

British Prime Ministers and Democracy: From Disraeli to Blair

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Addressing the Joint Session of Congress in 2003, Tony Blair issued a stirring defence of the democratic idea. Words like ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, he declared, were not ‘American values or Western values’:

They are the universal values of the human spirit and anywhere, any time, ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same. Freedom, not tyranny. Democracy, not dictatorship.⁽¹⁾

It was a view that would have surprised many of his predecessors. As Roland Quinault reminds us in his new book, democracy in its modern form is of remarkably recent vintage. Britain retained a restricted franchise well into the 20th century; indeed, John Major was the first prime minister born under universal suffrage. For most of the 19th century, democracy was a term of parliamentary rebuke; and as late as 1927, the *Daily Mail* campaigned furiously against extending women’s suffrage. Slowly, however, universal suffrage established itself as the founding principle of British politics, with democracy as its civic religion. This was a revolution in both the practice and ideology of the British state, and it forms the subject of *British Prime Ministers and Democracy*.

Quinault selects ten prime ministers for study, mining their speeches and publications for democratic commentary. There is no shortage of material, an indication both of the novelty of democracy and of its perceived fragility. Quinault’s timescale encompasses two World Wars, the Cold War and a ‘War on Terror’, all of which could be narrated as struggles for democracy. Lloyd George declared democracy in

peril from Tory aristocrats, Ulster unionists and even the opponents of conscription, while Baldwin accused trade unionists of menacing ‘everything for which democracy stands’ (p. 105). Churchill warned of a socialist ‘Gestapo’, and Thatcher found enemies of democracy in the trade unions, the Labour party and the European Commission.

For most of this period, democracy had to operate alongside a competing political language: that of imperialism. Quinault’s treatment of this subject is one of the strengths of the book. For some, the two were mutually exclusive. Salisbury thought ‘the Hottentots, the Indians and other non-Teutonic races’ simply ‘unsuited to democratic government’. Churchill claimed in 1897 that ‘East of Suez democratic regimes are impossible’ (p. 147); and even in the 1950s, he remained ‘sceptical about universal suffrage for the Hottentots’ (p. 152). MacDonald thought imperialism ‘distasteful to the democratic spirit’, and worried that leaders habituated to imperial rule abroad would be careless of democracy at home (p. 125). Yet empire could also be viewed as a force for democracy promotion. Lloyd George hailed the Empire as a ‘democratic commonwealth of nations’ (p. 85), while Baldwin insisted that ‘the prospects of democracy’ were Britain’s highest priority in India (pp. 111–12). Even MacDonald believed that a new kind of empire, ‘under democratic guardianship’, could be a force for peace (pp. 125–6). Labour leaders saw themselves as constructing a new form of colonial connection, based on democratic internationalism. For Attlee – a product of the former East India College at Haileybury – the liquidation of the Raj was a case in point; proof that ‘true democracy rejected imperialism’ in favour of ‘a polity of free nations’ (p. 169).

Democratic ideas could be a weapon for imperial reformers; yet they might also be used to justify imperial rule, if the conditions for self-government seemed absent. Attlee worried, privately, about the capacity for democracy in India, which he thought a ‘British invention’ with no collective identity (p. 161). In Africa, MacDonald looked only to a ‘semi-democracy in which the people are partly enfranchised or elect part of the governing authority’ (pp. 125–6). This allowed Churchill to oppose Indian self-government on ostensibly democratic grounds. Rather than transferring responsibility to ‘an electorate comparatively small and almost entirely illiterate’, he argued, the government of India should remain accountable to Westminster, ‘the most democratic parliament in the world’ (p. 148).

During the Second World War and again during the Cold War, Churchill offered a new vision of empire as a bulwark of democracy. The British Empire, he told Roosevelt in 1944, ‘has spread and is spreading democracy more widely than any other system of government since the beginning of time’ (p. 150). That was to become a pervasive national myth, and helped British politicians – of both right and left – to narrate decolonisation. By reframing the empire as a vehicle of democracy, decolonisation could be remembered as a triumph that vindicated, rather than repudiated, the imperial project. As Thatcher told a Japanese television station in 1982, Britain had a ‘great imperial past’ and had ‘been one of the greatest, most fervent advocates of democracy ... of any country in the world’.⁽²⁾

