

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

The Labour Governments, 1964-1970

Review Number:

586

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 April, 2007

Editor:

Peter Dorey

ISBN:

9780714656199

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£75.00

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Publisher url:

<http://www.routledge.com/books/The-Labour-Governments-1964-1970-isbn9780714656199>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Mark Crowley

Peter Dorey's edited volume, *The Labour Governments 1964-70* (2006), both in its methodological approach and chronological focus, is a timely addition to the historiography of the Labour Party. In a style reminiscent of his other two major publications of 2006, namely *Public Policy in Britain: An Introduction* (London, 2006) and his edited volume, *Developments in British Public Policy* (London, 2006), a systematic analysis of the major policy areas influenced by the 1964-70 Labour governments is undertaken. Dorey has solicited the work from some of Britain's leading authorities on the Labour Party, in addition to both current and recently-graduated PhD students researching in this field. Significantly, many of the contributors are political scientists, with only three of the fifteen contributors being historians 'by trade'. Although this has meant that their analyses are interspersed with a little more social science-based theory, especially pertaining to policy developments, than would usually be seen in texts authored by historians, its approach is predominantly historical, charting effectively the fortunes of the Labour Party, and its impact on the policy agenda during this period.

Its intellectual approach is therefore notably different to previous works on the Labour Party, which, broadly speaking, have fallen into three major categories. First, many historians have focused on the party's

development in the period up to the end of the Second World War, of which Stephen Brooke's, *Labour's War: Party, Coalition and Reconstruction, 1939-45* (Oxford, 1988), and Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson, and Nick Tiratsoo's *England Arise! The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995) are but two. Considerable attention is frequently accorded to the acrimonious split of 1931—for which Ramsay MacDonald's formation of the National Government will probably forever be regarded within Labour-Party circles as a betrayal of the party—after which the party did not regain electoral prominence until 1945. Secondly, there are studies of the party's history in its entirety, as found in the works (to name but a few) of Duncan Tanner, Andrew Thorpe, and Henry Pelling. These have provided an overview of the party's history, examining the major events and contextualising the party's fortunes within the wider British (and oftentimes European and worldwide) political climate. However, even though Tanner, Thorpe, and Pelling's works touch upon the 1964-70 Labour governments, their larger chronological scope precludes a more detailed analysis of this period. Thirdly, other studies have examined the development of the party in its era of turmoil, especially in the aftermath of the 1979 general election, highlighting the difficulties of the party's struggle to regain public confidence, of which Eric Shaw's *Labour Party since 1979: Crisis and Transformation* (1994) is an example. Only two studies of the 1964-70 Labour governments, one by Clive Ponting (1990) and the other by Richard Coopley, Steven Fielding, and Nick Tiratsoo (1993) were hitherto in print. The lack of studies on the 1964-70 Labour governments, compared to that for its earlier and later history, consequently makes Dorey's volume the leading study on this period of the party's history.

Dorey's contribution is extensive; he authors half of this 200,000-word book. He examines the party's attitude towards devolution in Wales, education reform, Labour's relationship with the trades unions, the development of incomes policy, its policies on Northern Ireland, and the reform of laws concerning homosexuals. In his introduction, he outlines three justifications for a further study of the 1964-70 Labour governments. First, he argues that the major economic, political, and social developments of the 1960s provoked disagreements within the party over the future direction of its public policy, which in turn contributed to a stalemate between the left and right wings of the Labour Party, thus making the formulation and agreement on policy incredibly difficult. This is an aspect frequently referred to by all authors, revealing an interesting dichotomy between issues and politics, frequently culminating in policy impasses within governments. Secondly, the two previous studies of the Labour governments gave only a somewhat cursory examination of policy areas such as Northern Ireland and the reform of the House of Lords, and neglected others, such as the reform of the House of Commons and education reform. It is difficult to understand why the preceding texts have treated these areas so superficially—if at all. Thirdly, Dorey notes that his is the first study to make comprehensive use of hitherto unexplored archival material. It is this which is the biggest strength of this study, and it has enabled all the contributors both to highlight and to explain the ideological and political tensions within the party. Furthermore, this is used as a platform to explain how these internal tensions emasculated the party machinery's ability to present a united and cohesive image, thus contributing to apathy and a lack of confidence amongst the electorate. Contextualizing these aspects within the wider British political climate, this study demonstrates that the party's apparent marginality, both in terms of the number of its supporters and of its ideology, was attributable to more than the simple fact that it was a minority government.

