

**LABOUR IN THE SOUTH EAST:**

**A Regional Study of Political Culture & Practices C 1931-1945**

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# **Abstract**

## **Labour in the South East**

### **A Regional Study of Political Culture & Practices Circa 1939-1945**

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This thesis examines how, following its near collapse in 1931, the political and ideological restructuring of Labour Party circa 1939-1945 was achieved not in the traditional, industrial northern heartlands, but within the south east among a burgeoning middle-class membership. For the south-east between the wars provided the main site for a significant spatial-temporal restructuring in the division of labour where the urban core of the region turned to light or service industries centred upon the production of consumer goods and free-time where women became the targets of collective consumption. Indeed, Labour's south eastern membership was not only crucial to its sizeable victory in 1945, but contributed to the Party's recovery by offering a democratic, welfarist model of socialism that could potentially appeal to both service workers or clerical/professional employees within the south-east. They succeeded in preserving a utopian vision of socialism essential to Labour's revival as the champion of equality and solidarity during the war years.

Following charges that 'Corbynmania' was built on the support of a south east metropolitan elite, this thesis suggests that there is nothing novel about the spatialisation of socio-political divisions, for this can be traced back through the 'Metropolitan Intellectuals' of Michael Foot's 1930s. At the same time it takes issue with this simplification by noting the importance of a new, service based working-class within the Greater London region, more concerned with wage regulation and the efficient provision of collective consumption than production centred grievances concerning alienation within the workplace. Overall, this

work argues that the progressive alliance essential to Labour's success was rebuilt within the social clubs, party branches, universities and reading groups of the south-east.

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Last, but not least, thanks to my family for all their support. Indeed, my parents, Margaret and Robert, together with a wider, extended family, comprise the ‘foot soldiers’ mentioned in this research in that they have given most of their adult lives to the furtherance of the Labour Movement, whether by way of work-place politics or numerous causes, including the recent representation of a Grenfell Fire victim, work in the Disability Rights Movement and union representation for some of the lowest paid and vulnerable workers in the country. Suffice to say, my own politics were shaped in the womb and the varied topics discussed in this project have been regularly spoken about down through the years over the dinner table, so I hope I have done them justice.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AGM	Annual General Meeting
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Co-Op	Cooperative Society
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DLP	District Labour Party
DLP	Divisional Labour Party
EC	Executive Committee
HCLA	Home Counties Labour Association
ILP	Independent Labour Party
JP	Justice of the Peace
LCC	London County Council
LLY	Labour League of Youth
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
LRD	Labour Research Department
LSPC	Labour Spain Committee

NALGO	National Association of Local Government Officers
NEC	National Executive Committee
NFRB	New Fabian Research Bureau
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NUDAW	National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers & Shop Assistants Union
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers Movement
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PPE	Politics, Philosophy & Economics
RPC	Revolutionary Policy Committee
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SECTIONS	Women's Sections
SJC	Standing Joint Committee
SJCIWO	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organisations
SL	Socialist League
SMA	Socialist Medical Association
SSIP	Society for Socialist Inquiry & Propaganda
T&G	Transport & General Workers Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UDC	Union of Democratic Control

WLL

Women's Labour League

YCL

Young Communist League

## Introduction

Commenting on Labour's narrow electoral defeat in the May 2017 General Election, the lecturer and *New Statesman* columnist, Daniel Allington, has blamed the southern, middle class, 'virtue signalling' of Labour socialists (i.e. 'Corbynistas') for alienating a socially conservative, working class electorate.<sup>1</sup> In this respect Allington is merely one of many critics to target what David Swift has recently termed the 'left-wing hobbyists', those middle class activists whose cultural elitism and esoteric concerns (veganism for example) are held to antagonise working class voters and damage the image of the Left.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Labour Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, has variously complained that the Party's Remain campaign was 'Too much Hampstead, not enough Hull', and following the election defeat of December 2019 former Labour MPs such as Phil Wilson, pinned the blame squarely on the Corbynistas' ultra-left 'cult', comprised of 'members from middle class backgrounds'.<sup>3</sup> The *Financial Times* contented itself with the fact that "Under Jeremy Corbyn's disastrous leadership', armed with his 'radical and transformative' manifesto, Labour sank to "its lowest seat total since 1935".<sup>4</sup>

Yet, had these critics studied the 1930s it would have been evident that their vitriolic charges against the socialist 'fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, Quaker.... pacifist, and feminist' (as Orwell branded them in the 1930s) were hardly novel.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, upon assuming leadership of the Labour Party in 1931, George Lansbury, a key figure-head of the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Allington, 'Does the working class need to ask for its Labour Party back?', 19 June 2017, accessed at <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/06/does-working-class-need-ask-its-labour-party-back> .

<sup>2</sup> D. Swift, *A Left for Itself: Left-Wing Hobbyists and Performative Radicalism*, London, 2019, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> A. Burnham, cited in Lascelles, D., 'Why did Hull back Brexit', 11 August 2016, accessed at [https://www.p.hh\\_respectmagazine.co.uk/politics/why-did-hull-back-brexit](https://www.p.hh_respectmagazine.co.uk/politics/why-did-hull-back-brexit). Also, see Wilson, P's, comments accessed at <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/labour-leadership-race/2020/03/labours-mess-predictable-result-leader-and-philosophy-hated>.

<sup>4</sup> *Financial Times*, 15 December 2019, accessed at <https://www.ft.com/content/3b80b2de-1dc2-11ea-81f0-0c253907d3e0>.

<sup>5</sup> G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London, 1937, pp. 105-6.

Labour Left for many years, faced a slew of such charges and had to contend with the fierce opposition of union leaders such as Walter Citrine and Ernest Bevin.<sup>6</sup> Though Lansbury lacked the political authority of MacDonald or Henderson, his period at the helm of the party apparatus witnessed both a substantial expansion of Labour's individual membership and serious attempts to 'ginger' up the Party's political-strategic commitment to socialism.<sup>7</sup> The individual membership of the Labour Party in fact doubled between 1928-1936 (214,970-430,690) and trades union membership also picked up in the new industrial areas, as well as gains made in local government, the prize being Labour's new majority on the London County Council (LCC) from 1934.<sup>8</sup>

However, as Colm Murphy has noted, the similarities with the 1930s go beyond the likenesses of 'Corbynism' and Lansbury's brand of grass-roots socialism, for as in 2019 a significant fraction of working-class electors voted Conservative in both 1931 and 1935.<sup>9</sup> According to the research of McKibbin and Pugh (who differ on the exact percentage), in 1935 roughly between one third to a half of the total working class electorate voted Conservative, whereas some overwhelmingly working class regions like Birmingham and the West Midlands remained solidly Conservative into the post-1945 era.<sup>10</sup> Yet this does not mean that Labour was any more successful in converting the more affluent, liberally-minded electorate in the south-east. For as Butler has calculated, over the course of the 1930s at least 147 Parliamentary seats in the south of England were held by Conservatives, as opposed to a

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of such animosity see Postgate, R., *The Life of George Lansbury*, London, 1951, pp. 276-7.