Quinault offers ten premiers for analysis: Disraeli, Gladstone, Salisbury, Lloyd George, Baldwin, MacDonald, Churchill, Attlee, Thatcher and Blair. Some readers, inevitably, will cavil at the selection. Asquith is a striking omission, given his struggle with the House of Lords, his hostility to women’s suffrage and the enthusiasm of his opponents for referenda. So, perhaps, is Bonar Law, who gave his blessing to a paramilitary army in 1914 on overtly democratic principles. A case might also be made for Harold Wilson, whose ‘Social Contract’ promised to ‘re-establish faith in the working of Britain’s democracy’.⁽³⁾ Yet a line must be drawn somewhere, and Quinault provides a reasonable spread across party and period. More serious, perhaps, is the case against the biographical approach itself, with its emphasis on ‘great’ men and women. Quinault anticipates that objection and addresses it directly. ‘The transition to democracy’, he acknowledges,

was a collective achievement that owed much to the aspirations of the people in general and their pressure for inclusion in the political system. It was, however, the political elite that largely determined the pace and character of that peaceful transformation (p. 1).

Not everyone will find this convincing. It treats democratisation primarily as a legislative process, carried through in reform acts and other statutory changes. Viewed as a *social* transformation, or as the rise of a political idea, the prime ministerial focus is more doubtful. The Victorians, in particular, often saw franchise reforms rather as a *consequence* of democracy than as its vehicle, seeing them as wise accommodations to the growing power of the *demos*. For G. C. Brodrick, for example, the Second Reform Act was but one of 'the symptoms of democratic progress', 'a change resulting, in part, from democratic pressure and contributing to strengthen that pressure'.⁽⁴⁾

Each chapter covers a single prime minister and follows a recurring template. For each premier, Quinault compiles their statements on democracy and, where relevant, on such ancillary subjects as enfranchisement, proportional representation, the House of Lords and the monarchy. The intention, presumably, is to facilitate comparison, but the approach does involve some problems. The first concerns language. Quinault states at the outset that 'No attempt is made, in this study, to define "democracy" other than on the terms of each premier' (p. 2); but in practice, his subjects are constantly judged against a normative standard. Disraeli's boast, in 1867, that 'we do not ... live ... under a democracy' is deemed 'factually correct because a majority of adult males were still excluded from the electoral roll' (p. 23). Lloyd George, by contrast, 'failed to live up to his reputation as a reforming democrat' (p. 95). Of the four 'tenets of true democracy' outlined by Thatcher, Quinault rules that 'none of them is inherently democratic' (p. 196). That generates a certain incoherence, and obscures the extent to which the meaning of 'democracy' has mutated over time. Depending on *who* was using it and *when*, democracy could be a form of society, a particular social class, or a type of government; and each of these had many variants.

A second difficulty resides in the nature of the cohort. Politicians of this kind present peculiar challenges in the study of political thought. These were not public intellectuals but participants in a competitive arena, in which speech and narrative are political acts. That is not to deny their intelligence, nor to suggest that their ideas lacked agency; but their primary purpose as rhetoricians was not the disinterested study of political science. With occasional exceptions, their remarks on democracy were made while addressing some other, more immediate concern – a strike, perhaps; an election; or a budget. That does not make these pronouncements unimportant, but it reminds us of the political purposes they serve. We cannot abstract a politician's understanding of democracy from a compilation of his or her remarks on the subject. Their statements must be understood within a larger public dialogue, in which politicians struggle not just to narrate but to reshape their environment.

The point here is not simply that politicians are 'pragmatic', a designation that raises more questions than it answers. Politics is the art of the possible; but politicians are architects, as well as inhabitants, of the political space in which they operate. They build, as well as respond to, that framework of received ideas and conventional wisdoms by which all governments are constrained; and, in this respect, politics is as much about the *shaping* of the possible as it is about accommodating oneself to it. Needing democratic votes, politicians in the 20th century incorporated the language of democracy into their particular political creeds, generating sub-categories like 'liberal democracy', 'social democracy' and 'Tory democracy'. In so doing, however, they were not passive worshippers at the democratic shrine: they were claiming the right to define what democracy *meant*, and to label their opponents as its enemies. This requires us to think about the political purposes behind rhetoric, and the use of words like 'democracy' as a weapon.

Quinault is by no means insensitive to context, and he is particularly attuned to the international influences on democratic debate. Yet there is little sense here of politics as dialogue, or of the purposive nature of rhetoric. Nor is there any substantial engagement with the problems of language. The result is fun to read and brings together an array of interesting material; but there is a tendency to take politicians at their word.

To illustrate this point, it might be useful to look briefly at three prime ministers explored in this book: Disraeli, Baldwin and Thatcher.

