The Rise of Labour and the Political Culture of Conservatism, 1890–1945

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Abstract
Growing dissatisfaction among scholars over a class-based approach to electoral change has exacerbated the problem of finding explanations for the rise of the Labour Party in Britain. This article is intended to open the way to a more satisfying overall treatment by altering the perspective on the subject. It argues for the necessity of taking full account, not simply of the Liberal and socialist traditions in the Labour movement, but of Labour’s capacity to adapt to the Conservative tradition at the level of ideas and electoral strategy.

Despite decades of research and writing, the centenary of the British Labour Party presents historians and social scientists with an awkward reminder that they have largely failed to come up with a convincing overall explanation for its peculiar and chequered history. Two problems stand out. First, how to reconcile Labour’s poor and erratic electoral record with mass enfranchisement and its claim to represent the working class. Secondly, how to explain Labour’s failure to develop an effective national appeal until comparatively late in the day, a task that is hampered by a traditional historiography which concentrates on the ideas and personalities of the left within the movement.

Traditionally scholarly attention has focused on the timing of Labour’s rise, on its Edwardian breakthrough and on the significance of franchise reform. However, analysis of the pre-1914 electorate casts doubt on claims that the working class was significantly under-represented, and suggests that the young and unmarried in all classes were disenfranchised.¹ Yet,
whatever view is taken of the party’s Edwardian record, the electoral performance after 1918 underlines the unimportance of the franchise. In an electorate now dominated by the working class, Labour never managed to poll more than 37–38 per cent of the vote between 1918 and 1935. Moreover, empirical studies reveal wide variations in the support given to Labour by working-class communities. This is corroborated by comparisons of its performance in local and parliamentary elections. After 1918 the local government franchise remained restricted in ways that made it resemble the pre-war parliamentary electorate. But Labour’s performance does not appear to have been noticeably better under the more democratic electorate. Rather, the six elections from 1910 to 1929 show a steady rise in Labour support that reflected the expansion in candidates and organization rather than a dramatic leap caused by a change in the character of the electorate. Furthermore, historians have recently grown even more sceptical about viewing British electoral history as an evolution towards a neat class-based polarization between a party of capital and a party of labour, so much so that many now regard the 1950s as an aberration and not as the norm. The result has been a critical reaction against sociological explanations that make the link between class and voting too mechanical and the role of the participants in the process too passive. Instead, the emphasis is on explaining how, in specific constituencies, parties and candidates contrived to build lasting loyalties. Yet, valuable as the criticism of existing work is, there is still no positive overall explanation.

Unfortunately, discussions of the electoral record have often been detached from the nature of Labour’s appeal to the electorate and overlook the extent to which it varied both geographically and chronologically.

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2 It excluded sons, daughters and other relations living with the owner/occupier as well as servants living with employers and tenants of furnished premises.


Historians, including the present writer, have usually seen the party's politics in terms of a synthesis of two political traditions. First, Labour inherited much of the thinking and the personnel of Victorian non-conformist radicalism, a process accelerated by the collapse of the Liberal Party after the Great War. Secondly, it derived from socialism a distinctive outlook, part of its programme and a vital sense of the historical inevitability of its eventual triumph. The liberal and socialist strands endowed Labour with a measure of familiarity and novelty.

Although this perspective is valid as far as it goes, it seems inadequate in that it represents only a partial description of the politics of the Labour Party. Neither the socialist nor the liberal traditions really enabled the party to fulfil its mission as the party of the working class, if only because so many working-class communities remained resistant to their appeal. Nor, in view of the persistence of working-class Conservatism, is it plausible to argue that the workers eventually became converted to socialism. An explanation for the rise of Labour must therefore take account of the party's adaptation to the Conservative tradition, rather than to its overthrow, a complex process which has to be examined at both national and regional level, indeed even constituency by constituency. Yet, although historians are well aware of the traffic of ideas and personnel between Conservatism and Liberalism and between Liberalism and Labour, they have largely neglected that between Labour and Conservatism. Without a study of this connection no overall interpretation of Labour's evolution is likely to be satisfactory. One of the implications of this approach is that it would be helpful to make greater use of some of the traditional weapons of the historian—chronology, personnel and leadership for example—along with electoral evidence, regional patterns, political culture and ideology. Although this approach appears ambitious and certainly requires much further research, it is possible, by adjusting the perspective, to advance towards a more plausible interpretation of Labour's historical development on the basis of existing knowledge.

I

Years before the 1945 election Hugh Dalton, significantly drawing on his insight as a former Tory, remarked to G. D. H. Cole that Labour would only win power in Britain with 'the votes of the football crowds'. At this


7 More research would be valuable on, for example, the attitudes and background of local Labour candidates, the political aftermath of the General Strike, the 1929 general election, the role of Catholics in local parties, the Morrison machine in London, and local involvement in the Popular Front.
disturbing suggestion ‘Cole shuddered and turned away’. This was not surprising because Cole belonged to a long and honourable tradition of radical and socialist intellectuals and improvers who were regularly frustrated by the tendency of workingmen to interpret reform as criticism of working-class society. The mismatch between elite and rank and file regularly manifested itself from the 1890s to the inter-war period when Labour candidates failed to win the most deprived or ‘slum’ wards of large and medium-sized towns where they came up against an entrenched culture of conservatism. Historians have often emphasized how the difficulty was compounded by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and Labour habit of pitting candidates who were outsiders against Tories who boasted genuinely local credentials. Consequently Labour claims to represent the local community often carried little credibility.

Moreover, there has been no difficulty in identifying the attitudes and values that underpinned Conservatism in working-class communities all over Britain. These manifested themselves in hostility towards the state and suspicion of improving legislation, enthusiasm for the monarchy, the empire, the Union with Ireland and militant Protestantism, and in a tendency to blame immigrants and foreigners for Britain's ills. This outlook was complemented by working-class social behaviour, notably a preoccupation with the public house, scurrilous newspapers, gambling, football, horse-racing, boxing and music hall. It would, of course, be a mistake to assume that this conservative culture automatically translated into votes for Tory candidates, though to some extent informal links existed in the form of upper-class patronage of popular entertainment including boxing, racing and drinking. Conservatives were obliged to cultivate support by a range of expedients including workingmen’s clubs, sporting societies, Orange Lodges, and Primrose League Habitations. But equally the ILP and the Labour Representation Committee had to find ways of coming to terms with popular conservatism, and were inevitably influenced by the interaction. Their dilemma was epitomized by the mixed fortunes of Keir Hardie in the election of 1900 when he was heavily defeated at Preston, where he spent most of his time, but elected at Merthyr Tydfil. Though attuned to the nonconformist radicalism of South Wales, Hardie remained alienated from the boisterous working-class culture that made Lancashire a bastion of Toryism.