<sup>7</sup> R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour*, London, 1972, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> B. Donoghue, & G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison – Portrait of a Politician*, Oxford, 2001, p 190. In the LCC election of 1934 Labour polled 341390, votes, the highest ever gained by any party in an LCC election. Its share of the vote was 51 per cent. Labour had 69 Councillors, 34 more than 1931.

<sup>9</sup> C. Murphy, 'Are the 1930s the true historical parallel for Labour today?', accessed at <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/are-the-1930s-the-true-historical-parallel-for-labour-today-macdonald-lansbury-corbyn-starmer-long-bailey-leadership>.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951*, Oxford, 2010, pp. 52-5, and M. Pugh, 'The Rise of Labour and the Political Culture of Conservatism, 1890-1945', *History*, Vol. 87, No. 288, October, 2002, p. 529, or M. Pugh, *Speak For Britain: A New History of the Labour Party*, London, 2011, pp. 236-43.

peak of 15 for Labour in 1935.<sup>11</sup> Instead of constructing a hegemonic, ‘progressive’, electoral alliance of the working-class and socially-minded middle class, by 1939 Labour was seemingly in similar straits to today’s Party. Though larger than ever before, with a socially varied mass membership of more than 400,000, it struggled to retain the support of its core working-class constituencies beyond the ailing ‘depressed areas’ of the north-east and north-west, and made limited inroads into the increasingly affluent ‘New England’ which arose in the south-east.

This thesis will reappraise the long-running divide between Labour’s socialist activists and its wider support base by examining the party’s flourishing south-eastern membership, which exerted an increasingly prominent role in the internal policy debates of the 1930s. For from 1928 to 1936 Labour for the first time in its history, came close to achieving its objective of becoming a mass party, with the total number of constituency parties increasing from 532 in 1928 to 614 in 1936, with most of those CLPs registering a membership of 1,000 or more located within the environs of London and the Home Counties.<sup>12</sup> Whether in the forms of its Million Member campaigns (1933-35) or its promotion of local educational classes on socialist planning or social policy, these members cultivated the feeling of a communal crusade aiming to establish a qualitatively different society. As Vernon Bogdanor has noted, there has always been a tension between the ‘Utopian’ vein of Labour politics and the pragmatic and respectable image which the Party’s leadership cultivated in that they were particularly reluctant to accommodate this political energy beyond ‘dues collecting’.<sup>13</sup> This reluctance resulted in a stillborn youth movement, together with a failure to harness broad-minded Liberal support for the Popular Front and other popular movements during the 1930s.

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<sup>11</sup> D. Butler & J. Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, London, 1963, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> See D. Tanner, ‘Labour and its Membership’, in Tanner et al. (eds.), *Labour’s First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 252-3.

<sup>13</sup> See ‘Introduction’ in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *From New Jerusalem to New Labour: British Prime Ministers from Attlee to Blair*, New York, 2010, pp. 4-6.

Nonetheless, historians such as, Pimlott have opined that opportunities for Labour to act as an instrument of progress were wasted because of left wing, largely south eastern activism which, ‘far from encouraging brave initiatives, inhibited the Party leadership’ whilst antagonising a socially conservative working-class electorate. In his narrative Labour might have been holding office, leading the ‘vanguard of the Keynesian revolution’ had it not been for the ‘political strait jacket’ imposed by the Marxist Labour Left, whose identification of a progressive alliance with the ‘Popular Front’ and Communist cooperation hindered ‘the chances that it might have been achieved’.<sup>14</sup> For Pimlott, criticism of Labour’s failure to harness grass roots radicalism missed the mark, since the party ‘never set out’ to promote a social movement or the peaceful dis-appropriation of capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

This thesis argues that such criticism of the membership is misleading in several respects. First, in that the Labour leadership, reacting to the disaster of 1931 with a call for a more rigorous socialist programme, deliberately sought to promote a more ideologically committed Party to both members and voters. Labour activists cannot be blamed for taking such pledges seriously, even if they were secretly meant in jest. Indeed, Labourites who were later critical of the United and Popular Fronts, such as Patrick Gordon Walker, justified their opposition to such devices precisely on the grounds that this would ‘water down’ the socialist programme and replicate the sterile Lib-Labism of the MacDonald years.<sup>16</sup> Second, the suggestion that these activists antagonised the south-eastern electorate cannot be fully gauged from the election results of a first past the post system, which failed to register the considerable advance in support for Labour within south-eastern constituencies. Worley has captured the importance of the members’ crusading spirit in broadening Labour’s appeal to

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<sup>14</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in The 1930s*, London, 1986, pp. 198-200.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> See D. Bowie, *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires: Radical, Socialist and Communist Politics in the City of Oxford 1830-1980*, London, 2018, pp. 204-5.

south-eastern constituencies. However he overestimates the extent to which this movement was displaced in the constituencies by a trade-union inspired ‘pragmatic socialism’, one emphasising better wages, living conditions and equitable status for the workers.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Labour Left was not monolithic – a significant section of left-wingers (including the Socialist League) appealed to voters through developing a Parliamentary socialism which would harness extra-Parliamentary movements to the election of an invigorated, committed Labour Government.

Thus, this thesis disagrees with Worley’s suggestion that the Party ended the decade with a more consistent, defined conception of socialism. Rather, Pugh grasps this problem when he suggests that the movement’s evolution in this period was not consistently in one direction ‘for...while Labour defined its left-wing thinking more clearly, it also consolidated its right wing tendencies’ achieving an uneasy ‘synthesis’ which was to underpin Labour’s victory in 1945.<sup>18</sup> This loose synthesis of utopian humanitarianism and Fabian inspired administrative reform offered the crucial ideological compromise by which grass-roots activists and intellectuals were able to reconcile themselves to the Labour Party. As we will see in Chapter VI of this thesis, even the Socialist League’s desire for enabling legislation was the result of a reaffirmed faith in Parliamentary institutions.

