

# The Persistence of Character in Twentieth-century British Politics

Journal of Contemporary History  
2021, Vol. 56(1) 96–116  
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DOI: 10.1177/0022009420922584  
journals.sagepub.com/home/jch



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## Abstract

Politicians across parties repeatedly agreed that their visions of social improvement rested as much on the promotion of character virtues as on the efficacy of economic systems. Character posed recurring political dilemmas. Ideological dispute over character, as to whether it is formed best through individual exertion or collective support, lies at the heart of the division of politics between right and left. Further, the limits to the people's character were seen as a constraint upon social progress. Yet, contrary to much historiography, this is not a story of decline from a supposed Victorian heyday of 'moral politics'. British politics proved notably adaptive in forging updated, optimistic visions, in which the forces of modernity which might have seemed to threaten the moral calibre of the body politic, or of society, whether democracy, state expansion, or, later, 'individualism', were recast instead as supportive foundations for the people's moral growth. If the century has seen a steadily 'quieter', less loudly moralizing, more nurturing approach to the encouragement of character, this reflected a growth in the sophistication of the method of advancing character, not a decline in either the political importance accorded to it, or the people's possession of it.

## Keywords

character, Conservative, Labour, Liberal, people, politics

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Recent decades have witnessed a growing appreciation that the course of modern British history rests as much on a society's 'moral' qualities as on the more familiar, oft-analysed indicators like material wellbeing, or social structural inequality. This 'moral turn' has incorporated a steadily growing interest in the role of character as a driver of social and political outcomes. Yet, it is a role which requires further, and in some ways different attention in three respects. Firstly, the issue of character needs to be disentangled from the broader one of 'public morality', and the consideration of it extended more fully into the century's later decades. The starting point for this whole subject remains Peter Clarke's seminal study of the 'division between the moral and mechanical reformist', the optimistic former believing in progress through a growth in ideals and character, 'a change of heart', the latter more focused on structural or institutional measures 'from above'. Clarke's exploration of liberal and socialist intellectuals dovetailed with Philip Williamson's later treatment of the more governmental public morality of the leading inter-war Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. Williamson presents Baldwin as national educator as much as party politician, his sense of service, 'a deeper purpose', helping to foster the character attributes of responsibility and moderation required to make the new, post-1918 democracy function.<sup>1</sup> Further research by Fielding and Francis on the pivotal 1945–51 Labour government has suggested that whilst its policy focus was on material improvements, its underlying objective was as much to foster a more cooperative 'spirit'.<sup>2</sup> There is also a growing wider interest in politics as a 'mindset', and in the lived politics of everyday behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

However, whilst character is certainly a concern of many of the above, it is usually not the central focus, which is about wider ideological, ethical or political purposes, or the relationship between elites and masses. The many insights of the above literature have also been insufficiently applied to the century's second half. Jon Lawrence's recent book on the balance between post-war community and individualism is a major step towards remedying this, albeit that its focus is social more than political, and its interest in those two social *characteristics* is still somewhat distinct from the more general subject of character itself.<sup>4</sup> Character has, though, been explicitly explored in relation to the outlooks of the post-war Labour Party, in work which asserts the continuing centrality of character to twentieth-century social democratic thinking, whilst also exploring the

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1 P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge 1978), 5; P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge 1999), 87.

2 M. Francis, 'Economics or Ethics', in *Ideas and Policies Under Labour, 1945–1951* (Manchester 1997), 57; see also S. Fielding, P. Thompson and N. Tiratsoo (eds), *'England Arise!' The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester 1995).

3 R. Toye, 'Keynes, Liberalism and "the Emancipation of the Mind"', *English Historical Review*, 130, 546 (2015), 1162–1191; 1183, 1191; A. Campsie, 'Mass-Observation, Left Intellectuals and the Politics of Everyday Life', *English Historical Review*, 131, 548 (2016), 92–121; M. Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford 2006), 13, 291.

4 J. Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford 2019).

tensions between the party's economic and moral strains.<sup>5</sup> This article seeks to centre character more fully in cross-party, post-1900 politics as a whole, which still continues in many accounts to be written with high political, ideological or economic macro-narratives, in which character only features relatively peripherally.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, a declinist narrative has pervaded much of the discussion of the twentieth-century role of character, in assumptions about both the centrality of ideals about character within political thinking, and, indeed, about the very quality of the people's character. There remains a frequent belief that character is somehow the rightful property primarily of the Victorians. In his justly influential work on nineteenth-century 'public moralists', Collini argues that the ideal of character 'enjoyed a prominence in the political thought of the Victorian period that it had apparently not known before and that it has, arguably, not experienced since'.<sup>7</sup> For Freedon, Clarke and Marquand, this was symbolised by the twentieth century's housing of a decline in the influence of liberalism, with its ethical high-mindedness being replaced by Conservatives' and socialists' shared preoccupation with power, struggle and class.<sup>8</sup> Others have pushed character's survival as a mainstream concept later, into the mid-twentieth century, but it is then perceived to have been undermined by a growing liberal individualism. In Sennett's narrative of the 'corrosion of character', the decline came later still, the resilience of workers' characters depleted by the rugged market competitiveness of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>9</sup> But all share a sense of an ultimate twentieth-century fall in character's centrality.

There has, though, recently been the beginning of a recognition, on which this article draws, that the distinction between a Victorian 'moral' politics and society, and an increasingly technocratic, economic and ultimately selfishly individualistic twentieth-century one, may be misleading. Lawrence persuasively argues that 'commentators [who] tell us that everyday life has become selfish and atomized . . . are wrong', that 'community still matters' to people.<sup>10</sup> If community still

5 J. Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism: The Labour Party and Qualities of Mind and Character, 1931 To The Present* (Manchester 2006); J. Nuttall, 'Pluralism, the People and Time in Labour Party History, 1931–1964', *Historical Journal*, 56, 3 (2013), 729–56.

6 For example in B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left* (Manchester 2007); E. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford 2004); E. Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul? New Labour and The Blair Government 1997–2007* (London 2007).

7 S. Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850–1930* (Oxford 1991), 94.

8 M. Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939* (Oxford 1986), 10; Clarke, *Liberals*; D. Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society: New Demands and Old Politics* (London 1988).

9 Thomson, *Psychological*, 13, 291; P. Mandler, *The English National Character* (London 2006), 196; J. Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870–1914* (London 1994), 252; R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character* (London 1998), 148.

10 Lawrence, *Me*, 1, 230; see also E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Tomlinson, 'Telling Stories About Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28, 2 (2017), 268–304; B. Jackson, 'Currents of Neo-Liberalism: British Political Ideologies and the New Right, c.1955–1979', *English Historical Review*, 131, 551 (2016), 823–50; S. Brooke, 'Living in "New Times": Historicizing 1980s Britain', *History Compass*, 12 (2014), 20–32.

matters, it will be argued here, so too does character – to both the people, and their politicians.