10 For example, see Lawrence, Speaking for the People, pp. 129–32.
11 This was compounded by Labour’s suspicion of the close local connections between members and parliamentary boroughs, which it regarded as based on influence and corruption. The party preferred to nominate trade union candidates who brought subsidies to the constituency organization but lacked local connections.
Although working-class conservatism may have become less deferential and more secular in character over time, it persisted strongly throughout the twentieth century. John Mackenzie has emphasized the continuing vitality of popular imperialism and monarchism during the inter-war period and Ross McKibbin has argued that Conservative support extended well beyond those who were the ‘objective’ beneficiaries of deflationary government policies. Indeed, Labour’s eventual breakthrough as a national majority party during the 1940s coincided with a particularly vigorous expression of traditional working-class attitudes in the pages of the *Daily Mirror*. The paper’s success demonstrated the continuing vitality of an irreverent, populist and patriotic brand of politics in Britain; it articulated more effectively than any rival the sentiments of a conservative working class that, in certain circumstances, was prepared to vote Labour. In so far as Labour spoke for this section of the community in 1945 it had found the language of a national appeal that had eluded it for so long. Nevertheless, the path leading to 1945 was clearly not an obvious one, and the Labour leaders looked down on the *Mirror* from a great height, when they noticed it all. It is, therefore, necessary to consider much more fully the chronology and the geography of Labour’s adaptation, and assess the extent to which the Conservative and Labour traditions overlapped with one another in terms of values, issues and personnel.

II

Notwithstanding decades of propaganda designed to portray the unions as tools of Bolshevism, pacifism and cosmopolitanism, there is no more important place in which to examine the Tory-socialist tradition in Britain than in the trade union movement. Unfortunately, the historiographical bias tends to present the trade union leaders simply as obstacles to socialism. Yet men such as J. R. Clynes, Jack Jones, John Hodge and J. H. Thomas, who successfully straddled the worlds of parliament and the unions, were mainstream figures in the movement, not marginal or eccentric. Jack Jones emerged as an authentic representative of Tory-socialism in the working class of London’s East End. A shop boy, docker and builder’s labourer, he rose through the General Workers’ Union to

Hugh Cudlipp, *Publish and Be Damned!* (1953).
enter parliament in 1918, riding the jingoistic tide very comfortably. A champion of the workingman’s drink, keen on outdoor sports, and noted for his humorous and even coarse language, he prefigured by several decades the irreverent brand of politics typical of the *Daily Mirror* in the 1940s and 1950s. But Jones’s cheerful belligerence was tempered by reverence towards the royal family: ‘No monarchy’, he insisted, ‘did its work with greater dignity or did better work than ours.’ Even more central in the movement was J. R. Clynes, who effectively acted as Labour leader in 1921–2. Originally a mill boy from Oldham, Clynes based his political career on his close ties with the Manchester working class. As early as 1893 his attendance at an International Labour Conference in Zurich had accentuated his hostility towards foreigners and his conviction that labour conditions were infinitely better in Britain than abroad: ‘it was difficult to co-ordinate the statements of the stolid British delegates, abhorring armed violence as much as mock heroics, with the inflammatory verbal orgies of the representatives of certain of the Latin and Slavonic races.’ Like many other trade unionists Clynes was deeply impressed with the way the British had closed ranks against the common enemy during the war, and by 1918 he emerged as an opponent of revolution and direct action and an enthusiast for class co-operation. During the 1920s he advocated colonial emigration both as a means of strengthening the empire and as a way of helping those who were unable to settle down after the war.

Perhaps the supreme exponent of Tory-socialism was J. H. Thomas, a striking figure who, though often regarded as a joke or a traitor, succeeded in retaining his popularity as a union leader while also extending Labour’s appeal across the boundaries of party and class in his Derby constituency. Thomas epitomized the blunt, exuberant, humorous, patriotic working-class leader, unrepentant about alcohol, sport and gambling, but

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17 Jack Jones was MP for Silvertown from 1918 to 1940; even in 1931 he won 77.8% of the vote; see his memoirs, *My Lively Life* (1928).
22 J. H. Thomas [1874–1949] MP for Derby 1906–36; Secretary ASRS 1910–18; General Secretary NUR 1918–24 and 1925–31; President TUC 1920–1; Colonial Secretary 1924 and 1931; Lord Privy Seal 1929–30; Dominions Secretary 1930–1 and 1931–5. The two modern scholars to have recognized the importance of Thomas are Andrew Thorpe, ‘J. H. Thomas and the Rise of the Labour Party in Derby 1880–1945’, *Midland History*, xv (1990), 111–28, and David Howell, ‘“I Loved my Union and my Country”’, Jimmy Thomas and the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vi (1995), 145–73. Like a number of key Labour figures Thomas suffers from the assumption that there is insufficient material for a modern biography; but see the J. H. Thomas Papers at the Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone.
reverential towards the monarchy, the empire and the British constitution. Reportedly the target of a number of cabinet offers from Lloyd George he served on several wartime committees on retrenchment and the railways. At the Coupon Election in 1918 Thomas faced his electors flourishing letters of congratulation from such luminaries as Field Marshall Sir William Robertson, Sir Douglas Haig, Andrew Bonar Law and J. L. Garvin of the Observer for his role in keeping the railways running during the war; and even the local Conservatives believed he should be in the cabinet. 23 By 1918 Thomas had, in effect, become a bridge linking the labour movement and the political establishment, a position that exposed him to accusations of treachery but made him an asset for a party now aspiring to office. During the 1920s he played a key role in reassuring the public about the prospect of a Labour government. Like Clynes, he emphasized that the war had demonstrated the irrelevance of the class war and declared his readiness to work with anyone, however wealthy. After the war he enjoyed a reputation as the man who had saved the country from revolution: ‘believe me, a trade union leader that wants a strike’, he declared, ‘is not fit for his job’. 24 Later, in his capacity as Colonial Secretary in Labour and National governments, Thomas revelled in his visits to British colonies and became closely identified with the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925. 25 He adopted an idealistic view of empire as an institution above party and as the embodiment of democracy deeply rooted in allegiance to the crown: ‘It gives hope and inspiration to the humblest,’ he liked to say, ‘it imposes a duty upon the highest.’ 26

Men like Clynes and Thomas would scarcely have achieved lasting power in their unions and in the Labour Party had they not reflected rank-and-file sentiment. They appreciated that many of the members who paid their wages held Conservative and Liberal views and saw membership more as a self-help strategy than as an expression of ideology. 27 Consequently, the political implications of union membership were complicated. The emphasis on collective action, which ran somewhat against the Liberal reluctance to subordinate the individual, made a natural bond


24 *Morning Post*, 24 Nov. 1923, 15 Jan. 1924; *Burton Evening Gazette*, 12 May 1923; *The Communist*, 16 April 1921.