## **Concepts and Method**

First, in exploring the contribution of the south east membership to the political culture of Labour and its relationship with civil society, it is necessary to justify our chosen methodological approach, for this study has several contentious concepts as heuristic devices. Most notably, in characterising the object of our analysis as the political culture of Labour’s members, we run the risk of attributing a false sense of ideological unity to what has often

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<sup>17</sup> M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, London, 2008, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> M. Pugh., *Speak for Britain: A New History of The Labour Party*, London, 2011, p. 217.

been characterised as two parties occupying one organisational framework of Labour politics.<sup>19</sup> In particular, a generation of critics influenced by the New Left writings of Anderson and Nairn have argued that ‘Labour politics’ were the product of an unstable compromise between the defensive collective bargaining, or ‘Labourism’, of an assertive trade union movement and the internationalist reformism of a social-liberal intelligentsia.<sup>20</sup> Thus various attempts to define the term itself has also given rise to a historiographical minefield, with Saville and Miliband variously categorising the party’s political culture as Labourism, ‘the theory and practice of class collaboration’, or the apolitical class consciousness of the working class.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, Macintyre has suggested that Labour politics were defined by an internal contest between the Labourism of trade union barons, a corporatist practice which sought social recognition for the workers as a prestigious estate of the realm, and the ‘Labour Socialism’ of activists and intellectuals, an ethical, reformist creed which (unlike Marxism) sought to establish a co-operative commonwealth through parliamentary action and a revolution of minds.<sup>22</sup> This picture is further complicated by the fact that Labour’s ostensible culture of openness and debate, the much celebrated ‘broad church’, fostered cohesiveness precisely by encouraging a wariness of dogmatic codification in any intellectualised or precise sense.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, unlike the Gotha Programme (1875) of German Social Democracy, or Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* (1902), the Labour party did not produce a definitive ideological statement beyond the limited provisions for common ownership of the means of production in clause IV of its 1918 constitution.

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance H. Wainwright, *Labour: A Tale of Two Parties*, London, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion in M. Davis, ‘Labour and the New Left’, in J. Callaghan et. al (ed.) *Interpreting the Labour Party*, Manchester, 2003, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> J. Saville, ‘The Ideology of Labourism’, in R. Benewick, et. al (eds.), *Knowledge and Belief in Politics: The Problem of Ideology*, London, 1973, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> See S. Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917-1933*, London, 1980, pp 3-5, and E. A. Roberts, *The Anglo-Marxists: A Study in Ideology and Culture*, Lanham, 1997, p 27.

<sup>23</sup> On this point see J. Watts, ‘The lost world of the British Labour Party? Community, Infiltration and Disunity’, *British Politics*, 13, July 2017, p. 509.

However, if we adopt a less monolithic perspective on political culture and instead consider Labour's politics and identity in the weaker sense of a discourse, that is an articulated set of political norms and symbols centred upon certain key values (or 'nodal points'), it is possible to provide a loose definition of Labour politics.<sup>24</sup> Here Tony Crosland's summary of Socialist thought in the 1930s provides a useful point of departure. For Labour Socialists in the 1930s, regardless of their disagreements on long-term questions, were united in their desire to abolish poverty, the creation of a 'social service state', the greater equalisation of wealth and thirdly, economic planning for full employment.<sup>25</sup> In addition to this desire for equality (of opportunity in this case) can be added a commitment to liberty, both economic and political. Here centrists like Tawney were united with Marxian theorists such as Laski in desiring a true and active democracy, expressed through parliamentary forms as the safeguard of individual rights and opposed to the corrosive influence of big capital in public life.<sup>26</sup> Finally we must add to the mix the grass-roots activists' emphasis upon fraternity, whereby CLP branch life was frequently treated as the germ of a qualitatively different social order. However, the relative balance between these principles and the means by which they were to be achieved were subject to considerable (and frequently emotive) debate amongst members throughout the 1930s. As Michel Foucault observed long ago, discourses contain internal contradictions with silences and the political culture of Labour was an important example of this.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this was the case for Labour's south-eastern membership which, as will be seen, attempted to balance a support for the working-class virtues of collective solidarity, discipline, class and trade union solidarity with the increasingly individualistic, internationalist and politically dissenting middle class

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<sup>24</sup> On discourse analysis see E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London, 1977, pp. 7-11.

<sup>25</sup> C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*, London, 1967, p 1.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. H., Tawney, *Equality*, London, 1931, pp. 230-3, and H. J. Laski, *The State in Theory and Practice*, London, 1935, pp 296-300.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, New York, 2013, pp. 60-7.

activists. In this respect this thesis focuses upon the institutionalisation of the Labourist discourse within the constitution and practices of the Labour Party at both a national and local level. It also examines whether the south-eastern membership was able to amend this culture to encompass the specific concerns and values of their local electorate.

Apart from political culture, it is necessary to justify the use of the concept 'region' or 'south east', which have been severely criticised by Stefan Berger. Indeed, Berger has argued that regional approaches are too abstract, not giving enough attention to local experiences and that the term can conceal important socio-economic differences between neighbouring localities.<sup>28</sup> A prime example of this caveat as applied to the south-east would be the socio-economic dislocation between pockets of unemployment in the east end of London in the mid-1930s and the burgeoning light-industrial hot spot of Hendon. Yet taking these qualifications into account, the concept of 'region' as defined by Edward Soja, namely 'a complex socio-economic formation', remains fruitful when applied to south-east England in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> As contemporaries such as J.B. Priestley observed, the social-division of labour, relations between work and home life, gendered division of labour and main political concerns within the south-east of 'byways', suburbs and Council estates, were quite different from the rightful emphasis on unemployment in the distressed north-east.<sup>30</sup> For lack of better terms, everyday life for the working and middle classes of London and the Home Counties was a world apart from the struggle for survival in the northern distressed areas, where the scramble for work all but absorbed the energies that would have otherwise been devoted to political activism and organizing. In this respect, the south-east presented a unique social-formation which is worth studying.

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<sup>28</sup> S. Berger, 'The Decline of Liberalism and the Rise of Labour – The Regional Approach', *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 12, pt. 1 1993, pp. 86-7.

<sup>29</sup> See E. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, New York, 2003, pp. 109-11.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, London, 1934, pp. 3-9.

This research seeks to contribute to the recent fusion of the ‘new political science of British politics’ and labour history by examining the dynamics of political culture within a rapidly changing historical (temporal) and spatial context.<sup>31</sup> In examining the interrelationship between the discursive nature of labour politics and material political practices, it is first necessary to deconstruct the term ‘Labour’ and interrogate the ambiguities of this albeit vague political identity. There were many different forms of Labour: manual or intellectual, male or female, industrial or service, and in certain respects the political brand of Labour represented a catch-all means of appealing to what Keir Hardie ambiguously described as the ‘useful classes’.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, in examining the interaction of political culture and practice the first half of this thesis (chapters I – VI) examines each of these Labour identities in relation to the main political controversies of the day. In doing so it attempts to grasp not only the mutual interaction of effective political performance and socio-structural factors, but the importance of constructing social-alliances to the development of an effective hegemonic politics. Could ‘Labour’ become as effective a symbol for a universalist politics as ‘Socialism’ or ‘Liberalism’, or was it irredeemably tainted by the sectionalism of its origins?