Thirdly, illuminating research has addressed how character has been ‘constructed’ to preserve the power of dominant groups. Francis’s work on the ‘emotional economy’ of 1950s’ Conservative Prime Ministers, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, shows how they privileged notions of emotional restraint and measured balance as the supreme virtues. Yet, this created tensions with their personal psychological nervousness and insecurities. Character here was also politically loaded, used to discredit those supposed to lack the required calm prudence, ranging from homosexuals and Celtic working-class radicals like Aneurin Bevan, to even the apparently over-exuberant Americans.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is important to note that character was not *solely* a rhetorical construct, affected rather than real. Nor was it only a tool of marginalisation, used merely by Conservatives. As Jose Harris cautions, it is too ‘frequently taken for granted that the concept of character was exclusively a “class” weapon, whereby the rich passed moral judgement upon the suppliant poor’.<sup>12</sup> In fact, character has mattered considerably to the visions and fortunes of all three main British ideologies and parties, and continues to do so. For Conservatives, market economics needed not just a market system, but self-reliant and enterprising *mind-sets*. Liberals held to a conception of citizenship, which required not only institutional democratisation, but a popular appetite for engagement, and independent-thinking. So, too, for social democratic egalitarianism, which rested not only on state provision, but on an underpinning spirit of cooperation, kindness and care.

Character illuminates ideological shortcomings. It is argued here that politicians were divided between an ideological right too inclined to depict character virtues in narrowly business-orientated or ‘manly’ terms, and a left at times reducing the problem of insufficient societal virtue merely to inequalities of material distribution. More positively, however, the article rejects the declinist view of a twentieth-century politics becoming economistic or technocratic at the expense of a focus on character or ethics, or of British political thinkers, politicians or the people themselves becoming less aspirational in that search to raise character. On the whole, ‘character politics’ became more, not less determined and sophisticated over the course of the century. The sheer frequency of leading British politicians’ insistence that their approach to politics was, to use Clarke’s terms, ‘moral’, not merely ‘mechanical’, is some initial evidence of this.<sup>13</sup> Further is the adaptivity of post-1900 British politics, its ability to create new intellectual syntheses, in which the forces of ‘modernity’ which might have seemed likely to undermine the moral fibre of the body politic, or the wider society, were presented instead as mutually

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11 M. Francis, ‘Tears, Tantrums and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963’, *Journal of British Studies*, 41, 3 (July 2002), 354–87: 361–6, 386.

12 Harris, *Private Lives*, 248.

13 Clarke, *Liberals*, 4–5, 243.

supportive partners to visions of moral improvement. Democracy, for instance, came to be seen as educative and morally uplifting for those newly enfranchised, rather than a dangerous dilution of the character level of the electorate. Similarly, in the century's middle decades, a considerably enhanced level of state welfare was broadly accepted as more likely to provide the support upon which the cultivation of character rested, than to generate a character-sapping dependency. In some ways, these syntheses show the still historiographically under-explored appetite for a progressive 'middle way' in British politics, an enabling state *and* individual responsibility; material *alongside* moral advance.<sup>14</sup>

Linked to this was a shift in the tone of character politics over the century. If earlier decades housed a still ruggedly competitive conception of character, at times bombastically proclaimed, character politics steadily 'quietened' over the century. Through character- and independence-fostering forces like state welfare, home-ownership, educational expansion, and also the sheer cumulative impact of millions of daily acts of personal initiative, character has had opportunities to grow through seemingly less direct, obvious or loudly declaratory channels. But a *quieter* character politics should not be mistaken for a less *meaningful* one. Character was not about a lost yesterday, but a living, evolving, and, on the whole, organically improving present reality.

Methodologically, the article observes Collini's warning that there are dangers in an approach which 'reduces "ideas" to "theories"'.<sup>15</sup> Character was a concept employed widely by both political thinkers and practitioners. It reflected intuitive assumptions, observations and outlooks as much as systematic intellectual appraisals, and as such the article ranges across works of thought, speeches, jottings, letters and memoirs. Historiographically, somewhat unusually, what follows seeks to connect the findings of historians of political thought, who discuss projects of moral elevation as ideological endeavours, with those of lived political culture, who illuminate how the actual character of an evolving society – how the people *were* – both constrained and advanced those visions.<sup>16</sup>

Leading twentieth-century British political figures have been repeatedly insistent that their mission was about more than the construction of better economic systems or the improvement of social institutions, and rested crucially on a liberating, and raising of the deeper character of the people. 'The harshest features of poverty we may hope to get rid of,' reflected Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in 1924, 'and perhaps in time to lift the level of our people; but none of those things are of avail unless we can raise their character.'<sup>17</sup> For the Liberal David Lloyd

14 On the surprising academic under-scrutiny of the concept of the middle way in British history, see B. Harrison, 'The Centrist Theme in Modern British Politics', in *Peaceable Kingdom* (Oxford 1982). See also E. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge 2011).

15 S. Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals In Britain* (Oxford 2006), 6.

16 Jackson, *Equality*; Clarke, *Liberals*; L. Black, *The Political Culture of The Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–1964* (Basingstoke 2003); Fielding et al., 'England Arise!'

17 S. Baldwin, 'Teachers and Taught', speech to London Teachers' Association, 28 Nov. 1924, in his *On England: And Other Addresses* (London 1926), 165–6.

George, 'character is as important to a nation as it is to an individual': 'the mind – the soul must have its vitamins, and we must see that more verdure is brought into the lives of the millions of people who live under . . . [poor] conditions'. Similarly, to Labour's Ramsay MacDonald, in 1905, progress came through the mind, not just the economy, and if socialism 'over emphasises either side, let it be the former'.<sup>18</sup> As the ideological variety of the above figures suggests, character, whilst it undoubtedly could serve as a moralizing or punitive class weapon, was far from being a merely negative idea, or the conceptual preserve of the right. Spreading the *opportunity* to develop one's character was also seen as a, perhaps even *the* fundamental objective of progressive politics.

There was a particular convergence across the ideologies, and throughout the century, on the importance of the character attribute of 'independence'. A striving for independence satisfied the Conservative esteem for individual self-reliance, yet also the Liberal attachment to freedom from conventional thought, and the socialist desire to liberate people from mind-numbing subservience to the factory production line. In all cases, support for the more independent character had a progressive quality. It assumed character could grow. That was 'this independence, of which we make so much', as Helen Bosanquet, intellectual leading light of the relatively *laissez-faire* Poor Law Majority Report (1909), put it. Through such independence was ensured 'the frequency of lives in which richness of character has been triumphant over material poverty'.<sup>19</sup> Yet so too for the more state interventionist New Liberal Leonard Hobhouse in his *Liberalism* (1911). This was 'the real crux' of the matter, he noted: 'to foster the development of will, of personality, of self control, or whatever we please to call that central harmonizing power which makes us capable of directing our own lives'.<sup>20</sup>

Character seemed to get to the heart of the matter in a way that the specifics of particular policies, or institutional changes failed quite to do. But it also appeared the essential foundation to make these other things work. For all the emphasis by interventionist Liberals in the late 1920s on a more active public policy to address unemployment, they saw the crucial changes as lying in the mind, as in their 1928 *Yellow Book*: 'the essential weakness [of our declining industries is] . . . psychological. It lies in a stubborn adherence to out-worn methods, ideas, traditions.'<sup>21</sup> For the young Conservative Harold Macmillan, too, propounding his 'middle way' in the 1930s, improvements in the 'social and economic structure' rested on the development of 'morality, . . . reason and good will'.<sup>22</sup>

If character mattered in the people, it was also seen as crucial to the success of a politician. In these turbulent early century decades, there was particular laudation

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18 Speeches, Bangor, 16 May 1894, Oxford University, 22 June 1923, both in his *Slings and Arrows* (London 1929), 15; J. R. MacDonald, *Socialism and Society* (London 1905), 8, 125.