25 ‘What Holding Office Has Taught Me’, *Pearson’s Magazine*, March 1925; during 1924 *John Bull* carried many reports of Thomas’s speeches on the empire.

26 See speech for Empire Day, 24 May 1933, Thomas MS 034/15; Thomas’s emphasis on colonies as a source of food and as a prop to the workers’ standard of living reflected a hard-headed attitude more usually associated with Ernest Bevin.

27 Clynes, *Memoirs*, p. 84; Griffiths, *Lancashire Working Classes*, pp. 290–1 shows that even among coal miners in Wigan a substantial minority were Conservatives (pp. 290–1); he also presents interesting evidence about the willingness of union members and working-class institutions to become shareholders in local companies which he sees less as a conscious endorsement of the capitalist ethic than as a variation on working-class gambling (see ibid., pp. 180–96).
between socialists and Tories that was recognized by some of Labour’s upper-class Conservative recruits. Major David Graham Pole, Labour MP for Derbyshire South, recalled: ‘I was always enthused by the idea of brotherhood [my italics]. In Freemasonry I felt at home.’ The unions also fostered an inherently protectionist outlook which manifested itself in opposition to foreign imports and foreign labour, and in resentment towards industrial inspection which Clynes called the ‘grandmotherly interference of Government officials’.

Thus, the inclusion of non-Labour union members in the Labour Party through the affiliation of their unions should not be regarded simply as an anomaly or as a weakness but as another symptom of cross-fertilization between the Tory and the socialist traditions. Conservative union members occupied the classic position of voters subject to cross-pressures. Recurrent grievances against their employers and participation in strikes rendered their loyalty to the Conservative Party inherently unstable. Perhaps the foremost instance of this, though one which has been largely overlooked, is the General Strike of 1926. No doubt many Labour leaders felt apprehensive and shared the Conservative view of it as a threat to the state and welcomed its early end as deflating left-wing confidence in the efficacy of direct action. However, the electoral ramifications belied their fears. Although the General Strike presented Stanley Baldwin with a short-term triumph, it represented a major setback for the Conservatives in so far as it undermined their claims to treat the working class fairly and to represent the national interest. Local and regional studies of the strike strongly underline the solid support it received from working-class communities, a situation which left non-Labour strikers sharply torn between politicians’ condemnation of the strike as illegal or unconstitutional, and their own perception of it as a necessary attempt to resist general reductions in wages. In the Ladywood ward of Birmingham, where a municipal by-election was taking place, the strike generated so much hostility to the Conservatives that they abandoned canvassing and holding meetings and lost the seat to Labour. Subsequently Labour made extensive gains in the nationwide municipal elections. The effect was also reinforced by the punitive trade union legislation enacted by Baldwin in 1927. ‘Large numbers of Tory and Liberal workingmen who understand little else’, commented Sir Oswald Mosley, ‘will understand how their rights are endangered when their trade unions are placed under the heel of powerful employers.’ In this way the strike helped to lay the

28 Borthwick Institute, Major Graham David Pole Papers 5/8/1.
foundations for the extensive gains at the 1929 general election that left the party with 288 seats in comparison with 151 in 1924, the closest Labour had so far come to winning an overall majority.

III

Political differences among trade unionists are a reminder that in some respects Labour always incorporated two parties not one. During the 1880s a coherent version of Tory-socialism had been formulated by H. H. Champion of the Social Democratic Federation and Robert Blatchford whose book, *Merrie England* (1894), was arguably the most influential recruiting aid produced by British socialists. A major aim of Blatchford and Champion was to dispel prejudice against socialism as alien to British traditions. In the pages of *The Clarion*, Blatchford shrewdly mixed politics with sport and entertainment in contrast to the more sober and less commercially successful *Labour Leader* which he saw as typical of Hardie's puritanism. Blatchford, an imperialist who belligerently backed the British cause during the Boer War, regularly attacked Germany after 1904, and advocated a citizens' army on the lines of Lord Roberts's National Service League. His views were reflected in parliament by those Labour MPs who voted in favour of increases in the naval estimates. In 1908 Will Thorne even introduced a bill to establish a citizen army, a proposal which he endowed with a respectable rationale by describing it as a socialist measure for safeguarding liberty. This prefigured the role of the Great War in drawing socialists and Conservatives together against the threat posed by the armies of continental Europe.

Several of the domestic issues of Edwardian politics also illustrate how Labour incorporated two distinct schools of thought. For example, through men such as Arthur Henderson, Keir Hardie and Harry Gosling, Labour had inherited much of the nonconformist-Liberal enthusiasm for temperance and self-improvement. Yet, in many working-class communities where drink, public houses and the brewing industry enjoyed deep roots, temperance represented a major embarrassment for the party. Conversely, Labour boasted some vocal champions of alcohol, notably Jack Jones, who insisted: 'Beer is our national drink. Why should any man be in any degree looked down upon because he likes a glass of beer? ... The public house is the workingman's club – remember that.' Significantly, where brewing was a key industry, as in Burton-on-Trent,


35 *Reynolds News*, 23 Nov. 1941; *Daily Express*, 22 Nov. 1941. In this debate socialism occupied a halfway house between Liberal puritanism and Tory indulgence. Socialists condemned drink as a weapon of the employers for maintaining their men in a condition of dependency while advocating some form of municipal or state control of the industry; see Philip Snowden, *Socialism and the Drink Question* (1908).
it fostered a common attitude amongst local Labour and Conservative supporters.36 During the war when the authorities restricted consumption to maintain output among munition workers, Clynes used his influence as Food Controller to restore the production of beer towards its normal level; and Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, the Conservative Party chairman, was one of those ready to adopt state purchase of the brewing industry – providing another illustration of the effect of war in drawing the socialist and the Tory traditions together.37

On the issue of free trade Labour gave every appearance of faithfully following the Liberal line, influenced by the evident popularity of cheap food with the voters. However, socialists never endorsed the Liberal view of free trade as a great moral good, and usually adopted a more pragmatic and equivocal attitude. As early as the 1880s Blatchford had advocated economic autarky as a more appropriate policy for socialists than liberal internationalism, emphasizing that Britain should never put herself at the mercy of foreign powers for her food supplies. An amendment to the free trade resolution at the ILP conference in 1903 urged that the only effective means of protecting British employment and benefiting British producers was ‘the system of preferential tariffs, leaving the foreigners to find foreign markets and dumping grounds for his produce’; and even Philip Snowden accepted the Chamberlainite diagnosis that manufacturing had declined under free trade.38 The interruption of German imports during the war accelerated the existing sympathy with Conservative protectionism within the movement. ‘If it is right for us to muzzle the British sweater’, observed Jack Jones, ‘it cannot be wrong for us to muzzle his foreign competitor.’39 As these remarks indicate, Labour protectionism carried xenophobic overtones that had manifested themselves earlier when a number of Labour MPs supported the Balfour government’s Aliens Bill in 1905. According to Ben Tillett, who was always ready to blame the problems of British workers on foreigners, immigration attracted ‘all the dregs and scum of the Continent to make foetid, putrid and congested our already overcrowded slums’.40