The book's structure effectively highlights both the historical context and the contemporary political, economic, and social constraints impacting on the Labour Party's ability to influence and develop policy. Kevin Jefferys's chapter analyses the position of the Labour Party in opposition. He explains concisely the fall of Labour as a party of government, the reasons for its years in the wilderness, and traces how it managed, after thirteen years, to regain the confidence of the public and to become once again an electable force. His reference to contemporary texts such as *Must Labour Lose?* (p. 4), published in the aftermath of the 1959 election defeat, effectively sums up the mood of Labour-Party loyalists, despairing after eight years in the political wilderness. The ideological divisions at the heart of the Labour Party, including the formation of Aneurin Bevan's left-wing splinter group typified in the infamous 'Morecambe Conference', leadership challenges against Attlee, and the rise of Hugh Gaitskell's revisionism provide a basis for understanding the developments analysed by the authors later in the volume. For example, among the reasons Dorey cites for

the rise of diverging opinions within the party by 1964 are the influx of younger members and the election of more MPs with a university-educated background. Their views were different to those of the older members of the Labour Party, many of whom had not embarked on a university education. He argues that this represented the embourgeoisement of the Labour Party (p. 31). This argument is convincing on two grounds. First, if one examines the political context, the growth in the areas of government competence, in addition to the growing complexity of governance, meant that a better-educated political elite would be viewed more favourably by the electorate. Secondly, the elitist label formerly attached to university education was slowly diminishing by the very nature of its growing popularity. This provides the basis for the analysis of these tensions in greater detail in later chapters.

The shift towards a university-educated party culminated in tensions on several fronts. Whilst Eric Shaw argues that diverging opinions led to growing disagreements over the areas of responsibility held by government and party (p. 40), Noel Thompson argues that it was Harold Wilson's preoccupation with the creation of 'a brave new world' (p. 56) for his Fabian Political Economy—comprising the 'professional expert'—which alienated many of the party's older members. The core of its success would depend on the party's ability to undertake coherent economic planning, yet its failure to do so was attributable to its inability to acquire the powers necessary to facilitate its development, and, indeed, to the lack of inclination to acquire those powers (p. 70). Although Thompson argues that the influence of the fundamental economic changes during this period affected the party's ability to pursue the Fabian-Wilsonian Economy, his suggestion that there was a lack of any inclination to develop the mechanism is not convincing. The Labour Party, following its period in the political wilderness, had managed to return to power, capitalizing on the relative weakness of the Conservative Party. Its increased numbers of university-educated members now enabled it justifiably to argue that it could no longer be a party considered as wholly dominated by trade union leaders. The importance of developing this new image to emphasize not only its own development but also the difference between it and the Conservative Party was, therefore, paramount to solidifying its electoral position. In this context therefore, Thompson's assertion is somewhat debatable.

The Labour governments' relationship with the trades unions is something that receives close attention from Dorey in two chapters: one examining the developments of incomes policy; the other examining the impasse reached by the party in industrial relations. When discussing incomes policy, Dorey cites the opposition of both trades unions, especially those representing workers in the craft trades, who benefited the most from collective bargaining, and of some within the party itself. Opposition was expressed by prominent, but divisive, figures such as Tony Benn, who argued that the government needed to look at mechanisms of controlling prices rather than wages, as controlling wages was both impractical and ineffective (p. 83). This demonstrates that although the influx of a university-educated membership in the party was initially considered as a move towards embourgeoisement, it did not preclude the expression of left-wing views by those such as Benn, himself an Oxbridge university-educated MP. This is an aspect examined in more detail in Dorey's chapter on industrial relations, where he argues that the opposition of many left-wingers in the party to Barbara Castle and Harold Wilson's white paper, *In Place of Strife*, published in January 1969, stemmed from two areas of the party. First, there were the left-wingers, who regarded any curb on the power of trades unions as an infringement of the rights of working people. Secondly, those who were sponsored by the trades unions considered their loyalty to rest primarily with those unions, and only then with the government. They consequently expressed opposition at the reduction in trade union power (p. 107). This discussion is balanced by the attention accorded to the supporters of the White Paper, especially those such as Tony Crosland, who were sympathetic to both Wilson and Callaghan's views. Dorey demonstrates that acceptance of the White Paper depended on the ability of its supporters to convince the ever-prominent left-wing contingent of the party that it did not represent a departure from the founding ideology of the PLP, whilst still ensuring that they could negotiate a stronger position for a Labour government vis-à-vis the trade unions so as to be able to implement their reformist ideas.