19 H. Bosanquet, *The Strength of the People: A Study in Social Economics* (London 1902), 10, 121.

20 L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London 1964), 65–6.

21 Britain's Industrial Future: The Report of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry (London 1928), 454–5.

22 Bodleian Library [Bod.], Macmillan Papers, dep. c. 721, 210, 'From Tolpuddle to TUC', 21 June 1934.

of those coolly 'moderate' character attributes of leadership that would facilitate a blend of change and stability. These were adjudged notably evident in Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, who exhibited, above all, patience, that 'rarest and most difficult of all the virtues'. Contrastingly, it was, Asquith believed, not so much policy as 'incurable defects . . . of . . . character', notably loyalty and reliability, which made Lloyd George an unsuitable Prime Minister.<sup>23</sup> It was a view of Lloyd George shared by Baldwin, who most esteemed the character attribute of 'proportion', without which 'you see everything awry'. To admirers across parties, the political longevity of the conciliatory, service-imbued Baldwin rested on his 'lofty character'.<sup>24</sup>

Just as the possession of character was an apparent political asset, the perceived shortfall in the people's character was seen as a recurring political problem. In the century's early decades, a range of emerging modernities, 'new movements and new spirits', as Baldwin described them, including democracy, state expansion, secularisation, and new mass commercial leisure pursuits, were seen to possess the potential to corrode the nation's character.<sup>25</sup> Liberal thinker Charles Masterman, in his 1909 survey of *The Condition of England*, pronounced himself 'undecided whether this enormous increase of life's comforts and material satisfactions has revealed an equal and parallel advance in courage and compassion and kindly understandings'.<sup>26</sup> Many politicians later worried that the arrival of democracy had conferred a political right not always matched by the responsibility to exercise it. 'Millions of new voters were enfranchised in 1918,' Baldwin reflected in 1927, 'and for the moment there is a real risk that the status of our electorate has got a little bit ahead of its culture.'<sup>27</sup>

If politicians fretted about the character of the people, no less significant were the divisions and shortcomings of their own thinking on the subject. For the right-leaning, character remained a fundamentally self-generating force, more likely to be discouraged by state welfare than mobilised by it. Bosanquet was insistent that 'it is poverty in the higher qualities of life which causes poverty in its material commodities'. Given that 'it is the man himself who chooses and makes his circumstances', collective support should be limited.<sup>28</sup> But to critics, Conservatives used character to legitimise restrained spending on social welfare. George Orwell suggested in 1939 that the call for 'a "change of heart" is in fact the alibi of people who do not wish to endanger the *status quo*'.<sup>29</sup>

23 Bod., Asquith Papers, 49, speech, 21 Apr. 1915; 46/ 138-9, letter, 28 May 1917.

24 Speech, 8 Jan. 1926, in *England*, 114; Cambridge University Library, Baldwin Papers, 123/ 198-9, Maclean to Baldwin, 2 Aug. 1926; 161/ 154, Tyrrell to Baldwin, 21 May 1935.

25 Bod., Conservative Party Archives, series 1, part 4, X. Films, 63/4, 1937/23, 12, speech, 24 June 1937.

26 C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London 2008), 163-4.

27 Baldwin, speech to Cambridge University Conservative Association, 4 March 1927, in his *Our Inheritance* (London 1928), 29.

28 Bosanquet, *People*, 10, 48, 58.

29 G. Orwell, Essay, 'Charles Dickens', 1939, in S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 1 (London 1968), 427, 445.

The left, in turn, in their assertion of ‘the primacy of the economic factor’, as Harold Laski, by 1935 in his *Marxisant* period, put it, were open to the opposite charge of reducing inadequacies of character to a matter of purely material hardship. This economic reductionism extended well beyond the party’s left, new leader Clement Attlee, for example, arguing in 1937 that ‘at the back’ of other contests over power has been ‘the desire to use that power for economic ends’. There was an enduring tension in Labour thinking between this, and the party’s at other times strikingly pluralist assessment of the multiplicity of social and psychological factors underpinning inequalities.<sup>30</sup> Critics lamented the party’s habit of ‘attributing all existing evils to Capitalism’, as a Liberal pamphlet put it in 1929. This materialism overlooked the extent to which progress relied on ‘spirit’.<sup>31</sup> In focusing on equalisation, the Liberal thinker John Maynard Keynes worried, socialists risked under-valuing a more meritocratic ethos which recognised the divergence between people’s character contributions. Labour, he claimed, had to ‘put on an appearance of being against anyone who is . . . more skilful, more industrious, more thrifty than the average’.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, Liberals themselves were far from wholly resolved or coherent on character. The divide between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Liberalism was in part one over how far the state would be likely to impede or foster character. Moreover, it was a divide that was often also internal to individual Liberals. As Harris notes of William Beveridge, for instance, ‘at times he favoured generous social welfare and radical redistribution of resources; but at other times he favoured ‘the whip of starvation’ as a necessary precondition of economic advance’. So too amongst the most centrist, or governmentally-orientated figures within the Labour Party, like MacDonald, who, as McKibbin suggests, could be as censorious as Conservatives about the character failings of the working classes.<sup>33</sup>

Some of the more reflective observers of such polarities yearned for a more mature synthesis. For Orwell, writing, in 1939, admiringly, in an essay on the Victorian moralism, yet co-existing social concern of novelist Charles Dickens, there was an undesirable disharmony between two viewpoints. ‘The one, how can you improve human nature until you have changed the system? The other, what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature?’ These ‘appeal to different individuals, and they probably show a tendency to alternate in point of time’. ‘The moralist and the revolutionary,’ he lamented, ‘are constantly undermining one another.’<sup>34</sup>

30 H. J. Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice* (London 1935), 108–9, 121; C. R. Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective* (London 1949), 33. Main text first published in 1937. On this persistent moral-material tension in Labour thought, see Nuttall, *Psychological*, ch. 2.

31 British Library of Political and Economic Science [BLPES], Liberal Party Papers, 15/1, 154 *Liberal Candidates’ Handbook*, 1929; 15/3, 6, *Speakers’ Notes*, 1931.

32 King’s College, Cambridge, Keynes Papers, PS/4, Keynes, Liberal Summer School, 3 Aug. 1929.

33 J. Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford 1977), 2; R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (Oxford 1990), 297.

34 Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, 427–8.



