by a more positive view of their intellectual and cultural standards. Jay pointed in 1962 to rising book sales, concert attendances, and visits to the Tate gallery as evidence of the positive side of contemporary cultural trends, and identified a mixed picture of 'corrupting forces' and 'civilizing forces' in 'battle'.¹²¹ Jenkins reflected in 1959 that 'the satisfaction of wants is at least as likely to free people's thoughts from material things as to concentrate them there'.¹²² TUC assistant general secretary Vic Feather wrote in 1963 of the positive trends towards greater equality and educational opportunity, which were also affecting the style of trade unionism, with 'less need for oratory and mass meetings' and 'more need for books and periodicals'.¹²³ Even an older generation of leaders was not unreservedly critical of the modern. Reflecting on the influence of the radio (though admittedly not television) in 1954, Attlee concluded that it had 'operated to make election audiences more thoughtful and more desirous of listening to solid reasoning than in the old days'.¹²⁴ In a BBC interview in 1962,

¹¹⁷ C. A. R. Crosland, *The conservative enemy* (London, 1962), p. 173.

¹¹⁸ E. Summerskill, 'The citizen of tomorrow', in H. Tracey, ed., *The British Labour party: its history, growth, policy and leaders* (London, 1948), p. 170.

¹¹⁹ B. Castle, *New Statesman*, 24 Sept. 1960.

¹²⁰ Black, *Political culture*, p. 193.

¹²¹ D. Jay, *Socialism in the new society* (London, 1962), pp. 350–1.

¹²² R. Jenkins, *The Labour case* (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 55.

¹²³ V. Feather, *The essence of trade unionism: a background book* (London, 1963), p. 124.

¹²⁴ Attlee, *Happened*, p. 141.

three years before he died, Morrison opined that over the preceding four decades politics had become less dirty, and the electorate ‘more intelligent’.¹²⁵

The left, too, exhibited a mix of new hopes and new wariness about the people. Crossman, anxious to empower them through a decentralization of power, was simultaneously sceptical, remarking that the Christian doctrine of original sin was a more accurate view of morality than Marx’s vision of the classless society, and also warning Crosland in 1956 not to deceive himself that most people believed in equality.¹²⁶ Castle, in contrast, saw herself as ‘an optimist’, believing that the case for public ownership was being strengthened, not weakened, by the affluent society, and that people could be educated into socialism, though she acknowledged that ‘it won’t be easy’.¹²⁷ Even by 1970, which was beginning to witness a new phase of left-wing grassroots activism, simultaneous optimism and uncertainty about the people prevailed. Articulating this new phase was Tony Benn, who in his 1970 Fabian Tract, *The new politics*, pointed to people’s desire to ‘do more for themselves’, yet also reported their ‘fears and doubts and lack of self-confidence’.¹²⁸ This multi-sidedness echoes recent studies of post-war political or civic participation which emphasize the complexity of people’s levels of engagement, Lawrence, for instance, observing that people’s deliberative “‘peaceable-ness” was not the same as passivity’.¹²⁹

It is worth considering how Labour’s multiple tempos and time-frames fitted into the broader tempo of British politics by 1964. It is probably fair to conclude that there was, between 1931 and 1964, and intensifying thereafter, some quickening in the tempo of politics; in the sense of governments being expected to respond more rapidly to changing circumstances and ideas, the media attention to politicians’ pronouncements and characters being greater, and people’s expectations of government rising, all in a society where convention was somewhat more open to challenge, and social class structures were more fluid. In these respects, the fast tempo side of Labour, its urgent appetite for change, was in tune with the times. It was exemplified by the dynamism of Harold Wilson as leader from 1963, his ability to communicate effectively through the more immediate medium of television, and the centrality of support for rising educational aspirations to the party’s programme for the decade. Pimlott notes the initially ‘hectic pace’ of Wilson’s 1964

¹²⁵ H. Morrison, BBC Home Service interview, 1962, NC, Morrison papers, D.

¹²⁶ Crossman, in Crossman, ed., *Fabian essays*, pp. 8–9; Crossman to Crosland, 23 Oct. 1956, BLPES, Crosland papers, 13/10, fo. 3.

¹²⁷ B. Castle, *New Statesman*, 24 Sept. 1960.

¹²⁸ A. Benn, *The new politics: a socialist reconnaissance*, Fabian Tract, 402 (Sept. 1970), pp. 1, 9–10, 16, 28.

¹²⁹ J. Lawrence, *Electing our masters: the hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), p. 128; idem, ‘Transformation’, pp. 185–6, 208–9, 216; see also M. Hilton, ‘Politics is ordinary: non-governmental organizations and political participation in contemporary Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011), pp. 230–68, at pp. 232, 268.

government compared to the 'relaxed atmosphere' under Douglas-Home.¹³⁰

Yet, if the pace of politics was increasing, it was a steady, measured rise in the walking pace, by no means a run, or even a march. Policy, for instance, remained decidedly macro, with limited interest, for several more decades, in the micro-policy of behaviour, standards, or outcomes. If Wilson performed well on television, it was not with the intimacy or emotional connection of Tony Blair; his best was still the more traditional, boisterous context of the large-scale political meeting.¹³¹ If one of the least-noticed and most subtle of changes in British politics over the course of the twentieth century was the way it became, as Harrison has observed, 'more complex', this worked to quicken the political tempo, yet also to slow it. The expansion of state welfare and the civil service, the increase in social science and government research, and the increasingly pluralist sense of the complexity and multi-layered nature of social problems raised expectations, demands, and the sense of urgency about political action, yet simultaneously heightened the need for reflection and consultation, and the awareness of constraint.¹³²