Even more striking is the common ground between Labour and Conservatives towards the British system of government. One of the features that consistently distinguished the British Labour Party from its European counterparts was its unconcealed admiration for the country’s constitution. In a notable passage J. H. Thomas once expressed his ‘gratitude

38 LRC, Annual Conference Report, 1903. The success of the Conservatives in retaining seats in places such as the West Midlands and Sheffield, where employment was thought to be threatened by foreign imports, even in 1906, suggests the popularity of protectionism among workingmen.
39 Morning Post, 19 Jan. 1924.
to the constitution that enables the engine cleaner of yesterday to be the Minister of today. That constitution, so broad, so wide, so democratic must be preserved, and the Empire which provides it must be maintained.\textsuperscript{41} For a party that originated outside parliament as the representative of a class scarcely represented there, it would have been far more natural to adopt a highly critical attitude, especially towards the undemocratic and hereditary elements that still encumbered the system. It has been argued that Labour’s reputation for lack of interest in political reform is unjustified in the light of the innovations implemented by Herbert Morrison after 1945. Yet, Morrison’s work only corroborates the wider point, for his reforms to the Lords and Commons were marginal in character and designed simply to improve the efficiency with which a legislative programme could be enacted; his own account, \textit{Government and Parliament} (1954), was redolent of the conservatism and even complacency with which he regarded the system.\textsuperscript{42} This approach is, however, explicable. Despite showing some support for radical innovations including republicanism, a Scottish parliament and proportional representation, the party largely followed Ramsay MacDonald who disparaged constitutional reforms as mere distractions from socialism: “They will not bear examination. They may be will-o’-the-wisps leading into bogs those who foolishly follow.”\textsuperscript{43} Even the events of 1931 failed to overthrow the party’s underlying confidence in the existing system, partly because those socialists who took an interest in government recognized that the combination of a unitary state, a powerful executive and a tradition of secrecy in Britain would enable a ministry backed by a parliamentary majority to carry out its programme with comparative ease.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, whereas nineteenth- and twentieth-century Liberals displayed an almost congenital interest in constitutional reform, Labour shared the Conservatives’ refusal to treat it as a priority: if the system generated the desired results it needed no modification. It is thus no accident that the period of Conservative–Labour dominance after the 1940s saw the gradual demise of constitutional reform as an issue in British politics.

Unmistakable evidence of Labour’s pragmatism lay in its adaptation to the hereditary elements in the system. Although the party committed itself to abolishing the House of Lords in 1918, experience in office rapidly undermined this notion. The more elderly Labour politicians adjusted

\textsuperscript{44} The first two generations of Labour politicians may also have been influenced by their own experience in local government that gave them a footing within the system. There, too, they usually endorsed the status quo, for example, by accepting the Aldermanic system even though it was undemocratic and hampered the party’s rise to power between the wars; see Davies, \textit{Liverpool Labour}, pp. 159–60.

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to the prospect of retiring to the upper chamber towards the end of their careers, and MacDonald minimized objections from radicals by ennobling men without heirs in his first term. By the 1940s when Attlee created no fewer than eighty-two hereditary peerages as well as eight promotions in the peerage, the party had accepted the necessity for the second chamber. By taking the customary peerage himself, Attlee symbolized Labour’s accommodation to the system.  

The monarchy caused even less controversy, especially for a generation of Labour leaders whose political education had coincided with the climax of Queen Victoria’s reign. Subsequently the First World War further enhanced the reputation of the crown as the embodiment of the British and imperial cause. ‘In many respects’, commented Thomas, ‘the workers are even more conservative than the Conservatives. No question of Republicanism as a serious proposition ever finds a place in Labour discussions.’ To be exact the party appears to have devoted approximately a quarter of an hour at its 1923 conference to considering a pro-republican resolution which was rejected by 3.69 million votes to 0.38 million. During the 1920s relations between the royal family and the party grew noticeably closer. When Clynes, along with other leading Labour figures, attended the wedding of Princess Mary in 1922, he explained: ‘I felt that the vast majority of Labour voters throughout Great Britain would like to be represented at a wedding to which they obviously offered their good wishes.’ During 1923 Thomas, Clynes and Snowden met the king and queen socially with their wives as guests of the Astors, and Thomas brushed aside criticism of him for dining at Buckingham Palace: ‘Republicanism was no part of the Labour Party’s programme. If Labour came to power tomorrow they would find the King prepared to accept their advice as readily as that of the Liberal or Tory parties.’ After the inconclusive general election of 1923, King George V tacitly endorsed Thomas’s claims. At a time when Labour’s opponents routinely accused its leaders of being unfit to govern, it was of considerable significance that the king, whatever his private views may have been, showed his confidence by entrusting MacDonald with the premiership on the basis of a mere 191 Labour MPs. The new ministers were understandably flattered.


47 Clynes, Memoirs, p. 326; Daily Graphic, 10 March 1923; Daily Telegraph, 19 March 1923.

48 After MacDonald, Henderson and Clynes had been to the palace, Clynes noted: ‘We were, perhaps, somewhat embarrassed, but the little, quiet man whom we addressed as “Your Majesty” swiftly put us at our ease . . . I had expected to find him unbending; instead he was kindness and sympathy itself. Before he gave us leave to go he made an appeal that I have never forgotten: “The immediate future of my people, their whole happiness, is in your hands, gentlemen. They depend upon your prudence and sagacity”’ (Clynes, Memoirs, pp. 343–4).
Socialists recognized that the king’s decisive action in 1923 conferred a measure of legitimacy on their legislation and thereby helped to discredit Conservative propaganda and undermine their opposition to a Labour government.