British politics may thus be observed for the enduring problems posed by character. Yet, the advances and adaptivity on the subject are no less noteworthy. If the modernities of democracy, an expanding state and mass culture seemed a moral danger in these early-century decades, in the main, politicians across parties came to see these as compatible with a view of character in society as not merely preserved, but enhanced. This was true, for instance, of the evolving synthesis between an emphasis on individual responsibility and support for a more socially protective state. This was most systematically evident in the New Liberal thinking, which would provide an intellectual basis for ‘middle way’ politics long after the decline of the Liberals as a party. Here, as Hobhouse neatly encapsulated it, there was a happy convergence through which it was ‘the function of the State to secure the conditions upon which mind and character may develop themselves’. Progress was ‘not a matter of mechanical contrivance, but of the liberation of living spiritual energy’, in which ‘the generality of men and women are not only passive recipients but practical contributors’.<sup>35</sup>

Conservatives in these early century decades were also nudging towards an acceptance that character required supportive state nourishment. ‘Character cannot be formed except under good social conditions,’ insisted new party leader Andrew Bonar Law in 1911.<sup>36</sup> The party must, the reformist Conservative Viscount Halifax contended in 1935, ‘ensure to every boy and girl that opportunity of a full development of talents and character’.<sup>37</sup> Correspondingly, within Labour, any tendency to crudely materialist impulses was repeatedly held in check by the reassertion of the humanist, pluralist inclination to *combine* material with moral advancement. R. H. Tawney, a frequently useful marker of mainstream party instincts, warned in his *Equality* (1931) that for socialists to prioritize restructuring the economy over the liberation of minds, through education and social services, would be mistaken, as each served to strengthen the other. Such services fostered in the population the ‘mental vigour’, ‘resolution’, and ‘nerve and self-confidence to face without shrinking the immense task of Socialist reconstruction’.<sup>38</sup>

This search better to fuse the politics of state and character was matched by an arguably even more immediately crucial (given the continental drift to dictatorship) willingness to see the *moral* upside in the newly established democratic politics. Sometimes this restored confidence stemmed from a practical encounter with the electorate. Asquith, who had been prone to condescension about them, found the actual voters in the Paisley by-election in 1920 ‘intelligent and responsive’.<sup>39</sup> The elapse of time also gave reassurance, as British voters demonstrated their resilience to European extremes. By the time of the franchise extension to younger

35 Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, 65–6, 72–3, 83.

36 A. Bonar Law, leader’s speech, Leeds, 16 Nov. 1911.

37 Bod., Conservative Party Archive, series 1, part 4, X. Films, 63/4, 1935/48, 12, Viscount Halifax, *Thirty Years of Educational Progress*, pamphlet, 1935.

38 R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (4th edn, London 1952), 127. First published in 1931.

39 The Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections: vol. 2* (London 1928), 180, 252.

women in 1928, Baldwin was feeling that his race to 'educate' the democracy was being won: '... our party, of all others, has nothing to fear from any broadening of the basis of representation'. Underpinning this was his 'confidence in the character of our people'. Democratic participation itself seemed an educator. MacDonald, writing in 1920, on the cusp of Labour becoming a competitor for governmental office, assured readers that 'responsibility shatters all the bonds of narrow dogmatic theories; ... enfranchisement produces the reasonable mind'.<sup>40</sup>

So too with the moral and intellectual implications of the new mass culture. As Dan LeMahieu has charted, the 1930s proved an especially productive, reconciliatory decade in this regard. Mass entertainments, like cinema, raised their creative standards to become more acceptable to the intellectual classes. In turn, the previously highbrow BBC, for instance, began to consciously broaden its offering. Meeting in the middle was a more consensual, more national culture, and it helped that politically engaged intellectuals like Orwell and J.B. Priestley were so interested in articulating this 'English Everyman' taste.<sup>41</sup>

This did not mean that politicians perceived a populace abundant in its virtues. The most common view – across the century – was an essentially *mixed* one in which the people's strengths mingled with vices, active engagement with apathy. 'Human nature is a very complicated business,' reflected Lloyd George in 1923. 'It sometimes puts forward a great effort for something for which it cares, a gigantic effort. Then it astonishes everybody. The late war is a case in point. Then there are things which concern it intimately for which it makes no effort at all.'<sup>42</sup> 'This kindly, lazy, good-natured people,' thought Masterman.<sup>43</sup> In 1924, the women's citizenship campaigner, Eleanor Rathbone painted a similar picture of the recently enfranchised female electorate: '... not quite certain what it wants, but strong enough to bend the politicians to its will, when it knows it'.<sup>44</sup> This 'in between' view of the people's character merits more attention within historiographical debates over whether the electorate was apathetic or committed, conservative or progressive.<sup>45</sup> But the emphasis leant towards the positive, for two reasons. The first was a perceived, albeit hazy 'decency', an instinct to 'do the right thing' more often than not. Orwell wrote of 'the native decency of the common man'. 'The Englishman,' opined Baldwin by 1940, 'is fundamentally a friendly human creature.'<sup>46</sup>

40 Bod., Conservative Party Archives, series 1, part 4, X. Films, 63/4, 1927/16, 2, Baldwin, speech, Albert Hall, 27 May 1927; series 1, part 4, X. Films, 63/4, 1926/55, 10, Baldwin, speech, House of Commons, 3 May 1926; J.R. MacDonald, *A Policy For the Labour Party* (London 1920), 44.

41 D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture For Democracy. Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford 1998), 4.

42 D. Lloyd George, speech, Oxford University, 22 June 1923, in *Slings*, 16.

43 Masterman, *Condition*, 13.

44 E. Rathbone, *The Disinherited Family* (London 1924), 252–3, 316.

45 Fielding et al., 'England Arise!'; R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914–1951* (Oxford 2010).

46 Orwell, 'Charles Dickens', 428, 459; S. Baldwin, *The Englishman* (London 1940), 19.

Secondly, character was seen to be dynamic, not static. Both the character of individuals and the wider national character which stemmed from it, were assumed to be capable of adaptation. 'The foundation of liberty is the idea of growth,' explained Hobhouse, and 'human personality is that within which lives and grows', through a process of 'learning'. Even the more conservative Bosanquet emphasised how the 'progress made by the English people has always been the result of their own expanding energies, . . . armies of men who are struggling forward, however tentatively, to half-conscious ideals of their own'.<sup>47</sup> The prevailing outlook, then, was one of (caveated) optimism, not decline. This dual presence of national moral anxiety, yet underlying confidence, was strikingly captured by Conservative leader Arthur Balfour in 1908, noting that 'if current modes of speech take decadence more or less for granted, with still greater confidence do they speak of Progress as assured'. Balfour's text was itself entitled *Decadence*, yet its conclusion was representatively positive: 'I do not myself believe that this age is either less spiritual or more sordid than its predecessors. I believe, indeed, precisely the reverse.'<sup>48</sup>

The era of the Keynesian 'consensus' between 1940 and 1979 has been perceived as the epitome of technocratic politics: statist and economics-focused, in David Marquand's words, 'emphasising outward changes of structure and law rather than inner changes of value and belief'. Labour's social democratic revisionism, Ben Jackson suggests, focused on practical egalitarian policies, and 'could make little sense of an emphasis on moral transformation'.<sup>49</sup> Even historians arguing for the endurance of notions of character and service to this mid-century point, suggest they now came under 'more fundamental challenge'.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, however, rather than declining, character politics continued to adapt, and change in form. Building on the already domesticizing inter-war shift in the political culture, the post-war utilisation of character further 'quietened'. More nurturing means towards the cultivation of character, notably a character-supporting welfare state, a responsibility-fostering encouragement of home-ownership, and above all the expansion of educational opportunity, all rose in importance, not as institutional or materialistic *substitutes* for an agenda of moral improvement, but as more positive, subtle and wide-reaching ways of *promoting* character than were older, more punitive, or moralizing approaches.

