

## British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945-1964

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Chris Howell

It has been a long time since the relationship between the British Conservative Party and the trade unions was anything other than hostile. From the conflict over the 1971 Industrial Relations Act and the miners' strikes which helped bring down the Heath government, to the long period after 1979 when a full scale assault upon trade unions and the collective regulation of the workplace and the labor market characterized the Thatcherite brand of conservatism, contemporary historians and social scientists have become used to deep mutual hostility. Organized around a multi-pronged critique of the role of trade unions in British society, encompassing their role on the labor market, their electoral support for the Labour Party, and their contribution to political sclerosis via corporatist institutions, modern British conservatism has seemed implacably opposed to any but the most minimal role for trade unions: friendly societies offering limited services to their members perhaps, but playing little wider role in regulating the political economy or influencing British politics.

Peter Dorey has written what looks to be the definitive account of an earlier, almost forgotten, period when the relationship between trade unions and the Conservative Party was far less hostile, and indeed when leading Conservative politicians championed collective laissez-faire, free collective bargaining, and a positive role for trade unions in society. Wedged between Conservative hostility to unions in the inter-war period, the highlight of which was the legislative reaction to the 1926 general strike, and Conservative hostility in the period after 1970, this book looks in detail at the shift in Conservative thinking after 1945 and then Conservative government policy towards trade unions while in office between 1951 and 1964. Its value lies both in its exhaustive examination of this under-explored period, and in its explanation for how and why conservatism was able to make peace with the central collectivist institutions of British society. It would be going too far to suggest that this book offers lessons for the current period, when a new Conservative leader

is attempting to re-locate his party on familiar ideological terrain, and Dorey makes no such claims. But as a work of intellectual history, Dorey does help us understand the multiple, conflicting strands of modern conservative thinking, and the manner in which some, at least, of these strands could be recombined so as to be compatible with a more collectivist organization of society, one in which trade unions are legitimate economic and social actors.

*British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945–1964* is organized into seven roughly chronological chapters. The first summarizes the relationship between Conservatism and trade unions prior to the Second World War, tracing primarily the legislative record from the Combination Acts, via a Disraelian detour, to the broad incorporation of the labor movement into policy making during the Second World War. The second chapter traces the shift in Conservative thinking towards trade unions between 1945 and 1951, while the party was in opposition and coming to terms with the changed landscape of post-war politics. There then follow two pairs of chapters. The first pair examine the 1951–60 Conservative governments from the perspective first of voluntarism (a general refusal to legislate in ways which would interfere with the ability of trade unions to govern themselves and engage in collective action) and second of wage determination. These two chapters mark the high-water mark of Conservative support for British trade unionism as it was then constituted, and the period when Conservative governments were most resistant to efforts by its own backbenchers to constrain what a later Conservative document labeled *A Giant's Strength*. The second pair of chapters deal with the 1960-64 Conservative government, again divided into an examination in one chapter of voluntarism and an examination in the other of wage determination. During this period, of course, worsening economic conditions were putting Conservative support for trade unionism under increasing pressure. The concluding chapter of the book offers a summary of the period and an explanation for why British Conservatism was, albeit briefly, able to come to terms with trade unionism.

The research upon which this book is based is primarily archival, with the great majority of citations involving documents from cabinet meetings, cabinet committees, the Conservative Party, and civil service advice. We have largely passed the point at which the participants are still alive and available for interview. The result is a highly detailed study of Conservative policy making, but one in which the messy business of politics is largely muted. Official documents rarely contain frank evaluations of the balance of political forces. There are references to debates in cabinet, or dilemmas facing ministers, but it is hard to tell from the evidence presented in this book why one argument or policy won out over another. Was it the intellectual force of the argument or some more narrowly political explanation? What is most striking is that the dominant Conservative position during this period – support for voluntarism and free collective bargaining – never seems to have been seriously challenged. Criticism from the right of the party is acknowledged, but the impression one gets is that the party leadership was never in danger of losing the debate. This again is remarkable given how fast and how far the party moved away from a policy of rapprochement with the labor movement after 1964. Thus a better sense of how widely supported within the parliamentary Conservative Party and the wider party membership these policies were would have been helpful.

The narrative that Dorey lays out is in one sense not new. We know that between 1945 and about 1970, something approaching a consensus among the two major parties existed around some of the central elements of public policy (though it is worth noting that the existence of ‘the British consensus’ is hotly contested within political science, and Dorey’s book is a forceful reminder that, yes indeed, that consensus is not a figment of the imagination of an earlier generation of social scientists). Alongside Atlanticism and a commitment to full employment and the welfare state, both major parties sought to work with the trade unions and to encourage self-regulation of the sphere of industrial relations. But the enormous service of this book is to show, in great detail, how and why that policy position was justified on ideological and political grounds. How, in other words, could a party with such a long history of hostility to trade unionism, make such an abrupt shift, and then, when faced with repeated challenges in the 1950s and early 1960s in the form of sharply higher strike rates and evidence of economic failure, how was the leadership of the party able to stick to a commitment to voluntarism?