Britain's relationship with Europe and the wider world proved an important consideration for the Labour governments. Labour's relationship with the European Economic Community is examined by Helen Parr and Melissa Pine, and the development of British foreign policy beyond Europe is analysed by Rhiannon

Vickers. All conclude that the Labour governments took Britain's relationship with Europe and the wider world very seriously, seeking to expand its influence despite the nation's position being considerably weaker than it had been during the Empire's zenith. Both chapters conclude that although many aspects of both its European and foreign policies in this period resulted in failure, it was an area on which the Labour Party was relatively united. Although this is true, it is worth noting that different strands of the party had divergent views on how policy aims could be achieved.

Constitutional changes were also a preoccupation for the 1964-70 Labour governments. Kevin Theakston's analysis of reform in Whitehall concludes that the recollections expressed in politicians' memoirs, especially those of Tony Benn and Richard Crossman, overstate the acrimonious relationship between the Labour Party and the Civil Service. Indeed, Theakston argues that the party enjoyed a positive relationship with the Civil Service, and managed to implement some reforms during its six years in power. It was tension over the Fulton Report which prompted acrimony, with Benn criticizing the Civil Service publicly for its attitude, pushing Benn further towards the left (p. 166). Wider parliamentary reforms are examined in Donald Shell's chapter, in which he describes the compulsion within the party to reform both the House of Commons and House of Lords, culminating in the expansion of select committees as a method of improving scrutiny of the government's activities. One of the biggest advocates of the reforms, Richard Crossman, believed that these committees were necessary on the ground that it would improve the efficiency of departments if more pressure on, and scrutiny of, them were applied by the upper and lower chambers (p. 173). The most radical potential constitutional changes are examined by James Mitchell's analysis of the Labour governments' stance towards Scottish devolution, whilst Peter Dorey examines the case for Wales. Both conclude that although the party's stance towards devolution did, in effect, put the issue of devolution back on the political agenda, it was Wilson's preoccupation with ensuring a high level of control by central government which meant that major policies for devolution stopped short of the creation of the Scottish Grand Committee (p. 204) and after the development of the Welsh Office (p. 222). Its biggest success was seen as the development of regional policy, which, as Janet Mather argues, was taken up by later governments and also extended the viability of devolution as a policy idea; something which was embraced by the Labour government of 1979, and later by the Blair government of 1997 (p. 246). The most problematic policy for the government nevertheless proved to be Northern Ireland, outlined by Dorey in Chapter 14. Although the government sought to intervene in the province, it faced many difficulties, mainly due to the complicated history associated with the Catholic-Protestant relationship.

The remaining chapters examine issues as divergent as education, homosexual law reform, immigration, the abolition of the death penalty, and pensions policy. In his chapter on pensions policy, Stephen Thornton concludes that 'idealism was beaten by pragmatism' (p. 308), suggesting that the radical initiatives of the party's superannuation policy were watered down considerably by the need for caution in this area. This is contrasted with its 'illiberal' stance on immigration controls yet liberal stance on race relations (p. 326), examined by James Hampshire. The perseverance with reform of laws on homosexuality from the social-liberal side of the party, despite the perceived 'low saliency' of the issue to the electorate, demonstrates the seriousness attached by the party to this policy, despite the somewhat more pressing issue of far-reaching economic and social changes occurring concurrently in this period. Strangely enough, the sole policy uniting the Labour Party was the abolition of the death penalty, examined here by Neville Twitchell. This section clearly demonstrates that although all these policy areas, with the exception of education policy, could be considered as areas of lesser importance to the electorate, the Labour governments of 1964-70 attached equal attention to their development. Although these areas did not prove as divisive as the aforementioned policies, the issues raised ensured that both ideological and political tensions would again come to the fore.

The range of source material and secondary material drawn upon by this study has produced a comprehensive analysis of the 1964-70 Labour governments. It cites evidence from the Party's most prominent left-wingers, namely Tony Benn and Tony Crosland, and counterbalances these with the more 'moderate' views of Barbara Castle, Shirley Williams, and Harold Wilson. This ensures that the divergent range of policy views are presented and debated effectively by all authors. These juxtaposing views emphasize the difficulties to which the party was exposed in terms of achieving a political middle-ground for

the development of policy. This, in addition to the inclusion of hitherto unexplored archival material, has enabled the authors to shed light on aspects of the 1964-70 Labour governments that are not explored in other published works. By its very nature, therefore, this study makes a valuable contribution towards understanding why the Labour Party proved, even in government, oftentimes a marginal party ravaged by internal tensions. It will undoubtedly prove an invaluable resource for any student, researcher, or general reader interested both in the party's development, and its period in government throughout the 1960s.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/586>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3983>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>