The mix of ethical socialism with New and Old Liberalism which established the welfare state in the 1940s was explicit about its 'moral' purpose, that it sought a synthesis of rights *and* responsibilities; the cultivation of character encouraged by a supportive state. As a resolution at the Liberal Assembly in 1942, the year of the publication of one of liberalism's leading lights, William Beveridge's pivotal report, put it, the state could be the means, but the aim was to overcome 'ignorance and

47 Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, 65–6; Bosanquet, *People*, 341.

48 A. Balfour, *Decadence* (Cambridge 1908), 8, 52.

49 Marquand, *Unprincipled*, 20; Jackson, *Equality*, 191.

50 Thomson, *Psychological*, 13, 291; Harris, *Private*, 252.

undeveloped minds'.<sup>51</sup> The objective remained, as Beveridge himself put it four years later, the 'recognition of the rights of man as a spirit'.<sup>52</sup> Attlee's socialism, too, was about 'a way of life rather than an economic dogma': 'people are converted more by what they see Socialists are than by what they hear them say'. So also for Eleanor Rathbone, the leading campaigner for family allowances, finally enacted in 1945, the aim of which, she noted, was to promote access to 'the finer qualities of mind and character which should be the natural heritage of all the children'.<sup>53</sup>

The debate over whether the 'People's War' sparked a moral elevation of the people, the emergence of more engaged, cooperative, and – from a Labour perspective – genuinely 'socialist-minded' citizenry, is a pivotal one. Revisionists like Fielding have noted 'Labour's inability to make socialists on the scale anticipated in 1945', noting the continuation of individualistic and disengaged outlooks. For McKibbin, however, 'radicalization was genuine; people were not apolitical or cynical'. Yet, as with the essentially mixed assessments of the people so prevalent in the inter-war period, the co-existence of appetites for social cooperation and individual independence seems the most persuasive interpretation. As Lawrence concludes, we should not underestimate the sophistication of the ways in which, both in the 1940s and thereafter, people sought 'a healthy balance between self and society'.<sup>54</sup>

The newly ascendant Conservatism of the 1950s also repeatedly emphasised its morally improving purpose. Incoming Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, thought the most important values were 'wisdom, not a trade', 'character, not technicalities'.<sup>55</sup> 'Conservatism is more than successful administration,' insisted the party's 1959 manifesto. 'It is a way of life. It stands for integrity as well as for efficiency, for moral values as well as for material advancement, for service and not merely self-seeking.'<sup>56</sup> The party's flagship policy of extending home-ownership was as much about encouraging, and democratising character as its more obvious material benefits. As its leading One Nation thinker, Quentin Hogg, put it, 'property is the means whereby [a person] develops his personality'. Moreover, the once again crucial *independence* that this fostered was seen to generate altruistic, as much as self-orientated impulses. Enabling people to be 'without dependence', property promoted 'a duty to develop the property as a thing of beauty or utility for the honour of God, a duty to share it with others as a means of winning their love and understanding'.<sup>57</sup>

51 BLPES, Liberal Party Papers, 15/4, 110, Liberal Assembly resolution, Sept. 1942.

52 BLPES, Beveridge Papers, 9B/ 33/ 1, speech, Darlington, 27 April 1946.

53 Attlee, *Labour*, 194, 198; C. R. Attlee, *As It Happened* (London 1954), 33–4; E. Rathbone, *The Case for Family Allowances* (Harmondsworth 1940), 23.

54 Fielding et al., *England Arise!*, 213; McKibbin, *Parties*, 138; Lawrence, *Me*, 234.

55 W. Churchill, honorary degree conferment address, Copenhagen University, 10 Oct. 1950, in R. Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill. His Complete Speeches 1897–1963: vol. 8: 1950–1963* (London 1974), 8095–6.

56 Conservative Party manifesto 1959, in F. W. S. Craig (ed.), *British General Election Manifestos 1900–1974* (London 1975), 215.

57 Q. Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (West Drayton 1947), 99.

The social democratic revisionism underpinning much of the approach of the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s was also driven as much by moral as mechanical considerations. Its leading thinker, Tony Crosland, a lapsed Exclusive Plymouth Brethren, was more of a character improver than his ostentatious personal hedonism implied. 'Human character' mattered, he believed, because 'good & weak characters' resulted in 'good & bad actions'. 'The ultimate ideal of Soc. [ialism] seems to me essentially a moral & not a material one.'<sup>58</sup> Fellow revisionist Roy Jenkins was equally adamant that whilst 'day-to-day politics . . . are becoming more and more an affair of economics', these were only 'the means to an end'.<sup>59</sup> Whilst the party in government in the 1960s sought to extend new *rights* in the spheres of social welfare and civil liberties, this was accompanied by a more insistent emphasis on accompanying *responsibilities* than is often portrayed. These ranged from the call for social conscience to sustain welfare expansion, to the mass worker and union restraint urged to curb inflationary pay settlements in, by the later 1960s, increasingly difficult economic times. The party's 1964 manifesto envisaged a country in which 'men and women as responsible citizens consciously assist in shaping the surroundings in which they live'. That of 1970 was equally adamant that 'people want more responsibility', and 'it is this that makes us wish to extend opportunities for everyone to have a bigger say in making decisions, whether in their local community or in their place of work'.<sup>60</sup>

Revealingly, the manifesto noted that 'it is this too, that makes us place the highest priority on education'. The increased national political prioritisation of education from the later 1950s possessed a wider *moral* symbolism, which went beyond education's economy-boosting, or even its social class equalising functions. Crosland's oft-quoted revisionist call for Labour to see education 'as of far greater significance to socialism than the nationalization of meat-procuring' resonated because it seemed to represent a more general prioritisation of the 'moral' over the 'mechanical' in social democracy.<sup>61</sup> As the manifesto's connection with responsibility indicated, education seemed especially encapsulating of that synthesis between rights and duties, providing opportunity, but also requiring that it be actively seized by the recipient. Politicians across the century frequently asserted the 'special' importance of education, because it appeared the policy area most tangibly able to liberate the *internal* being. Crosland noted that 'the highest of all educational ideals' was 'fostering inquiry, dissent, and critical intellectuality'.<sup>62</sup> This desired *independence* of mind was a quality of character as much as, in narrow terms, of intellect. Education should receive 'great stress', thought Liberal leader Jo Grimond, its purpose 'to turn out people whose natural abilities

58 BLPES, Crosland Papers, 3/1, 75–6, jottings, 22 Nov. 1944; 13/21, 9, notes for speech to South Gloucestershire selection meeting, 1950.