In pursuing this question I have used a qualitative, archival approach in the exploration and analysis of primary and secondary source materials, including many local as well as national archives. I have also employed primary, printed source materials and collections from the 1930s, together with an array of secondary literature, journals, local and national newspapers. Due to the paucity of available oral historical sources, a profile of the south-eastern membership has been generated through examination of membership lists and

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<sup>31</sup> On the ‘new political science of British politics’ see C. Hay, ‘How to study the Labour Party: contextual, analytical and theoretical issues’, in J. Callaghan, S. Fielding and S. Ludlam (eds.), *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour politics and history*, Manchester, 2003, p. 184.

<sup>32</sup> Keir Hardie cited in H. Fyfe, *Keir Hardie*, London, 1935, p. 94.

the generation of prosopographical studies.<sup>33</sup> In attempting a clearer insight into the political activity that spurred the growth in middle-class, south east membership, I have compiled a comparative case study of two of the largest inter-war, south east constituency parties, that of the Hendon District Branch in Middlesex/north London with that of the Faversham suburban/rural Divisional Branch in Kent. Similarly, because women comprised the largest individual membership in the 1930s and were at the heart of the new consumer based, south east economy, I have also assembled a case study of the West Willesden Women's Section. Both studies are original save for Weinbren's very useful Microfiche archival paper setting out the contents of the Hendon Archive.<sup>34</sup> In respect of Women's Sections, the research that exists has been overly focused on north east working-class women (Ward's research comprising the most recent). Thus far it has only been Todd's post War examination of Bexley Heath that has looked to the workings of a middle-class, south east Women's Section.<sup>35</sup> Also, in an effort to shed some fresh light on the role of both the south east Home Counties Labour Association and the Labour Spain Committee I have incorporated the much overlooked J. C. Pole Papers, held in Churchill College, Cambridge, and the C. J. Garnsworthy Papers held at the British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), LSE. Historians such as Fleah, Saunders and Buchanan gave the latter resource a fleeting

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<sup>33</sup> On the continued importance of prosopography to social movement research see L. Bosi and H. Reiter, 'Historical Methodologies: Archival Research and Oral History in Social Movement Research', in D. Della Porta (ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, Oxford, 2014, p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> D. Weinbren, *Hendon Labour Party 1924-1992. A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, Microform Academic Publishers, London, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> N. Todd, 'Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-1950', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1973, pp. 159-173; S. Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working-class Women's Politics', *Twentieth Century British History*, Volume 30, Issue 1, March 2019, pp. 29-52. Also see B. Humphries, *The Origins & Development of the Labour Movement in West London*, Doctoral Thesis, 2019, University of Reading.

mention some thirty years ago but did not use the Collection to look at the closer, inter-workings of the two organisations.<sup>36</sup>

## Structure of Thesis

Chapter I provides a concept and method with which to interrogate the specific complexion and activity of the middle-class Labourite, one of the main research problems examined in subsequent chapters. It is argued that social class must be understood as a formation of social agents sharing a common position within the social division of labour (including political and ideological relations) and that an integrated middle class was constituted by the shared exercise of authority (ownership, control or disciplinary oversight) as well as political and ideological commitments to crown, constitution and domesticity.<sup>37</sup> The middle class in this period were not merely a rhetorical construct; they had real differences in outlook and politics from the industrial workforce founded upon authority within the spheres of production, administration and culture.<sup>38</sup> For though largely secure from threat of unemployment or privation, increasing numbers of professionals felt the need to combat inequality and privation through membership of the Labour Party. As such, the relationship between Labour and the middle class in the thirties requires a historical-theoretical reappraisal.

Yet, for all its ascribed significance, historians still lack both an agreed concept of ‘middle class’ and an associated method of class analysis. In deploying a combination of Marxist or Weberian concepts, sociologically minded writers have arrived at such varied

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<sup>36</sup> C. Fleah, & M. Saunders, ‘The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War’, *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp 187-197. T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991.

<sup>37</sup> See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class*, London, 1991, pp. 8-9. Also N. Poulantzas, ‘On Social Classes’ in J. Martin (ed.), *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, London, 2008, pp 186-189 & S. B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and The Acting Subject*, Durham, 2006, pp. 64-6.

<sup>38</sup> Xiaotian Jin, ‘Undoing Shame: Lower-middle-class Young Women and Class Dynamics in the interwar Novels by Rose Macaulay and Elizabeth Bowen’, *Women’s Studies*, 6 (2014), pp. 703-8.

definitions of middle class ('the Salariat', 'intellectual labour', or the £250 per annum income stratum), as to render empirical comparison arduous.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, confusion still prevails as to whether class should be treated as a structural category (the salaried and owners of capital) or an active historical formation (the middle-class), whilst work influenced by the 'linguistic turn' has raised important questions concerning the linguistic and gender construction of 'middle classness'.<sup>40</sup>

Chapter II examines suburban labourism, for by 1935 Labour's traditional image as a party of the organised, skilled working class had become increasingly anachronistic within the cities and suburbs of south east England. For those flourishing branches established in the Home Counties or the London suburbs organised Labour's demands for higher wage levels, worker's control, or overtime pay were of secondary importance compared with the provision of efficient health services, transportation or educational resources. In other words, the restructuring of the spatial 'matrix' enforced by the new service dominated economy, together with the segregation of the 'two Englands' described by Priestley, meant that Labour had to adapt to a southern region where issues of collective consumption and distribution were paramount.<sup>41</sup> The London Labour Party, which attained its first LCC majority in 1934, had the greatest success in this regard. To the increasingly urbanised working-class, Morrison and other London politicians offered a politics of municipalization and communal support, whilst the suburbanized professionals and clerks were persuaded to participate in a 'compassionate professionalism'. Within this socio-spatial shift Labour's middle-class membership ironically fulfilled a stabilising role, for as much as suburban, middle-class

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750*, London, 1968, p. 65 and H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, London, 1989, pp. 29-30.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. D. Cannadine, *Class In Britain*, London, 1998, pp. 11, 20-22 and G. Crossick, 'From Gentlemen to the Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain' in P. J. Corfield. (ed.), *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 152-3.

<sup>41</sup> On spatial-temporal 'Matrices' cf. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London, 2014, pp. 115-6. and 'Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason And Law', in Martin, J. (ed.), *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, London, 2008, p. 48.

Labourites may have objected to the excessive influence of the trade unions, only a minority of middle class members embraced the type of confrontational politics and class struggle which Poplarism had sown so effectively at the level of local government in the 1920s. Instead, they employed the practice of citizenship which stressed electoral supervision of local or national services. Thus, Labour's middle-class members were crucial in facilitating the party's development as a national (in ideological and spatial terms) agent of social-welfare reform, the true heir to the historical mission of radical Liberalism.