Disraeli began his career as a Tory radical, after the Whig Reform Act of 1832. In a series of writings, of which the most important was *The Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835), he outlined a populist vision of Toryism, that pitted the democratic legitimacy of his own party against the selfish 'oligarchy' of the Whigs. This had little to do with the franchise or with elective institutions in general: for Disraeli, the Tory party was the 'truly democratic party of England' because it embodied national institutions, like the Church of England and the House of Lords. They were democratic precisely because they were national, whereas Whiggism appealed to 'sectional' interests like nonconformity and Irish Catholicism.

Quinault describes the *Vindication* as the 'fullest exposition of Disraeli's political views' (p. 17). It was certainly the longest; but it was very much a response to its times, when Tories were seeking a populist alternative to Whig reform. By the time Disraeli re-engaged with democratic ideas in the 1850s and 1860s, he was operating under very different conditions. No longer a political outsider, he was now leader of the Conservative party in the House of Commons, at a time when the global reputation of democracy was at a particularly low ebb. Leading a party that was gravely suspicious of democracy, he cheerfully joined in the general condemnation. 'If you establish a democracy', he warned in 1859, 'you must in due season reap the fruits of a democracy', listing an array of apocalyptic scenarios that ranged from war and confiscation to a military coup (p. 20). Addressing his constituents in 1865, he urged them to 'legislate in the spirit of the English Constitution ... and not fall into a democracy, which is the tyranny of one class, and that one the least enlightened'.⁽⁵⁾

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, Disraeli used the menace of 'democracy' as a hammer with which to beat Liberal reform bills. Hence, when he took responsibility for Conservative reform bills in 1859 and 1867, it was essential to distance his proposals from any taint of democratisation. At a time when even reformers needed to distance themselves from the term, Disraeli's disclaimers of democracy in 1867 were not so much 'factually accurate' as tactically astute – a means of creating political space, which provided the necessary cover for an act of mass enfranchisement. Gladstone had been less adroit in 1866, drawing tortuous distinctions between the sense in which his reform bill was and was not democratic. The price was the destruction of his reform bill and the fall of the government.

By the time Baldwin came to the premiership, in 1923, politics was operating under very different constraints. During the First World War, the British state had finally ranged itself unambiguously under the banner of democracy. Lloyd George called the War 'a struggle ... for the democracy of Europe' (p. 85), while Churchill described it as a conflict between 'the democratic nations of the world' and the Prussian 'imperialist bureaucracy' (p. 143). At the same time, the 1918 Representation of the People Act conceded universal manhood suffrage and partial female suffrage, while full adult suffrage was achieved in 1928. The King's speech in 1929 formally declared the British state a 'constitutional democracy' (p. 132) – the first time, Quinault suggests, that it had committed itself so unambiguously. Yet there was no guarantee that the new system would work. The elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 delivered completely different results; not so much an electoral swing as a series of violent ricochets. The new electorate seemed dangerously volatile, unclear of its mind from one year to another. With an economy dislocated by war, public finances unbalanced by debt and the Bolshevik shadow rising in the East, it remained to be seen how the new electorate would work in practice.

In this context, Baldwin offered himself as the guide and teacher of democracy. 'The task of this generation', he declared in 1923, 'is to save democracy, to preserve it and to inspire it'. His strategy was to embrace democracy, while warning of its fragility. 'Democracy', he declared, 'calls for harder work ... than any [other] form of government'. It 'can rise to great heights; it can also sink to great depths. It is for us so to conduct ourselves ... that we may achieve the heights and avoid the depths' (pp. 102–4).

Baldwin's commitment to democracy is not in doubt; but it is worth thinking about the political purposes this served. Baldwin tended to define 'democracy' against 'dictatorship'; a polarisation to which we are so

habituated that it can almost pass without notice. But the inter-war dictatorships, and their would-be imitators in Britain, themselves deployed a rhetoric that was populist and sometimes explicitly democratic. Just as it had been possible, in the Victorian era, to champion 'popular representation' while disclaiming the name of 'democracy', so it was possible in the inter-war period for 'democrats' to reject parliamentary institutions. Baldwin's achievement was to nail 'democracy' so firmly to the parliamentary system that they could hardly be pulled apart. The scale of this achievement – infusing medieval institutions with democratic legitimacy – is easy to overlook.