59 Bod., Jenkins Papers, 337, speech, 1950.

60 Labour Party General Election Manifestos 1964 and 1970, in Craig (ed.), *Manifestos*, 277, 345.

61 Ibid.; C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London 1956), 277.

62 C. A. R. Crosland, *The Conservative Enemy* (London 1962), 176.

have been sharpened, whose virtues have been released, whose capability for enjoyment is heightened, whose characters are rounded'.<sup>63</sup>

Grimond's increasingly revitalised Liberal Party certainly foregrounded character. In his contribution to a leading collection of essays, *The Unservile State* (1957), party Vice-President Elliott Dodds explained the Liberals' support for political and economic decentralisation in terms of their contribution to 'creating conditions favourable to the development of personality', to fostering 'self-directing, responsible persons'. Roger Fulford's *The Liberal Case* (1959) argued that policies mattered less than the 'spirit' animating them. 'Every individual is a human soul with his or her own capacity for, and right to development,' and the quality to be promoted above all was 'an independent mind'.<sup>64</sup>

Politicians of all shades continued to worry about how far away the people still were from fully achieving this 'independence'. Jarvis and Black have shown how right and left alike worried that the materialism of the greater social 'affluence' of the 1950s and 1960s was crowding out ethics.<sup>65</sup> More widely, Grimond reflected in 1960 that 'we are not wrong in wanting more energy in present-day Britain'. There was 'a certain lack of purpose or quality, a certain idleness, a feeling that nothing matters very much', and this character deficit was felt to *feed* wider failings of national outlook, 'our snobbery, our claim to social superiority, our racialism'.<sup>66</sup> Standing, in 1970, on the cusp of a shift from the still top-down consensus politics to a less deferential, more aspirational electorate, Labour left-winger, Tony Benn, hoping to engage this new public mood, noted people's desire to 'do more for themselves', but also their continuing 'fears and doubts and lack of self-confidence'.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, this remained a nuanced, mixed rather than morally *declinist* view, and political figures' resilient underlying optimism in the people's character remained. Reflecting the upbeat view of affluence of most Labour revisionists, Jenkins made the point 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'.<sup>68</sup> Alluding to the once again under-estimated decency and reflectiveness of a 'quieter', more domesticated electorate, he observed that 'non-attendance at [political] meetings [was] not necessarily a sign of moral degeneration', later affirming that the people 'are often more perceptive than some politicians realise'.<sup>69</sup> Macmillan, too, who himself had

63 J. Grimond, *Let's Get On With It!* (London 1960), 16; J. Grimond, *The Liberal Challenge* (London 1963), 197.

64 E. Dodds, 'Liberty and Welfare', in G. Watson (ed.), *The Unservile State: Essays in Liberty and Welfare* (London 1957), 15, 20–1; R. Fulford, *The Liberal Case* (Harmondsworth 1959), 149, 159, 175.

65 M. Jarvis, *Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change in Affluent Britain, 1957–1964* (Manchester 2005), 161; Black, *Political Culture*.

66 Grimond, *Get On*, 16–7, 41.

67 A. Benn, *The New Politics: A Socialist Reconnaissance*, Fabian Tract 402 (Sept. 1970), 1, 9–10, 16, 28.

68 R. Jenkins, *The Labour Case* (London 1959), 54–5.

69 Bod., Jenkins Papers, 337, speech on 'Socialism and the Individual', Oct. 1956; 303, speech to Birmingham Fabians, 18 Jan. 1974.

periodic bouts of moral declinism, ultimately concluded that the citizenry were pursuing a 'double inspiration', in which 'opportunities' for material comfort and leisure were joining with 'responsibilities', through 'moral and religious values'. 'Nothing in my long experience . . . makes me fear that the people of Britain . . . will . . . fail to rise to the level of events.'<sup>70</sup>

That said, if this broadly optimistic post-war 'consensus' between the parties, built on a partnership between the state and a steadily more empowered individual character, shows, again, the influence of adaptive, middle way syntheses in British political history, historians have rightly observed that this consensus was far from total.<sup>71</sup> Character continued to be a politically vexing and divisive subject. Conservatives remained grudging in their acceptance of government, still frequently positing character and the state as zero-sum alternatives. 'Britain's greatness has been built on character and daring, not on docility to a State machine,' argued the party's 1945 manifesto. Conversely, socialists continued at times to view moral and psychological improvements as mere follow-ons from changes to the supposedly more fundamentally determining economic structure. 'Only when [the public ownership of industry] . . . is accomplished,' advised Aneurin Bevan, 'will a tranquil and serene attitude take the place of the all-pervading restlessness that is the normal climate of competitive society.'<sup>72</sup>

Further, if the period housed a steadily more nurturing approach to character, older, harsher outlooks retained considerable purchase. There remained a bias towards rather 'masculine' character attributes of competitive assertiveness, on the one hand, and stiff-lipped restraint on the other. Churchill, for one, admired the 'intense insatiable energies', as well as 'the long patience of self-denial, for thrift and savings'. Reflecting egalitarian concern about a growing, narrowly meritocratic ideal, in which a certain sort of business-suited 'intelligence' might become the overriding measure of economic reward, Crosland questioned: 'Why should not marks be given for saintliness, generosity, compassion, humour, beauty, assiduity, continence, or artistic ability?'<sup>73</sup> For all the under-estimated endurance of character politics, then, it was still contained within certain acceptable parameters. There were more 'advanced' political articulations that foregrounded more generous, emotionally expansive routes to the growth of character. Labour revisionist Evan Durbin explored the importance of 'emotional education', and a 'loving character' to political outcomes. Grimond outlined how 'to behave liberally is to behave generously', and that progress was directly dependent on gentler character attributes, like being 'willing to listen'. But, in the main, such isolated insights still

70 H. Macmillan, *At The End of The Day* (London 1973), 506–7 and 523.

71 H. Jones and M. Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus* (London 1996).

72 Conservative Party manifesto 1945, in Craig (ed.), *Manifestos*, 113; A. Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London 1978), 145. First published in 1952.