IV

Patriotic, monarchist and imperialist sentiment in the Labour movement was greatly enhanced by the experience of the First World War. Within days of Britain’s entry into the war the bulk of the Labour movement aligned itself in support of the national cause, including local branches of the ILP, which historians usually regard simply as an anti-war organization.\textsuperscript{49} The extreme patriotic view was expressed by John Hodge, who served as minister of labour under Lloyd George. Hodge denied that Britain was as blameworthy for the outbreak of war as the other powers and insisted: ‘I have never believed in any claim for an appeal to what was called the German moral conscience. You have got to stop German militarism – this is Labour’s war aim.’\textsuperscript{50}

Moreover, the enthusiastic and belligerent reactions of working-class movements all over Europe prompted some socialists to reconsider their own political philosophy. The Leeds MP, James O’Grady, who admitted he had previously underestimated the force of nationalism, insisted: ‘My assertion is that the Socialist ideal is not in any sense anti-national.’ He argued that in the future the establishment of a socialist or co-operative commonwealth would go hand in hand with nationalism.\textsuperscript{51} After 1918 Thomas proposed a permanent memorial to mark the patriotism of the working class and spoke of his pride in the ‘spiritual revival’ engendered by the war: ‘In the dark period of 1914–18’, he recalled, ‘this great Empire of ours, with all that it means and stands for, was defended and preserved by the man from the slums as well as the man from the palace, recognising a common duty and a common obligation.’\textsuperscript{52} These views significantly prefigured Labour’s stance at the end of the Second World War when the rapprochement between socialism and patriotism was more explicit and less controversial. During 1917 the revolution in Russia complicated matters by giving the left an alternative strategy in the shape of workers’ soviets. Hence the period of bitter infighting between the devotees of parliamentarianism and the advocates of direct action. ‘If you want me to lead the Labour Movement as a Bolshevist’, declaimed Arthur Henderson, ‘I give you notice that I am done with the job. Would to God

\textsuperscript{49} In Manchester Clynes took comfort from the knowledge that even the local ILP branches agreed with him about the need for British participation in the war: see ibid. pp. 186–7.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Christian Commonwealth}, 14 April 1915; \textit{Daily Telegraph}, 16 Aug. 1918.
some of our people who are espousing the Bolshevik cause knew what it was.’53 However, by 1921 the parliamentary and trade union leaders felt they had weathered the challenge posed by direct action and could safely repudiate the class war as a continental aberration. ‘Nowadays’, wrote Clynes, ‘I think the most loyal class is the working class. As the Labour Party has grown in power, the menace of revolution has dwindled.’54

Above all, it was the issue of military conscription that crystallized the attitudes of Tory-socialists during the war. The embattled Liberal ministers confidently anticipated that conscription would ultimately be checked by trade unionists’ fears that it would inexorably lead to industrial compulsion. Significantly, however, even the Labour anti-conscriptionists failed to share the Liberal view of compulsory service as a threat to civil liberties by the state. Thomas, for example, considered conscription politically unwise rather than morally wrong because it would create controversy and give an opening to the left-wing militants.55 Altogether eight Labour MPs voted for the conscription bill and thirteen against it.56 Moreover, the language used by some socialists to justify conscription is revealing. One Leeds activist wrote: ‘people should be self-sacrificing for the community’, clearly implying that it was not primarily a matter of individual conscience. The Socialist National Defence Committee saw the maintenance of national liberty as quite compatible with socialist principles: ‘Socialism is not a system of go as you please. Socialism is not Anarchism’. Describing compulsion as the keystone of trade unionism, it suggested that conscientious objectors in wartime were comparable with blacklegs during a strike.57 James O’Grady, who declared himself unable to understand the attitude of conscientious objectors, argued: ‘He was a Socialist, and he had a conception of what the state is, and he averred that he could not live apart from the state. The state had a right to call upon him for service, even for his life.’58 Though an unusually forthright view, this again underlines the effect of war in crystallizing the common elements in the Tory and socialist outlook.

V

These indications of the common ground existing between Conservatives and socialists between the 1890s and the 1920s shed fresh light on Labour’s erratic electoral advance during this period. The electoral pact of 1903 largely determined the party’s parliamentary representation,
producing a concentration of Labour MPs in north-west England for example. The party also acquired seats in the coalfield constituencies where it capitalized on the radical tradition. But extending its reach beyond these bridgeheads proved difficult. Even the 1918 election largely consolidated the existing pattern in that thirty-three of Labour’s fifty-seven election victories occurred in mining constituencies. In this sense no real electoral breakthrough had been achieved.

The question arises why Labour’s advance was so much slower in some regions than in others. Duncan Tanner has drawn attention to the broad distinctions between what he called the ‘Liberal’ and ‘Tory’ regions of the country, the latter comprising London’s East End, Birmingham and the West Midlands, much of Lancashire and the naval-dockyard towns which were characterized by a vigorous working-class Tory tradition.59 Rather than searching for evidence for the overthrow of this tradition it is necessary to recognize the extent and the timing of Labour’s adaptation to it. In Lancashire the ILP occupied the vacuum created by Liberal weakness, but it still needed to win Tory votes, and for this reason the 1903 pact with the Liberals could not by itself account for Labour’s success in the region; indeed, Labour’s closer identification with Liberalism under the pact complicated the party’s efforts to recruit working-class Tories. Conversely, adaptation to the prevailing political culture came naturally since a high proportion of local ILP members had originally been Conservatives.60 In order to cope with the Tory tradition and the Catholic presence in Preston, Blackburn and similar towns where Labour recognized that Liberal policies alienated working-class support, Labour backed rate aid for voluntary schools, supported compensation for publicans who lost their licences and opposed disestablishment. When John Hodge fought a by-election in Preston in 1903 he asked Hardie not to come for fear of antagonising Tory voters!61 In time, as Labour reflected the needs of Catholic communities in northern and Scottish constituencies, its local parties gradually became socially conservative and remained so for the rest of the century. Consequently, even within Lancashire, the party’s performance in working-class communities varied very widely according to the character of the appeal it made. In 1906, for example, it did conspicuously well in the ostensibly unfavourable Tory constituencies of Manchester Gorton and Manchester North East which were captured by Hodge and Clynes respectively with a huge turnover of votes. Though Clynes retained his seat in subsequent contests, North-East Manchester continued to elect nineteen Conservative councillors to six Liberals and four Labour up to 1914. In other words, though the underlying Conservative character of the constituency persisted, Clynes

59 Tanner, Political Change, p. 83.
60 Ibid., p. 141; Howell, British Workers, pp. 204–7; Griffiths, Lancashire Working Classes, p. 284.
offered a brand of socialism that proved viable in such conditions. In Stockport, too, the Conservatives retained their municipal strength while Labour held the parliamentary seat. At Preston Labour scored a remarkable victory even in the unfavourable circumstances of 1918. The key lay in its candidate, Tom Shaw, another bluff, sporting, archetypal John Bull figure whose blend of Toryism and socialism appealed to the working-class community.62

Labour’s strategy also varied in the East End of London where the combination of poverty and a hostile political culture posed great obstacles, so much so that Labour was effectively two parties. In Bow and Bromley, George Lansbury struggled to uphold the radical-socialist tradition, but in West Ham the populist-patriotism of Will Thorne and Jack Jones prevailed.63 In 1918 Labour won just four seats in the whole of London including Woolwich where Will Crooks was unopposed, and Deptford, Plaistow and Silvertown where C. W. Bowerman, Will Thorne and Jack Jones won respectively.64 The comfortable victories recorded by these right-wingers despite the prevailing jingoistic mood underlined how well attuned they were to the views of the London working class.