With the use of previously unused Party records (held in the Hendon and Maidstone Archives) Chapter III provides a closer insight into south east grass-roots political activism. The comparison of a south east urban district (Hendon) with that of the suburban/rural divisional Party of Faversham is an interesting one in terms of both the ethnic make-up of the different Parties and related priorities, as well as the unconventional recruitment methods used by rural Labour in an area where the Conservatives were seen as 'the Party of the countryside'. For very few historians have looked at Labour in the countryside, with the exception of Clare Griffiths.<sup>42</sup> With the use of wider sources and local newspapers we learn that what initially appears as overly-bureaucratic officialdom belies the Left leaning passions of Jewish, middle-class intellectuals in Hendon whose internationalism reveals its irreconcilability with bread and butter local issues, whilst also revealing that Faversham complied more to a suburban as opposed to rural model.

Chapter IV examines the way in which the Party's opening up to individual membership gave many women a new voice, one where they became instrumental in Labour's attempt to develop a populist politics of collective consumption which appealed to the new suburban housewife, as well as an expanding female workforce in London. For

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<sup>42</sup> C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside – The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007.

women comprised half of Labour's individual membership throughout the inter-war years. Though the majority of women in this period were not Feminists, let alone Suffragists, attempts to organise Labour women represented a significant forward step in the relationship between the Party and the women's cause in areas of universal healthcare and education as part of a modern citizenship.<sup>43</sup>

Chapter V comprises an inter-war case study of the West Willesden Women's Section of the Labour Party. It is important in that Willesden comprised a mixed, north west London suburb at the heart of the south east growth in light industry, where local areas such as Neasden became a by-word for growth in inter-war suburbia. We learn that the Section served as much a social as political need and was the back-bone of all fund-raising for the constituency as a whole and that the Willesden women applied the moral economy of the home to party politics. For unlike their northern, working-class sisters, the south east Sections' women did not have links to a long, industrial heritage. Instead, their politics were more readily formed within pressure groups such as the League of Nations Union.

Chapter VI is an analysis of the influence or otherwise of Labour intellectuals in the 1930s in terms of their association and development through south eastern political and educational institutions. For an emotive debate exists as to whether the Labour Party was devoid of intellectuals and, in effect, was an un-intellectual or perhaps more accurately, an un-theoretical Party? Here I look to Labour thinkers (influential in the 30s) who grew and evolved out of southern institutions such as Oxbridge and the LSE: R. H. Tawney, G. D. H. Cole, the Webbs, Dalton, Durbin, Hobson, Cripps, Strachey, etc. Such thinkers were pivotal in the re-building of the Party and its future direction but were divided along clear fault lines in their assessment of Labour's woes. For notables such as Tawney (writing in 1932) were

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<sup>43</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994.

critical of what he deemed the wasted years whereby Labour could not become a Party of ‘peaceful revolution’ until it recognised that its 1918 constitution had failed to establish a mass socialist Party. Similarly, G.D.H. Cole espoused the accepted view that by 1931 ‘gradualism’ had failed in terms of working to mix capitalism with doses of socialism. His influence was important in that he formed The Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) with the intention of writing a new programme for the Party. Its members comprised a number of notable figures, including Attlee and their role was an important one in recasting Labour’s political practice from 1931, so moving the political initiative from the NEC.

In Chapter VII I look to the little-known Labour Home Counties Association set up in the south east in 1935 as a vehicle for channelling membership grievances within the hierarchy of the Party. I have also combined this with an investigation of the Labour Spain Committee set up in 1937, since Fleah & Saunders highlighted the way in which the Committee was symptomatic of the internal divisions in the Party between 1936-1939. No one subject evoked such passion and discontent among the south eastern middle-class membership than Labour’s foot-dragging on Spain. Yet there is a limited historiography both on the Labour Spain Committee and the Home Counties Association, both of which have been consigned to the footnotes or references of most overviews, whereas the collections of Charles J. Garnsworthy (first Chairman of the HCLA) or J.C. Pole (Secretary of the LSPC) and their correspondence with local CLPs remains an untapped resource (the former housed at the LSE and the latter Churchill College, Cambridge).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Labour Spain Committee represented the most radical wing of the south eastern constituencies, in particular that ‘troublesome’ element in support of the Popular Front and sought to challenge the

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<sup>44</sup> C. Fleah & M. Saunders, ‘The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War’, *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197; B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, London, 1986, pp. 116-126.

dominance of the trades unions on the National Executive by mounting a national campaign to increase constituency representation whilst limiting the influence of the trades union block vote in selecting candidates.

Chapter VIII examines the south east constituencies response to war and reconstruction, for sources reveal a general malaise and disinterest for fighting an expected 1940 General Election among the south east membership. The compassionate, humanism of southern, middle-class members had been at odds with the national Party over lack of action on their cause celebre, Spain, and expulsion of their folk hero, Stafford Cripps, who commanded something of a personality cult. Indeed, in the immediate years leading into and during the war itself many individuals were expelled or whole branches disaffiliated for sharing platforms with Communists on international causes. Ironically, middle-class, southern members were often most active in constituencies where they stood the least chance of winning, where their support for internationalism as opposed to localism exacerbated the situation. In looking to south east members' aims for reconstruction, evidence from the constituencies reveals that this ran on class, demographi and ideological grounds. For although various Gallup Polls in the weeks leading up to the election revealed shifting priorities, the middle-class respondents to mass observations lent weight to Beveridge and medical care, whereas the working class switched to housing. Rural Labourites felt the countryside had, once again, been forgotten and the more intellectual members adopted an ethical approach that accommodated capitalism, so hoping to bring about 'revolution by consent'. The national Party's conflict with the south east rank and file could be said to adhere to Robert Michels' archetypical model of the social democratic party fixated on votes alone. Yet the question remains as to whether Labour could have implemented their bold

plan on victory in 1945 without the support of the south east middle-classes who gave them such a majority, for the suburbs of London alone saw a swing of 23% to Labour.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> V. Bogdanor, *'The General Election 1945'*. Transcript of Lecture given at the Museum of London on 23 September 2014. Bogdanor highlights that the swing to Labour in 1945 differed in various parts of the country. For example, surprisingly, there was only a 2% swing in Glasgow, but the suburbs of London and Birmingham witnessed a swing of 23%.