73 Churchill, election address, 4 Feb. 1950, in Rhodes James (ed.), *Churchill, 1920*; Conservative Party manifesto 1945, in Craig (ed.), *Manifestos*, 119; Crosland, *Future*, 236. On restraint, see M. Francis, 'The Labour Party: Modernisation and the Politics of Restraint', in F. Mort, B. Conekin and C. Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–64* (New York, NY 1999).

too easily appeared esoteric, amidst more obviously pressing daily political concerns.<sup>74</sup>

The dominant narrative of British politics since the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 is a declinist one. Rising material inequality is presented alongside a still more fundamental picture of *moral* decline. There appeared to be established under Thatcher, and accepted under her New Labour successors, a neo-liberal ideology, which legitimised a selfish individualism. Earlier conceptions of fostering a character built on co-operation or community seemed ‘on the back foot’. In Eric Shaw’s influential account, ‘the values of competition, individual self-assertion and ‘entrepreneurialism’, and not ‘fellowship, co-operation and service’ are those that New Labour extols.... To this extent Labour has lost its soul.’<sup>75</sup> More sociologically, Sennett charts how the short-termism, fragility, or time pressures of a marketised economic system have undermined the ‘loyalties and commitments’ on which character rested.<sup>76</sup>

But if the above suggests a ‘de-moralized’ post-1979 politics, where the idealism of cultivating the virtuous character has been marginalised, this underestimates the persistence, and, in significant respects, advancement of such a politics. From the outset, this moral declinism rests on an over-estimation of the political and social ethic of service and community existing *before* 1979. As reappraisals of the collectivist ‘Blitz spirit’ of the 1940s have shown, this was significantly qualified by the endurance of more individualistic, or ‘everyday’ motives.<sup>77</sup> Extending this in time, Lawrence, drawing on resident interviews used in Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), which suggested that London working-class social networks were lost when families moved out to suburban Essex, shows that the original bonds were weaker than presented.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, studies of popular political participation now challenge easy narratives of ‘decline from an earlier golden age to a contemporary crisis’.<sup>79</sup> Surveys show the number ‘very interested’ in politics consistently low throughout *all* decades since 1940. Whilst party membership declined from the 1950s, political activity became ‘more diverse’, manifesting itself increasingly through campaign groups, petitions, ‘moral’ consumer choices, or active engagement in the school, hospital or workplace.<sup>80</sup> In ideological terms, too, the de-moralization thesis seems suspect. New Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair’s oft-cited advocacy of a utilitarian politics of ‘what counts is what works’, for instance, was no less evident in the inter-war Baldwin’s approving assertion that ‘the ordinary Englishman’s ... one question’

74 BLPES, Durbin Papers, 4/7, notes on ‘Does Democracy Matter?’, 1945-8; Grimond, *Liberal*, 17, 33.

75 Jackson, *Equality*, 224-5; Green, *Ideologies*, 290; Shaw, *Labour’s Soul*, 206-7.

76 Sennett, *Character*, 10.

77 Fielding et al., *England Arise!*.

78 J. Lawrence, ‘Inventing the “Traditional Working Class”: A Re-analysis of Interview Notes from Young and Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London*’, *Historical Journal*, 59, 2 (2016), 567-93.

79 K. Jefferys, *Politics and the People. A History of British Democracy Since 1918* (London 2007), 6.

80 *Ibid.*, 261, 280. See also M. Hilton, ‘Politics is Ordinary: Non-Governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22, 2 (2011), 230-68, 248.



on political matters, 'as it would be in the case of a new machine in his workshop, is 'Will it work?'.<sup>81</sup> In both cases, such pragmatism could, and did *co-exist* with a more ethical language of service, community and character.

Liberated from all-embracing declinist assumptions, a more layered, pluralist assessment of the place of character in contemporary politics is possible. To the extent that politics had lapsed, by the 1970s, into excessively technocratic and statist forms, there was a relatively rapid political self-critique of this, in favour of a renewed 'moral' emphasis. Tail-end 'consensus years' Labour Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, for instance, long a striking mix of labourist and moralist, had learned from recent decades that 'it is not enough to enforce changes in the economic structure to ensure the fulfilment of ideals. These require changes also in human attitudes and relationships.'<sup>82</sup> Similarly, for One Nation Conservative, Ian Gilmour, in 1977, politics should blend the 'inspiration' of the 'pulpit', with the 'good management' of the 'counting house': 'and over the last fifteen years or so Tory politicians have strayed too far towards the counting house'.<sup>83</sup> If Thatcherism imposed itself largely through economic and industrial policies, Thatcher was repeatedly insistent that her envisaged end was more fundamentally that of spirit and character. 'Economics are the method,' she famously declared in a *Sunday Times* interview in May 1981, 'the object is to change the heart and soul'.<sup>84</sup> There were 'many things to be done to set this nation on the road to recovery', she had noted in her defiant 'not for turning' party conference speech the year before, 'and I do not mean economic recovery alone, but a new independence of spirit'.<sup>85</sup>

In some respects, the 1980s *were* out of line with the political approach towards character prevailing, even in Conservative circles, for much of the rest of the century, both before and after her. This was true of the extent of her denigration of the state as a support to character. 'The State drains society,' she claimed in 1980, 'not only of its wealth but of initiative, of energy, the will to improve and innovate as well as to preserve what is best.'<sup>86</sup> It also holds true of her at times bleak view of the quality of the average character. Marked differences between people's levels of character, she believed, justified markedly unequal rewards. 'We are, after all, very different in our skills, temperament, capacity for decision, and capacity for courage.' Consequently, 'nations depend for their health, economically, culturally and

81 T. Blair, *A Journey* (London 2010), 119; Baldwin, *Englishman*, 18–19.

82 J. Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London 1987), 396.

83 I. Gilmour, *Inside Right: A Study of Conservatism* (London 1977), 170.

84 Interview, *Sunday Times*, 3 May 1981.

85 Party conference speech, 10 Oct. 1980, 1–2, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104431> (accessed 6 May 2019). On Thatcher and morality, see M. Grimley, 'Thatcherism, Morality and Religion', in B. Jackson and R. Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge 2012).

86 *Ibid.*, 11, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104431> (accessed 6 May 2019).

psychologically upon the achievements of a comparatively small number of talented and determined people'.<sup>87</sup>

Yet, Thatcherism was a hybrid force, and this pessimistic, fixed, hierarchical view of character co-existed with a more optimistic, expansive outlook, through which it was believed people's characters could develop and grow. Here, social mobility, and the extension of property and capital, were seen to be spreading character virtues of independence, initiative and responsibility at an unprecedented rate. Whilst simultaneously articulating a narrative of economic and moral decline under the 1974-9 Labour government, Thatcher, meeting ordinary people, found them 'so much better than the statistics said: more energetic, more independent, more restive'. Politicians should 'trust the deepest instincts of our people'.<sup>88</sup> Her initial emphasis on council house sales, given 'the independence that comes with [home] ownership', then expanded share ownership, was joined, after the 1987 election, by an attention to choice and standards in education. By providing people with 'the opportunity to develop their talents', and encouraging 'the spread of personal property ever wider', one could create 'a nation of responsible people'.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, as recent research has explored, the 'individualism' associated with the 1980s was a much wider, and more varied phenomenon than its right-wing connotations convey. This individualism housed a range of manifestations of growing popular assertiveness and aspiration, including social mobility, declining deference, class dealignment, feminism, and trade unionism, many of which had been developing long before the 1980s, often, indeed, fostered by the post-war social democratic welfare state. These 'individualisms' constituted a growth of popular outlook, of *character*, it might be said, which were far from exclusively 'selfish' or right-wing, and often carried progressive implications, which would also play out further in the decades after Thatcher's fall in 1990.<sup>90</sup>

Further, if Thatcher denigrated the state as an enabler of character, this view was not politically all-pervasive. Historians are forging more pluralist analyses of the 1980s, which, whilst not disputing the impact of her free market ideology, suggest a range of countervailing constraints. The social democratic ethos of the 1960s and 1970s did not simply evaporate overnight, especially in relation to public support for public services, and in this sense, as Brooke has argued, 'social democracy persisted against or even alongside neo-liberalism'.<sup>91</sup> One Nation

87 Speech, 'The Renewal of Britain', 6 July 1979, 7, 12, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104107> (accessed 6 May 2019).