But it was Birmingham and the West Midlands, more than any other region, which demonstrated the dilemma facing Labour between the wars. Despite a working-class population of 70 per cent, post-war Birmingham enjoyed a deserved reputation as a bastion of popular Conservative-Unionism that had withstood even the Liberal landslide of 1906. The explanation lay in a combination of factors. The local Tories had maintained the Chamberlainite tradition of civic service and interventionism. They employed a mixture of municipal policy, charity and deference that was underpinned by an impressive membership and organization especially in the inner-city wards of Birmingham. Their choice of candidates combined local workingmen such as Alderman A. R. Jephcott, the MP for Yardley, with the prestige of the Chamberlain family and the cause of protectionism and empire with which it was associated.65 In effect, Birmingham Conservatism occupied too much of the social and ideological spectrum to leave much room for Labour to make a distinctive appeal, and not surprisingly the party made no significant progress during the Edwardian period. Moreover, the weakness of Liberalism and trade unionism in the city makes it impossible to explain Labour’s eventual success within the terms of the traditional perspective.

62 Tom Shaw [1872–1938], MP for Preston 1918–31; Minister for Labour 1924; Secretary of State for War 1929–31; the otherwise valuable study by Mike Savage, The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880–1940 (Cambridge, 1987) largely neglects Shaw and his distinctive appeal.


64 Strictly speaking Jones won as an National Socialist Party candidate by defeating official Labour and Conservative opponents, but sat subsequently as a Labour member.


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Consequently, Labour had little alternative but to come to terms with the prevailing political culture. Although this proved to be a lengthy process, early signs appeared in 1918 when the party pulled off several intriguing victories against the trend, notably in the newly created constituency of Smethwick. A working-class seat, Smethwick had been carved out of the old Handsworth Division, a traditional Tory stronghold. Labour’s candidate there, J. E. Davison of the Ironfounders Union, faced one of the shrillest jingo candidates – Christabel Pankhurst. Standing with the official backing of Lloyd George and Bonar Law, Pankhurst impugned her opponent’s patriotism and appealed for the anti-German vote. In such situations most Labour candidates went down to a heavy defeat. However, Davison, who had played an active part in recruitment and on government committees during the war, effectively appropriated the war as Labour’s victory, arguing that the workers had won both the war and the vote for men and women. He also advocated the nationalization of key industries. Two aspects of the Labour victory at Smethwick in 1918 are significant. First, Davison’s re-election by modest majorities in 1922, 1923 and 1924 indicated that the town would never become a Labour stronghold comparable to those in South Wales or County Durham. But therein lay its importance as the more marginal type of territory the party had to win in order to make the leap from being a substantial minority party to a national majority. Secondly, the winning formula used by Davison in 1918 carried strong overtones of Labour’s appeal in 1945 in so far as it combined patriotism with interventionism.

The subsequent pattern of Labour’s development in the West Midlands is also instructive. Although 1922 brought further gains in Cannock, Kingswinford, Wednesbury and Leek, by 1924 the region had become the target of a distinctive strategy designed to meet the Tories on their own terms by importing upper-class recruits who came from a Conservative not a Liberal background, including Oswald Mosley (Birmingham Ladywood), Lady Cynthia Mosley (Stoke), John Strachey (Birmingham Aston), Oliver Baldwin (Dudley) and J. A. Lovat Fraser (Lichfield). Initially the Conservative press derived considerable enjoyment from this spectacle: ‘A droller choice as Labour candidate for an industrial constituency than this debonair young sprig of the aristocracy [Mosley] could scarcely be conceived’, scoffed the Birmingham Mail. They derided Lady Cynthia as ‘The Dollar Princess’ and mocked Strachey for addressing his constituents as ‘Ladies and Gentlemen’ rather than ‘Comrades’ and signing himself ‘Your obedient servant’. However, they were missing the point. By drawing attention to the wealth, glamour and connections of these new candidates they helped Labour to play the Tories at their own

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66 Smethwick Telephone, 30 Nov. 1918, 7 and 14 Dec. 1918.
67 Smethwick Telephone, 11 Nov. 1922; for similar tactics by Labour speakers see reports on Alfred Short, G. N. Barnes and John Hodge in Birmingham Post, 25 Nov., 2 and 3 Dec. 1918.
68 Birmingham Mail, 22 and 24 Oct. 1924; on the placing of ex-Conservatives as Labour candidates see Pugh, ‘Class Traitors’, 59–60.
game. As Lady Cynthia observed, her husband would ‘open the eyes of those who had not yet voted Labour’.

Many working-class voters found it flattering to be represented by ladies and gentlemen. The more the press attacked them the less credible it was for the Conservatives to disparage Labour as a mere workingman’s party.

Notwithstanding its overall losses at the 1924 election, Labour’s initiative began to pay off in Birmingham where Mosley came within 177 votes of unseating Neville Chamberlain in Ladywood. The party won its first Birmingham seat at King’s Norton and sharply reduced the Tory majorities at Aston, Yardley, Deritend, Duddesden and Erdington. Mosley claimed with some justification that he had fought Ladywood to break the Chamberlainite hold on the city: ‘when Chamberlain ran away [to stand in the safer Edgbaston] that tradition was broken.’ Subsequently he maintained the pressure by attacking the other parties over their role during the General Strike. The strike certainly provoked a working-class backlash against the Conservatives in Birmingham and led to an increase in the Labour councillors from seventeen in 1925 to twenty-nine in 1926 and thirty-six by 1928. In December 1926 Mosley himself contested a by-election at Smethwick where he raised the Labour majority from 1,200 to 6,500. When the general election finally took place in 1929 Labour achieved a dramatic breakthrough by taking six of the twelve Birmingham seats and squeezing Austen Chamberlain’s majority to 43 at West Birmingham; further gains were recorded at Stoke by Cynthia Mosley, at Dudley by Oliver Baldwin and at Lichfield by Lovat Fraser. However, this advance was largely obliterated by the collapse of Ramsay MacDonald’s cabinet in the crisis of 1931 and the subsequent National Government; Labour had one further step to take before it could claim to have fully destroyed the Chamberlainite tradition in the West Midlands.

VI

Within the perspective offered by Labour’s gradual adaptation to the Conservative tradition it is possible to reconstruct a more plausible account of the chronological pattern of the party’s development as a national party. In this process the First World War played a crucial part, though not in the sense in which it is usually understood, for the war is as important for what it reveals about Labour’s relationship with the

69 *Smethwick Telephone*, 11 Dec. 1926.
70 Many local newspapers that usually ignored Labour candidates as far as possible could not resist giving publicity to the exotic upper-class recruits.
71 The King’s Norton victory is also instructive in that the Conservatives usually relied on the influence of a dominant employer candidate, Alfred Austin, to hold the seat; Labour won partly with the help of another major employer, George Cadbury.
72 *Smethwick Telephone*, 27 Nov. 1926.
73 *Birmingham Mail*, 11 Dec. 1926, reported Mosley as saying: ‘In the hour of the working-class ordeal . . . the Tories and the Liberals united to break the resistance of the workers to lower wages . . . the voters had learned who were their friends and who were their enemies.’