## Chapter I

### High Anxiety: Middle Class Society, Culture and Politics 1931-1939

This chapter will seek to provide a logical-empirical critique of the existing historiography on the English middle class. Consequently, it seeks to furnish a concept and method with which to interrogate the specific complexion and activity of the middle-class Labourite, one of the main research problems examined in subsequent chapters. It is argued that social class must be understood as a formation of social agents sharing a common position within the social division of labour (including political and ideological relations) and that an integrated middle class was constituted by the shared exercise of authority (ownership, control, or disciplinary oversight) as well as political and ideological commitments to Crown, constitution and domesticity.<sup>46</sup> The middle class in this period was not merely a rhetorical construct; observers such as Orwell, Macaulay and Bowen were aware of real differences in outlook and politics from the industrial workforce founded upon authority within the spheres of production, administration, and culture.<sup>47</sup> This difference usually assumed the form of socio-political opposition, the rapidly developing lower middle-class of clerical workers and local government employees or the established professions embracing political conservatism, while the rapidly expanding suburbs became bastions of ‘fierce hostility’ (as Wilmot and Young termed it) to organised labour.<sup>48</sup> Yet, as interviews with teachers and social workers suggest, there were exceptions to this consensus. Though largely secure from the threat of unemployment, increasing numbers of professionals felt the

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<sup>46</sup> See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class*, London, 1991, pp. 8-9. Also N. Poulantzas, ‘On Social Classes’, in J. Martin. (ed.), *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, London, 2008, pp. 186-189, and S. B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and The Acting Subject*, Durham, 2006, pp. 64-6.

<sup>47</sup> Xiaotian Jin, ‘Undoing Shame: Lower-middle-class Young Women and Class Dynamics in the interwar Novels by Rose Macaulay and Elizabeth Bowen’, *Women’s Studies*, 6, 2014, pp. 703-8.

<sup>48</sup> M. Young & P. Wilmot, *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, London, 1960, pp. 105-7.

need to combat social inequality and privation through membership of the Labour Party. As such, the relationship between Labour and the middle class in the thirties requires a historical-theoretical reappraisal. For, surveying the socio-political condition of England in 1909, the Liberal Charles Masterman concluded that it was the ‘middle class’ which determined the ‘tone and temper’ of English life.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, by the beginning of the 1930s the centrality of middle England to national affairs had been firmly established within public discourse. To social critics such as Gibbs, Hodson and Priestley the middle class were the ‘voice’ or ‘spirit’ of English moderation against the extremes of fascism and communism, whereas politicians such as Baldwin praised its ‘individualist character’ for maintaining national prosperity.<sup>50</sup> More recently, social historians have also attached political importance to the middle class, Marwick, McKibbin and Skidelsky suggesting that this group underpinned an anti-socialist (though reform minded) public consensus in the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> Yet, for all its ascribed significance historians still lack both an agreed concept of ‘middle class’ and an associated method of class analysis. In deploying a combination of Marxist or Weberian concepts, sociologically minded writers have arrived at such varied definitions of middle class (‘the Salaried’, ‘intellectual labour’ or the £250 per annum income stratum) as to render empirical comparison arduous.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, confusion still prevails as to whether class should be treated as a structural category (the salaried and owners of capital) or an active historical formation (the middle-

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<sup>49</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, London, 1909, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> P. Gibbs, *England Speaks*, London, 1935, pp. 93-5, J. L. Hodson, *Our Two Englands*, London, 1936, pp. 217-9, J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, London, 1934, pp. 3-6 & S. Baldwin, *Service of Our Lives: Last Speeches as Prime Minister*, London, 1937, p. 117.

<sup>51</sup> A. Marwick, ‘Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political “Agreement”’, *English Historical Review*, 311, 1964, pp. 288-9, and R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951*, Oxford, 2011, pp. 91-3. Also, R. Skidelsky, *Britain Since 1900: A Success Story*, London, 2014, pp. 210-12.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain since 1750*, London, 1968, p. 65, and H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, London, 1989, pp. 29-30.

class), whilst work influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ has raised important questions concerning the linguistic and gender construction of ‘middle classness’.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Soul of England: defining the inter-war middle class**

First, before attempting to demarcate the inter-war middle class it is necessary to justify our use of the phrase, for historians have questioned both its precision and reliability as an explanatory concept. In particular, Cannadine, Crossick and Stedman Jones have argued that the term arose from the conflation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘middle order’ of rank and the newer capitalist class of Victorian political economy, and as such obscures more than it reveals of interwar social structures.<sup>54</sup> First used as a singular term in 1812 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the middle class were defined as the ‘opulent’ commercial stratum in John Wade’s *History of the Middle and Working Classes* (1833), the ‘ascendant’ owners of capital in J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), or a ‘half way’ house between capitalist and proletarians in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* (1848), whilst the term commonly began to be divided into *lower* (‘white-collar’) and *upper* (‘moneyed’) sections from the 1860s.<sup>55</sup> By 1939 and the outbreak of the second world war there were at least three different definitions of ‘middle class’ (or middle ‘classes’) in use among sociologists and economists: those with an income slightly above the average (the £250 per annum mark), those who ‘live in a middle class way’ and ‘associate’ with middle class people (J.R. Hicks), or ‘intellectual labour’.<sup>56</sup> This is not even taking into account its varying vernacular usage which, as Hoggart recounted from his experience of interwar Leeds, often assumed the vague

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. D. Cannadine, *Class In Britain*, London, 1998, pp. 11, 20-22 & G. Crossick, ‘From gentlemen to the Residuum: languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain’ in P. J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 152-3.

<sup>54</sup> D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, pp. 130-1, G. Crossick, ‘From Gentlemen to the Residuum’, p. 153 & G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History 1832-1982*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 33-6.

<sup>55</sup> A. Briggs, ‘The Language of ‘Class’ in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, in A. Briggs & J. Saville (eds.), *Essays in Labour History*, London, 1967, pp. 157-8, & S. Collini (ed.) *J. S. Mill.: On Liberty and other writings*, Cambridge, 2012, p. 87. Also, R. Williams, *Keywords*, London, 1983, p. 66 & G. Stedman Jones (ed.) *The Communist Manifesto*, London, 2014, pp. 60-3.

<sup>56</sup> A. Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA Since 1930*, London, 1980, pp. 54-5.

connotations of ‘non-proletarian’ appearance in speech, dress, or lifestyle.<sup>57</sup> As such, it would be tempting to draw the conclusion that middle class was a ‘rhetorical construct’ or ‘discourse’ (to cite Zebroski) and should thus be considered from the standpoint of intellectual rather than social history.<sup>58</sup>

If justified in problematising its object such an approach errs in reducing the middle class to a cultural construct, for as Lawrence has argued the varying uses of the term were structured around commonly shared notions of concrete material and individual class attributes.<sup>59</sup> Though critical of its ambiguity, Hoggart admitted that the workers possessed a serviceable notion of the middle class as the ‘higher-ups’, the clerical ‘pen-pushers’ and civil servants who ‘summons yer’, or the professionals who ‘never tell yer owt’ (a reference to doctors).<sup>60</sup> As Mass Observation found from a study of 400 panellists in 1939, the vast majority of clerks, teachers, professionals (doctors, lawyers) or civil servants interviewed (more than 75%) freely categorised themselves among ‘lower’, ‘upper’ or ‘professional’ strata of the middle class, whereas many specified that they would only ‘marry within’ their class.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, small-business owning families such as the Turners and Crews defined themselves as ‘middle class’ by dressing better than a ‘working-class person’, or through reduction of inherited accents and grammatical idiosyncrasies.<sup>62</sup> Yet the clearest traits of ‘middle classness’ outside of occupation were provided by education and housing. As Wilmot and Young discovered in their interviews with east-enders, the daughters of industrial workers admitted to grammar school in the 1930s were usually ostracised by their neighbours

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<sup>57</sup> R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, 1966, pp. 73-5.