A series of arguments were made to justify voluntarism and (until the early 1960s) free collective bargaining, all of which had utterly vanished by 1975. These included that trade union leaders were in fact

often more moderate than their members, so that statutory strike ballots or union officer elections were more likely to encourage disorder than order, and that legislation could not create good industrial relations. The 'human relations' approach was deployed to explain why insecurity and alienation at work could not be wished away or effectively regulated through sanctions. To anyone who has read the final report of the Donovan Commission, or the research papers which were produced by industrial relations academics for the commission, reading Dorey's book produces an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Time and time again in the 1950s and right up to the 1964 election, senior Conservative politicians deployed arguments to justify continued adherence to collective laissez-faire which could have been lifted word-for-word from the Donovan Report, which was not published until 1968.

This position remained in place as late as the 1964 election. As Dorey demonstrates, the cabinet was divided over whether to announce a Royal Commission to investigate the state of industrial relations in the run up to the 1964 election. It was felt that a Royal Commission would be necessary cover if any legislation was to be contemplated in the Conservative election manifesto, but such a commission would also risk alienating moderate trade unionists. Only the *Rookes v. Barnard* legal decision forced the hand of the Conservative government because now the trade union movement sought legislation to overturn the decision. In the end, the party entered the election campaign with a pledge to hold an enquiry before contemplating any legislation, and as late as March 1964 the Parliamentary Labour Committee of the Conservative Party continued to reject the role of legislation and sanctions as solutions to the problems of industrial relations.

The remarkable contrast between Conservative policy towards trade unions in the first two post-war decades, and Conservative policy after 1970 begs the question of what changed. It could have been contextual factors, but Conservative governments prior to 1964 weathered evidence of much higher unofficial strike rates, of poor economic growth, and of communist influence within trade unions without modifying, in any significant way, their commitment to voluntarism. This reader longed for one additional chapter covering the period 1964–70, which would have traced and explained the collapse of Conservative faith in its policies over the previous 15 years.

The concluding chapter to *British Conservatism and Trade Unionism, 1945–1964* provides an explanation, or a series of explanations, for the conciliatory view of trade unionism which predominated. The primary argument is an intellectual one: that among leading parliamentary figures in the Conservative Party, One Nation Tories (men such as Harold Macmillan, Anthony Eden and Rab Butler) were intellectually dominant, and that their sympathy for trade unionism was a product of personal background and experience. It is hard to know what to make of this argument, not least because, as noted above, we don't get a good sense in the book of whether one policy position won out over another because of its intellectual superiority or more mundane political calculations. But this is one place where a chapter dealing with the post-1964 period would have helped clarify the argument because it would have had to demonstrate and explain a shift in intellectual dominance to a new generation of Conservatives with quite different backgrounds and experiences, presumably the less aristocratic Edward Heaths and Margaret Thatchers of the party.

Two further arguments are also deployed to explain this remarkable period of Conservative policy towards trade unionism. Dorey emphasizes the role of the Ministry of Labour – regardless of the identity of the Minister – as a permanent lobbyist for conciliation rather than legislative sanctions. This raises the question of why the Treasury, which had been hostile to trade unionism since at least the creation of the Ministry of Labour, was not more successful in winning ministerial turf wars. Finally Dorey points to the unique conjuncture of the early post-war period, when the labor movement had moderate leadership which was prepared to work with a Conservative governments so long as they respected voluntarism and free collective bargaining, and which was as concerned about militants in the trade union movement as any Conservative minister. As Dorey notes, the political space for a cooperative relationship drastically narrowed from the early 1960s onwards, as the leadership of the largest unions shifted in a more left-wing direction, and as the continuing decentralization of British industrial relations meant that trade union leaders – or whatever ideological stripe – had less and less influence over wage bargaining.

Post-war British history has long been dominated by attempts to explain the particular dysfunction of British

industrial relations and the political conflicts that erupted around the myriad interpretations and solutions to the 'labour question'. We are awash with studies of conflict and crisis in the relationship between the labor movement and both the Conservative and Labour Parties. But it is impossible to explain those moments of political crisis without also being able to explain the moments when British trade unionism was able to carve out a cooperative relationship with the party in power; post-war histories too often render those moments invisible. It is the singular contribution of this book by Peter Dorey to revisit and resurrect this crucial period of post-war British industrial relations.

The author has not responded to this review.

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