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Conservatives as for its effect in allowing the party to overtake the divided Liberals. By deciding to enter the Asquith Coalition in 1915 the Labour MPs followed the logic of their existing electoral alliance, but by joining the more right-wing coalition headed by Lloyd George in December 1916 they signified a growing rapprochement with the political establishment. Like Attlee in 1945, Clynes, Thomas and others clearly felt tempted to remain in the government in 1918 with a view to influencing the peace settlement.  

Interestingly, their sentiments were echoed on the Conservative side, by Lords Milner, Selborne, Salisbury and Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, who recognized the patriotism shown by the workers and hoped that ‘the fellowship of the trenches would be a bond between Englishmen of the most various classes in the future.’ In order to translate this into concrete form informal attempts were made to bring Conservative and Labour politicians together ‘with a view to discovering a common basis for a patriotic and national policy’, and in November 1917 a group including Milner, Steel-Maitland, Edward Wood, Sir Laming Worthington Evans and Captain L. S. Amery, drew up an explicit and comprehensive statement of the Tory-socialist programme. Recognizing the principle of state interference in industries of national importance, especially railways and those threatened by imports produced with the aid of sweated labour or subsidies, they argued that the state should have the right to impose conditions, to set minimum wages and to limit profits; in effect the state was to be a third partner along with capital and labour. They hoped to promote this programme by recruiting Labour politicians into the British Workers National League (BWNL) which ran ‘National Democratic Party’ candidates in 1918 backed by the Lloyd George Coalition. A remarkably high proportion of the existing parliamentary Labour Party – ten or eleven of the thirty-eight MPs – joined the BWNL, while others, such as Thomas, strongly sympathized with its views.

As a result of these initiatives ‘Labour’ presented a very varied appeal at the election of 1918 notwithstanding the new statements of the party’s programme. Some Labour candidates publicly dissociated themselves from the anti-war leaders, notably MacDonald and Snowden, and their

74 Clynes, Memoirs, p. 273.
76 Memorandum, not dated, and Memorandum, 5 Nov. 1917, NLS, Steel-Maitland Papers GD193/92/2/11–17 and 104.
77 They also specified the use of tariffs as a weapon of defence, public acquisition of canals, national reforestation, regulation of milk and coal supplies, military training, housing reforms, public house reform, and differential taxation according to matrimony and parenthood.
78 Victor Fisher to Arthur Steel-Maitland, 27 April 1917, NLS, Steel-Maitland Papers GD193/99/24. The BWNL had the allegiance of John Hodge, W. Abraham, Will Crooks, Charles Duncan, G. Hancock, C. B. Stanton, R. Toothill, Stephen Walsh, Alex Wilkie; in addition G. N. Barnes and James O’Grady stood as unofficial Coalition Labour candidates; other union figures who supported the organization included J. Havelock Wilson, J. A. Seddon, David Gilmore (Scottish Miners Association) and James Robson (Durham Miners).
Jingoism equalled that of the Tory right. George Barnes advocated hanging the Kaiser, and John Hodge demanded that ‘the guilty must pay the penalty.’79 By eliminating the critics of the war from parliament the election shifted the balance of Labour representation sharply to the right; the fifty-seven members comprised patriotic trade union officials, plus a handful of members who fought independently but took the Labour whip; in addition ten erstwhile Labour members were elected under the auspices of the Coalition. In this way the war appeared to have reshaped Labour as a party poised to absorb much of the traditional Tory working-class vote as well as to inherit that of the Liberals.

The wartime strategy failed, however, to achieve this partly because the ten Coalitionist MPs were relatively elderly figures whose careers did not extend beyond 1922 and because the right-wing leaders failed to capitalize fully on their position in parliament. Had Thomas become party leader he might well have exercised a decisive influence on Labour’s strategy, but in 1918 he was too detached. Clynes enjoyed a brief opportunity during his spell as leader in 1921–2, but, following the return of 142 Labour MPs at the 1922 election, he was defeated by MacDonald by just five votes in the leadership election. As a result Labour reverted to its role as the heir to Gladstonian Liberalism during the 1920s and early 1930s.

It would be a misrepresentation, however, to see MacDonald’s leadership as simply a setback in the party’s evolution, for he proved a vital formative influence in constructing Labour’s national appeal. He shared with Thomas an instinct for working within the political system and a conviction that Labour should be more than simply a sectional or class party. This is underlined by the attraction he exercised over recruits not only from Liberal but from Conservative backgrounds, which he dramatically underlined by appointing Lords Chelmsford and Parmoor in the 1924 administration, and Lord Sankey, Stafford Cripps and Oswald Mosley in 1929. This recruitment of ex-Tories at the top of the party was complemented by the widening of Labour’s electoral base in the more socially mixed constituencies that produced 288 victories in 1929.80

Whereas the Liberal recruits consolidated Labour’s existing politics, the ex-Conservatives exercised a constructive influence on its thinking. As many of them occupied positions very close to the British establishment they came to Labour with a positive attitude towards the state and service to the state, often acquired from their public schools, their

79 *Birmingham Post*, 2, 3 and 6 Dec. 1918.

80 On Chelmsford’s appointment see Pugh, ‘Class Traitors’, 54–5. In the election Labour extended its reach by winning marginal, rural-urban constituencies, often with middle-class candidates, such as South Derbyshire (Major David Graham Pole) and The Wrekin (Edith Picton-Turbervill); Labour also broadened its appeal in some two-member seats by teaming a male trade unionist candidate with a middle-class woman such as Mary Agnes Hamilton (Blackburn), Marion Phillips (Sunderland) and Dorothy Jewson (Norwich); see Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women’s Movement in Britain 1914–1959* (1992), pp. 184–9.
experience in the law or the Indian and colonial civil service, or through their adherence to the Church of England.\(^8^1\) Thus they were not rebels or rejects hoping to avenge themselves on the system through the Labour Party. But by the same token John Strachey, Hugh Dalton and Stafford Cripps, among others, were not embarrassed about socialism; on the contrary, their complaint about Labour was that it did not take its commitment to socialism seriously enough. Above all, John Sankey, Godfrey Elton, Lovat Fraser and others felt the attraction of MacDonald, who articulated the case for Labour in non-class terms. As Elton put it: ‘the assent of one class alone would not furnish the wide moral basis needful for the sweeping transformation of society which is the Socialist objective.’\(^8^2\) These ex-Tories interpreted socialism as a national creed capable of regenerating British society. Without MacDonald, in Sankey’s view, the party would have remained a Labour Party not a socialist one. ‘A mere Labour Party would never obtain real power in England,’ Sankey wrote, ‘nor would it deserve it. It is a class party just as much as the right wing of the Conservative Party. The Socialist Party, on the other hand, is a National Party in which all classes can find a home.’\(^8^3\)