<sup>58</sup> J. T. Zebroski, ‘Social Class as Discourse: Mapping the landscape of Class in Rhetoric and Composition’, *Jac*, 26. 3-4, 2006, pp. 514-5.

<sup>59</sup> J. Lawrence, ‘Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930-64’, *Cultural and Social History*, 10:2, 2013, p 275.

<sup>60</sup> R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London 1966 pp. 73-75

<sup>61</sup> J. Hinton, “The ‘Class’ Complex’: Mass-Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain’, *Past and Present*, Volume 199, 2008, pp. 210, 214, 216.

<sup>62</sup> Cynthia Turner cited in G. D. M. Turner, ‘Growing up in Middle-Class Southern England in the 1920s and 1930s’, *Oral History Association of Australia*, 27, 2005, pp. 10-11.

and relatives, whereas the successful few who graduated to clerical or professional occupations soon moved to the suburbs of Ilford and Woodford, infamous for their Conservative voting or hostility to what they saw as lazy or feckless workers.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, suburban residence was considered a sine qua non by middle class professionals and their families: social-work pioneer, Margaret Simey, for instance (resident in Liverpool in the 1930s) was firmly told by her new mother-in-law that a respectable woman would ‘live in the suburbs’.<sup>64</sup>

This common-sense conception of the middle class as the suburban, educated group of white collared or black-coated workers was grounded in real disparities of income, occupation, housing and education. The surviving Census returns from 1931 clearly demonstrate the existence of a body of small business owners, professionals, civil servants, public sector or local government and finance workers (roughly 2,783,650 or 16.6% of the 16,686,570 in employment) which crowded into the expanding suburbs of the London, south-east and east-Midlands regions (which accommodated 517,890 professionals alone).<sup>65</sup> Not only was this group the main beneficiary of the inter war private-housing boom (the average price of £395 for a suburban terrace house was unaffordable for the manual worker), its children were twice as likely to attend a selective school as those of the working class in the 1930s.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it enjoyed a noticeably higher standard of living than both skilled and semi-skilled labour; in a comparative survey compiled in 1928 Caradog Jones calculated that Post Office Sorters and their families for example spent 27% more of their income on

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<sup>63</sup> P. Wilmot & M. Young, *Family and Kinship in East London*, London, 1965, pp. 174-5 and P. Wilmot & M. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, London, 1960 pp. 117-8.

<sup>64</sup> Interview no 17., The Cohen Interviews, accessed 11 February 2016, at [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject\\_guides/social\\_work](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject_guides/social_work).

<sup>65</sup> The estimate was calculated by adding together total number of employers, directors, managers, professions for lower estimates, and those ‘Working on Own account’ for higher. See ‘Census–1931–England General Report’, *Histpop*, accessed 11 February 2016, at

[http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/Browse?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)&active=yes&titlepos=360](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/Browse?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)&active=yes&titlepos=360).

<sup>66</sup> See A. A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes 1900-1950*, Newton Abbot, 1991, p. 46 & Table 4.9 in A. H. Halsey, A. F. Heath and J. M. Ridge, *Origins and Destinations*, Oxford, 1980, p. 37.

‘miscellaneous’ (i.e. leisure) activities and goods than those of skilled labourers.<sup>67</sup> Certainly the increasing domestic prominence of luxury goods such as the wireless, portable gramophone, fashion magazines or basket chairs were the preserve of this middle class, whilst the ‘Flapper Cult’ which dominated the rinks, cafes, cinemas and dance halls drew strength from the explosion in female clerical employment (some 1,152,000 in 1931).<sup>68</sup> Even the motor-coach (or ‘Charabanc’) holiday, if increasingly affordable as Priestley alleged, was frequented more often by the clerical or professional vacationer as opposed to the working class weekend tripper.<sup>69</sup> Consequently the term ‘middle class’, if frequently vague, captured significant discrepancies in lifestyle and values.

Of course, the inclusion of individual characteristics such as occupation, income, education or housing within our definition is not without defects. The common-sense association of the middle class with homeownership, if frequently reliable, could often blur the boundary between those considered ‘lower’ middle class and the upper stratum of the working class. For example, a survey of Bristol carried out in 1940 found that 39 per cent of local working-class families earning 30 shillings a week or more owned their own homes, whereas an (albeit declining) stratum of the middle class (5-10% in total) continued to rent due to high land-prices in London and the South-East.<sup>70</sup> In similar terms, observers’ over-dependence upon income or education gradations could also be misleading. Though useful for excluding the majority of the industrial workforce, the definition of middle class as those earning between £250-600 per annum concealed significant differences of lifestyle and social outlook; in a study of 1,360 civil servants carried out from 1938-39 Philip Massey found that

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<sup>67</sup> See Table XII drawn from 254 sorters and ministry of Labour statistics in D. Caradog Jones, ‘The Cost of Living of a Sample of Middle-Class Families’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 4, 1928, p. 487.

<sup>68</sup> Xiaotian Jin, ‘Undoing Shame’, pp. 701, 708, and A. Milward, *The Economic Effects of the Two World Wars on Britain*, London, 1979, p. 32.

<sup>69</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, London, 1934, pp. 3-4 and M. J. Law, ‘Charabancs and Social Class in 1930s Britain’, *Journal of Transport History*, 1, 2015, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> J. Lawrence, ‘Class, ‘Affluence’ and the Study of Everyday Life c 1930-1964’, *The Journal of the Social History Society*, Vol. 10, 2013, Issue 2, pp. 273-4 and A. A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London*, Oxon, 1991, pp. 102, 131, 241.

those earning £500 spent roughly double the amount per week on education, entertainment and domestic help as their subordinates.<sup>71</sup> As implied, these disparities in income contributed to diverging experiences of secondary and higher education within those strata constituting the middle class. If the grammar school system was dominated by the children of civil servants, merchants, clerks and school teachers (by 1938 62% of grammar school leavers entered 'black-coated' occupations), public-school and university places were monopolised by the highest rungs of the civil-service and professions in conjunction with the 'upper' class.<sup>72</sup> Therefore it can be suggested that it is nigh-impossible to demarcate the boundaries of the middle class when working with the individual attributes of income, education, and housing alone.