88 M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London 1993), 10; Party conference speech, 10 October 1980, 11, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104431> (accessed 6 May 2019).

89 Party conference speech, 10 October 1980, 5, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104431> (accessed 6 May 2019); Interview for *Woman's Own*, 23 Sept. 1987, 40-1, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, available online at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> (accessed 6 May 2019).

90 Robinson et al., 'Popular Individualism', 268, 273, 287.

91 Brooke, 27. See also A. Hindmoor, *What's Left Now? The History and Future of Social Democracy* (Oxford 2018), 88.

Conservatives, too, offered periodic resistance, reminding Thatcher that ‘resolution’ was not the sole character virtue, and due attention must also be given to ‘compassion’.<sup>92</sup> That the longer-term legacy of the 1980s was also not a wholly self-orientated definition of character is evidenced by the relative rapidity with which voters brought about the 1997 landslide election of New Labour. Speaking, once more, that British ‘middle way’ synthesis of rights *and* responsibilities, individual character in *partnership* with a supportive state, Blair claimed that ‘you can be successful and care’.<sup>93</sup>

Adjoined to this macro-ideological re-balancing, post-Thatcher politics also took a ‘cultural turn’, the stark debates over economic systems in the 1970s and 1980s at least partially yielding to a heightened focus on ‘micro-politics’, in areas like education policy, and on wider subjects of national and personal identity. Reflected in initiatives like John Major’s Citizens’ Charter, Blair’s constitutional democratisations, and David Cameron’s conception of a ‘Big Society’, this was a reminder of the continued salience of ‘moral’, not merely ‘mechanical’ politics. Within this, the possession of character attributes palpably mattered as much as legislative or economic change. As the New Labour government’s 1997 education White Paper put it, ‘effective change in a field as dependent on human interaction as education requires millions of people to change their behaviour’. Here, too, was a further evolution of that under-estimated ‘quiet’ character politics of active everyday decision-making. In his *Civic Conservatism* (1994), David Willetts saw this in something as apparently mundane as parents’ ‘remarkable ability to sniff out a good school from a bad school’, or in the importance to a school of ‘the character of its head teacher’.<sup>94</sup> Recent political thinking places an increasing emphasis on those gentler routes to character, like ‘friendship’, which is ‘about reciprocity, mutuality, sharing’, ‘love and support’, ‘confidence and self-esteem’, and the provision of ‘time’ for these to flourish.<sup>95</sup>

Character also remains a significant influencer of people’s perceptions of what makes a suitable British Prime Minister. Thatcher’s drive and conviction were a major factor in her appeal, yet the excess of these, what many thought her increasingly blinkered ideological zeal, and lack of openness to consultation, facilitated her demise in 1990, suggesting Francis’s mid-century political culture’s high valuation of balanced proportion had endured.<sup>96</sup> Here, in part, too, it seems, lay the appeal of the early Blair, his third way a claim to a personally psychologically balanced, ‘sensible’ approach to political decision-making as much as an ideologically balanced one.

92 BLPES, Tory Reform Group Papers, TRG/2/16/1, 2-3, *Reformer*, Autumn 1984.

93 Blair, *Journey*, 8.

94 *Excellence in Schools*, White Paper by the Department for Education and Employment (London 1997), 146; D. Willetts, *Civic Conservatism* (London 1994), 35–6.

95 R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better* (London 2009), 196–7; R. Philpot, ‘Introduction’, in R. Philpot (ed.), *The Purple Book. A Progressive Future For Labour* (London 2011), 12; L. Kendall, ‘Putting Families First’, in Philpot (ed.), *Purple*, 166, 179.

96 Francis, ‘Tears’, 357.

Many of the fundamental ideological divisions over character remain. The Conservative Cameron continued to present government as primarily an *impediment* to character: ‘human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state’. Conversely, the left was still arguably too mono-causally insistent, as in Richard Wilkinson’s and Kate Pickett’s influential *The Spirit Level* (2009), that ‘the quality of social relations in a society is built on material foundations’, that ‘psychological wellbeing’ was not the result of ‘values’, but merely of ‘the scale of income differences’.<sup>97</sup> An economic, utilitarian strain also continued to characterise political priorities as a whole. This was not, as already noted, a new development, but it did mean that idealistic, qualitative visions of the empowerment and flourishing of human character were still forced to contend with material priorities perceived as more urgent or tangible. ‘Modern democratic politics is about economics,’ insisted Willetts in 1992. ‘What . . . [people] desperately need,’ asserted Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg in 2009, ‘is money in their pockets, job security, a roof over their heads.’<sup>98</sup>

Yet, if politicians continued to exhibit a confusing mix of noble ideals with ‘muddling through’, it might be suggested that this accurately captured a similar unresolved duality within society at large, within the people. It has been a central assumption of this article that the state of a nation’s politics must in some measure reflect the wider character of its citizens, their possession, or dearth of attributes like confidence, initiative or care. Political figures continued to be part bemused by the apparent passivity of the public. Minds seemed still, in fundamental ways, *dependent*, not fully *independent*, constrained by that resilient combination of material hardship, poverty of ambition, and convention of thought. For Conservative ‘Big Society’ thinker, Jesse Norman, the country housed ‘a vast amount of latent and untapped potential energy’, yet ‘releasing this energy is not a simple matter’, and was a challenge not just for government, ‘but for us all’.<sup>99</sup> But that long-standing sense of optimism in the underlying character of the people – and, crucially, the capacity of this to *grow* – remained apparent. People displayed a ‘rough-and-ready decency’, thought Major. For Blair, people showed an increasingly active ‘desire to be free, to be the best you can be’. ‘Most people, most of the time, will make the right decisions for themselves, their family and their community,’ noted Clegg.<sup>100</sup> This sheer persistent energy in the human condition, alongside the endurance, and updating of ideological visions committed to the encouragement of character, have ensured that, on the whole, modern British politics is a progressive story of character gained, more than a declinist one of character lost.

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97 D. Cameron, ‘The Big Society’, Hugo Young Lecture, 10 Nov. 2009; Wilkinson & Pickett, *Spirit Level*, 4–5.

98 D. Willetts, *Modern Conservatism* (London 1992), 123; Liberal Democrat Spring Conference Speech, 8 March 2009.

99 J. Norman, *The Big Society. The Anatomy of the New Politics* (Buckingham 2010), 195–6.

100 Major, *The Autobiography* (London 1999), xxii; Blair, *Journey*, 90; N. Clegg, *The Liberal Moment*, Demos Pamphlet (London 2009), 16.

**Acknowledgements**

The author should like to thank the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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