The collapse of MacDonald’s cabinet in 1931 obviously interrupted both the evolution of Labour’s national reputation and its electoral advance for several years. As leaders, Henderson and Lansbury were too associated with the party’s sectional appeal, while Clement Attlee lacked the tactical flair and the oratorical skills needed to rebuild the party’s reputation despite the advantage of his own Conservative background. Nevertheless, the check proved to be shorter than is traditionally assumed, for the later 1930s saw another crucial advance as Labour gradually recovered the patriotic high ground. The process may be dated from 1935 when the annual conference, recognizing the threat now posed by fascism, committed itself to supporting sanctions under the League of Nations. The architect of Labour’s reorientation was Hugh Dalton, of whom Harold Macmillan wrote that he ‘combined socialism and patriotism in a good old-fashioned way’.\(^8^4\) In alliance with Ernest Bevin – a striking combination of upper-class Tory-socialist and right-wing Labour trade unionist – Dalton engineered the strategic shift from the pacifism of the 1920s to the patriotic interventionism that characterized the party’s foreign and defence policy throughout the 1940s and 1950s. He used his position as foreign affairs spokesman (1935–9) and party chairman (1936–7) to attack the weakness of National Government policy towards

\(^{8^1}\) Pugh, ‘Class Traitors’, 51–3.


\(^{8^3}\) John Sankey to G. Elton (copy), 6 April 1932, Bodleian Library, John Sankey Papers c. 509. This explains why Sankey and Elton agonized so much over the fall of MacDonald’s cabinet in 1931, dismayed, on the one hand, by the narrow attitude adopted by the other Labour ministers, but fearful, on the other, that MacDonald’s noble vision would be lost in a Tory-dominated National Government. Significantly, several of them rejoined the Labour Party in the 1940s when it seemed to them to have returned to MacDonald’s philosophy.

the dictators and thereby to reposition the party. Recognizing that Labour could not advocate collective security and support the Spanish Republicans while continuing to oppose rearmament, he succeeded by 1937 in persuading the party to abandon its opposition to the military estimates. This shift at the parliamentary level might have been complemented by full participation in the Popular Front strategy at the grass roots but for the leadership’s paranoia about exposing constituency organizations to communist infiltration. But even Dalton felt dubious about the viability of a Popular Front strategy and relatively unmoved by Spain, though during 1938–9 he showed interest in engineering a breakaway by anti-appeasement Tories. Historians have largely adopted a negative view of the Popular Front, regarding it as deficient in structure and leadership. However, this perspective is heavily biased towards the national level and tends to miss the significance of campaigns in the country where the leadership’s writ did not run. Under the aegis of the all-party Aid Spain Committees local activists participated in a wide range of anti-fascist activities, including humanitarian causes such as raising funds for food ships and assisting Basque refugees, as well as overtly political ones such as sending volunteers to fight, demanding that the government sell arms to the Republicans and organizing celebrations for the returning volunteers. Inevitably this involved co-operation between Labour Party members and communists, ILP-ers, Conservatives and Liberals; their obscurity enabled them to escape the expulsion subsequently inflicted on Charles Trevelyan, Stafford Cripps and George Strauss.

Despite the official proscription on the Popular Front, the local anti-fascist campaigns merged ineluctably into Labour’s national appeal. They had especial purchase in Birmingham where the policy of appeasement had become so closely associated with Neville Chamberlain. During the Munich crisis the local party boldly condemned the prime minister for his inability to understand Hitler and for failing to stand up for British interests. In this way, through the Popular Front Labour began to recover the language of patriotism for the socialist cause. In effect, local campaigns complemented the stance adopted nationally by Dalton and by a key recruit to the party – the *Daily Mirror*. This development can be dated to Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 when the paper’s proprietors became critics of the National Government. Subsequently, the *Mirror* advocated the Popular Front as the only way to save democracy from fascism.

89 See Pugh, ‘*Daily Mirror*’, 428–30.
The neglect shown by historians of the rapprochement between the *Daily Mirror* and the Labour Party epitomizes the wider misunderstanding of the party’s evolution. The significance of the rapprochement therefore deserves emphasis. During the late 1930s the paper blatantly talked up the change in Labour’s policy. In 1937 it commented: ‘Labour has shown that it would be prepared to fight any country (or Dictator) that ignores the League of Nations.’ If this overstated the position, the *Mirror* had none the less identified how foreign policy had become a political watershed: ‘One of the oddest twists of our time is indeed this – The old pacifists have become warlike. The true blue Tory warmongers now coo like doves. Who knows what the effect of that reversal of parts will be upon the voters at the next General Election?’90 The *Mirror* also ensured that the momentum generated by the Popular Front was carried over into wartime by its relentless attacks on the Conservatives in general and the appeasers in particular. Meanwhile, as Sankey, Cripps, Trevelyan and Strauss rejoined the party, Labour managed to present a genuine united front, which had been impossible in 1914–18. Finally, because the *Mirror* found its readership in those sections of the working class that had traditionally been resistant to Labour, it helped to extend the party’s message into the areas that counted most at the election.91 The *Mirror*’s rising circulation and the credibility it had won with the public as a result of its consistent opposition to appeasement made the paper a crucial if underrated ally. In 1945 the *Mirror* characterized Labour’s domestic programme as moderate and reassuring – ‘a typically British solution for British problems’ – rather than as extreme or subversive.92 As a result, by the end of the war the party’s prominent role in the Coalition and its vociferous support for putting the Nazi war criminals on trial made it impossible to question its patriotic credentials. With some justice Attlee claimed that the party had come to represent all the main elements in British national life, not simply the working class. The synthesis of Toryism and socialism that had flickered into life around 1918 had finally come to fruition.

VII

The transformation of Labour that culminated in the landslide victory of 1945 clearly involved a series of changes encompassing issues, personnel and electoral support. In electoral terms Labour’s achievement may best be appreciated by comparing the electoral map of Edwardian and post-war Britain. By 1945 the areas of former Liberal strength had largely become Labour strongholds, but with two important differences. Labour never acquired the same popularity as the Liberals in south-west England,

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90 *Daily Mirror*, 1 and 10 March 1938.
91 Pugh, ‘*Daily Mirror*’, 431–4.

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East Anglia and rural Scotland. But Labour compensated by winning over the major conurbations dominated by the Conservatives since the 1880s – ten of thirteen Birmingham seats and eight of eleven Liverpool seats for example – by adapting successfully to the Tory political culture prevailing there. This involved a fusion of the Tory-socialism of the middle-class recruits and the instinctive patriotism of the trade unions with the movement’s radical-socialist tradition. The implication must be that at the local level, at least, Labour is probably best understood not as one but as two or three distinct parties reflecting the diversity of political culture in the regions of Britain.