Thus, the multiple tempos of Labour, and indeed its broader multiple character found echoes in the wider British politics and society by 1964. Labour retained significant reservations about the people, yet was also optimistic about their ability to drive a new, more meritocratic and egalitarian age. Reflecting this ambiguity and multi-layeredness, Wilson's combination of reassuring conventions and change seemed attractive to both country and party. He was pipe-smoking, of plain tastes, and sceptical of revisionist critiques of Labour's traditions, yet young, iconoclastic, and presentationally adept, such that Callaghan could reflect on Wilson's offer of both 'stability' and 'dynamic action'.¹³³ Given this, Labour's unresolved balance of fast and slow tempos, short and long time-frames seemed as apt for a country both eager for and fearful of change in 1964 as it had for the party itself since 1931. Wilson promised the white heat of a technological 'revolution' and a hundred-day plan, yet also articulated this empirical pragmatist's belief that 'British socialism is essentially ... evolutionary'.¹³⁴ The party's 1964 manifesto offered rapid and dramatic change. Labour would 'revitalize and modernize the whole economy', there would be 'a revolution in training', and 'a revolution in our educational system'. It would even 'put an end to ... personal selfishness'.¹³⁵ Yet, equally insistent was the reminder to the voters, whom the party saw as both a constraint upon and essential contributor to their mission: there was 'no easy solution' to

¹³⁰ B. Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992), p. 338.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 312–13.

¹³² B. Harrison, *The transformation of British politics, 1860–1995* (Oxford, 1996), p. 414.

¹³³ Harold Wilson, *News Chronicle*, Oct. 1955, BLO, Harold Wilson papers, MS 1723; J. Callaghan, *Time and chance* (London, 1987), pp. 150, 161.

¹³⁴ H. Wilson, *The relevance of British socialism* (London, 1964), p. 2.

¹³⁵ Labour party manifesto, 1964.

national problems; improvements in welfare services would 'not be achieved all at once'; addressing problems would take 'time'.¹³⁶

VI

Perhaps befitting its emphasis on the multi-sidedness of Labour, this article has sought to display both the unresolved tensions at the heart of its thought, and yet also how relatively effectively it managed to function despite them. There was undoubtedly deep uncertainty in the way it looked to both long and short time-frames, and gazed both positively and negatively upon the people. Labour's different time-frames were not always conflicting, and there was an important element of consciously pursuing a twin-track approach of short-term reforms allied to a longer-term educative agenda. But Labour also craved clarity, precision, a unification of their diverse timetables. That it did not achieve this reflected ideological uncertainty over how far changing economic structures would be sufficient to change society's underlying ethics, how far the people were on the party's side, and indeed how much this popular participation mattered to achieving its desired social change.

Equally, though, the uncertain, multi-faceted outlook of Labour on people and time was arguably an understandable and relatively sensible and sophisticated response to issues which were indeed complex and many-sided. If Labour in this period found the populace less radical than it hoped, it also found it, at key electoral points, less conservative than it sometimes feared. If it might have expected the country, from the standpoint of 1931, to be further along the road to socialism by 1964 than it was, it had also, as it saw it, now acquired much more *concrete* evidence than it had possessed before that it could win, govern, and influence society. Above all, a Labour party that was itself uncertain and conflicted about exactly what socialism or social progress meant had managed to function, at least at certain crucial political moments, as an important and creative force, despite the ambiguities with which it lived. If its growing pluralist ability increasingly to accommodate and acknowledge political complexity and multiplicity exposed it ever more fully as a broad church of, as Harris puts it, ideological 'haziness and eclecticism', it was a haziness and multi-dimensionality which was probably necessary for it to operate, and which also enabled it to adapt to and remain relevant to what was an ever more complex society.¹³⁷

Labour's ambiguities and multi-sidedness on both time and the people remain, in important respects, today. In some regards, 1931–64 appears as a distinctive, middle phase in Labour's history to date, somewhere between the idealism and pressure group role of the early century and the precision-engineered election winning machine of more recent times, in which some of the uncertainties discussed above were especially acute. But one is also struck by

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought', p. 37.

the continuity of these unresolved issues. Lawrence has written of the first decades of the twentieth century exhibiting Labour's enduring dilemma of its 'wish both to speak for the people, and to change them'.¹³⁸ Whilst New Labour has undoubtedly tilted the balance towards seeking to be 'the people's party' more than the people's critic, that same determination to educate the citizenry, improve them, and hurry them along remains evident.¹³⁹ In significant respects, the mix of immediacy and hurriedness with long-term patience that characterized Labour between 1931 and 1964 also remains apparent, even if the policies and, indeed, ultimate aims have changed. Certainly, the party is now more world-weary, and places more overt emphasis on complexity and constraint. Yet, if this points to a less apologetic focus on the long term, contemporary Labour's enduring enlightenment, educational optimism, its sense of being in an epoch of especially rapid change, and its belief that it has learned from past mistakes mean its hopes for what might be achieved quite rapidly remain equally marked. Much has changed over the course of Labour's history, but its willingness to carry on going towards multiple and uncertain endpoints has remained strikingly constant.

¹³⁸ J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the people: party, language and popular politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 263.

¹³⁹ T. Blair, *A journey* (London, 2010), pp. 28-9, 658-60.