The chief beneficiaries, however, were the Conservatives. Tory politicians had been deeply nervous about their prospects under the new electorate. Indeed, it was such anxieties that had secured Baldwin the leadership; for his rival, Lord Cromer, was thought too aristocratic for 'this democratic age' (p. 101). Embracing 'democracy' gave Baldwinian Conservatism a moral purpose and a populist flavour, while reminding his party of their need for a democratic communicator. At the same time, the requirements of democratic management provided cover for political retreats – the abandonment of protection in 1924, or the failure to rearm in the 1930s. Elections were routinely framed by Baldwin as tests of democracy, in which the pass mark seemed invariably to be Conservative success. Above all, democracy allowed Baldwin to talk a conciliatory and inclusive political language, while marginalising his opponents. Conservatives, he claimed unctuously, upheld 'the lifted torch of democracy', while Labour was 'snuffing the wick of a lamp that is burning too dimly' (p. 105). Arthur Bryant called the Conservative college at Ashridge 'the first non-propagandist college of democratic citizenship', a claim that Quinault rightly describes as 'disingenuous' (p. 108). Yet the assertion captures a feature of Baldwinian Conservatism to which Ross McKibbin famously drew attention: its capacity to annex such hegemonic values as 'democracy' and 'freedom', in an ostensibly non-partisan 'conventional wisdom'.⁽⁶⁾

This is not to deny the sincerity of Baldwin's democratic pronouncements, or his achievement in a period littered with the corpses of democratic regimes. But nor should we take him at face value as the disinterested champion of democracy. To suggest, for example, that MacDonald championed reforms 'which directly benefited his ... career', while Baldwin, 'by contrast', took up a cause that 'brought him no obvious personal gain' (p. 240) is to take the latter too readily at his own valuation.

Thatcher had a less consensual style than Baldwin, but she shared his understanding of the power of rhetoric. To a greater extent than any leader since Churchill, Thatcher spoke a language of national crisis, in which democracy itself was at risk. That was only plausible because so many others also thought democracy in peril in the 1970s; but the threat was not necessarily understood in Thatcherite terms. The Labour party presented the *Conservatives* as a menace to democracy, projecting the 'Social Contract' as a reassertion of 'the democratic process' against the 'authoritarian and bureaucratic' methods of their opponents. In books like *Arguments for Democracy*, Tony Benn called for democratic control over industry, while the National Union of Miners presented itself as a democratic opposition to Thatcher. For most of Thatcher's time in Parliament, the prevailing vision of democracy had been social democratic, presenting nationalised industries, the welfare state and free collective bargaining as part of the constitutional architecture of the British state.

In this context, what Thatcher was fighting for was not so much the *future* of democracy as the right to *define* it. Against the industrial democracy championed by Benn and the corporatist democracy of the Social Contract, Thatcher upheld a conservative vision of democracy founded upon parliamentary government and consumer choice. Her conception of the 'property owning democracy' was markedly individualist: property was to be vested in individual members of the *demos*, not in 'democracy' as a collective. She dismissed the democratic credentials of trade unions, and rejected the claims made for public ownership as a form of democratic control. In its place, she offered the neoliberal concept of 'the democracy of the market'. As she put it in 1978,

the democracy of the ballot box, important though it is, is only one form of democracy. In a

truly free society ... it must be reinforced by the democracy of the market, in which people can cast their vote, not once every four years or so, but every day as they go about their daily business.[\(7\)](#)

From this perspective, the Thatcher era marked the triumph of a particular conception of democracy, centring on Parliament and the free market, over those alternative models of social, industrial and plebiscitary democracy with which previous leaders had wrestled. It was a struggle that had crossed orthodox party divides, pitting proponents of representative institutions – like MacDonald and Baldwin – against advocates of direct democracy within their own parties. The triumph of ‘representative’ over ‘direct’ democracy is one of the more remarkable themes of modern British politics, and might usefully have been addressed in this volume.

‘Democracy’, Quinault concludes, ‘is always a work in progress’ (p. 244). It might better be described as a *word* in progress, fashioned not simply by reform acts and structural changes but by a rhetorical struggle for political advantage. As Quinault’s book reminds us, democracy is not a timeless verity, but something contingent and embattled, to be puzzled over by one generation after another. As new democratic debates arise over European institutions, public sector strikes and coalition government, that seems as true of our own time as of the century-and-a-half preceding.

Notes

1. P. Richards, ed., *Tony Blair in His Own Words* (London, 2004), p. 249.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Interview for Nippon Television, 14 September 1982; *Margaret Thatcher: Complete Public Statements, 1945–1990* [CD-ROM] (Oxford, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Labour Party, *Britain Will Win With Labour* (October 1974).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. G. C. Broderick, ‘The progress of democracy in England’, *Nineteenth Century*, 14, 81 (Nov. 1883), 913.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Times*, 22 May 1865.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), 259–93.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Margaret Thatcher, ‘Speech to conference for management in industry’, 9 January 1978, <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103502> [2]> [accessed 3 October 2011].[Back to \(7\)](#)

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