However, should we then adopt Carr-Saunders and Carradog Jones' position and declare that the middle class were nothing more than '...a heterogeneous assemblage' of disparate elements?<sup>73</sup> This stance has certainly found favour among historians and sociologists disillusioned with the empiricism of the individual-attributes approach. Here Pugh and Joyce have separately argued that the boundaries of a middle class were established through a customary mentality of social orders preserved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one increasingly at odds with the blurred division between more affluent workers and impoverished clerks.<sup>74</sup> This critique has some validity, for the expansion in local government, the civil service and shop-work (in 1931 the Post Office alone employed 241,000 people of varying grades) meant that white-collar workers were no longer as distinct a social group as they had been before 1914.<sup>75</sup> Yet, as Thompson and Todd have stressed, it

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<sup>71</sup> See Table XVIII in P. Massey, 'The Expenditure of 1,360 Middle-Class Households in 1938-39', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 3, 1942, p. 177.

<sup>72</sup> For statistics see R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998, p. 261.

<sup>73</sup> A. M. Carr-Saunders and D. Carradog Jones, *A Survey of The Social Structure of England & Wales as Illustrated By Statistics*, Oxford, 1937, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> P. Joyce, *Visions of the People*, Cambridge, 1991, pp 160-5 and M. Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880-1935*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 141-3.

<sup>75</sup> M. Abramowitz and V. F. Eliasberg, *The Growth of Public Employment in Great Britain*, Princeton, 1957, p. 117.

must be kept in mind that class is not a ‘thing’ but rather a social relationship which cannot be fully grasped from the perspective of a ‘static’ quantitative analysis, or the deductive reasoning of a ‘structuralist’ approach.<sup>76</sup> For historical relations of ideological domination, socio-economic exploitation, and authority (in short power relations) were central to the constitution of a middle class. Those clerks, teachers, lawyers, doctors or small business owners who executed legal orders against the industrial workforce, helped to reproduce the dominant ideological and political values, monopolised knowledge, or managed the social surplus generated by the wage-labour relationship, were all concerned with the reproduction of the total social-formation (society) and the capitalist mode of production upon which it was founded.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, the centrality of this wider role of social management, exploitation and discipline to the constitution of the middle class was proudly proclaimed by this stratum’s self-conceptualisation as the ‘constitutional class’, the seat of ‘law and order’ opposed to organised labour and the threat of inflationary economics.<sup>78</sup>

Yet this functional theorisation of the middle class should not be taken as minimising what were significant differences of status. Here McKibbin has argued in his *Classes and Cultures* (1998) that overlapping skill and gender differentials allocated greatest status to the overwhelmingly masculine civil service and legal professions, whilst the predominantly female, emerging professions of teaching and clerical work (210,000 of 278,000) were considered ‘lower middle class’.<sup>79</sup> This interpretation grasps an important point; interviews with social-work pioneers conducted by Alan Cohen found that interviewees shared a firm sense of occupational hierarchy, the university linked professions of law, medicine, or the civil service occupying the top rungs whilst social-work and teaching were considered among

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<sup>76</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, 1978, p. 299 and S. Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010*, London, 2014, pp. 1, 65.

<sup>77</sup> See L. Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’, in S. Zizek, (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, London, 2012, pp. 110-3.

<sup>78</sup> R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1994, p. 285.

<sup>79</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures – England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 48-9.

the ‘lowest of the low’ (in Irvine’s terms).<sup>80</sup> There were also important differences in work and employment situations within the professions – as salaried executors of law civil servants lacked the degree of socio-political autonomy afforded to the self-employed barristers, solicitors, or GPs within the ‘older’ legal and medical professions.<sup>81</sup> Yet this should not be allowed to obscure the shared societal function of these occupations in the reproduction of the social division of labour, or their common ideological and political hostility to organised labour. As much as they were marked by internal disagreements and antagonisms, the residents of Ilford, Woodford or Harrow presented a united face when dealing with the working class, as did the 2 million middle class voters who supported the Conservative Party’s deflationary agenda during the 1931 fiscal crisis.<sup>82</sup> Thus, as McKibbin has justifiably suggested, for practical purposes the aforementioned occupational strata constituted a single middle class in both political and structural terms during the 1930s.<sup>83</sup>

### **From Suburbia to Parliament: The Middle Class and Labour Politics 1931-1939**

So we have seen that a shared sense of the middle class as a social group had taken shape by the beginning of the 1930s, and that this referred to the social formation of those occupations responsible for the reproduction of the wage-labour relationship or the wider social division of labour (including ideological and juridical relations) arising from this base. In this respect the socio-political conservatism of the middle class was unsurprising in that its role of management, discipline, and surveillance in relation to the industrial workforce, its temporal-spatial distancing and its segregated education-come-socialisation all generated an ensemble of practices firmly hostile to organised labour. Orwell was only half-correct when he suggested that ‘patriotism’ was stronger than ‘class hatred’ in England - for *Times*

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<sup>80</sup> Interview no 13., and Interview no 6., The Cohen Interviews, accessed 11 February 2016, at [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject\\_guides/social\\_work](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject_guides/social_work).

<sup>81</sup> See R. L. Abel, *The Legal Profession in England and Wales*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 23-4.

<sup>82</sup> R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford 1994, pp. 256-285.

<sup>83</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, Oxford, 1998, p. 14.

journalists like Gibbs, and his suburban readership, the middle class *were* England, its ‘stout individualism’ and ‘sentimentality’ that of the national character, as opposed to the sectional greed of organised labour.<sup>84</sup> Yet this leaves us with a quandary. Notwithstanding the Conservatives’ political hegemony, evidence also suggests that the Labour Party actually increased its middle-class membership during the 1930s. The constituency parties’ membership (typically the refuge of middle class supporters) doubled from 215,000 in 1928 to 431,000 by 1936 and began to demand increased representation upon the party’s National Executive.<sup>85</sup> In 1932 the Socialist League came into being, its appeal to the liberation of ‘workers by hand and brain’ mobilising at least 1,600 members before dissolution in 1937, whilst the Haldane Society and Socialist Medical Association (SMA) recruited several thousand professionals.<sup>86</sup> Consequently it must be asked: how did an otherwise contented social class produce so many converts to Labour politics?

Critics have argued that it was paradoxically this sense of economic security which encouraged the middle class to flirt with left-wing politics in the 1930s. Indeed, in his critique of the English intelligentsia entitled ‘Inside the Whale’ (1940) Orwell attributed the increasing fascination with Soviet socialism expressed by the S.L. and other groups to the ‘security’ from persecution or revolution afforded the ‘soft-boiled emancipated middle class’, whilst Amis argued that left-wing commitment arose from a ‘shift of fashion’ rather than immiseration.<sup>87</sup> If jaundiced in their treatment of the progressive intellectuals, each author’s objection to the myth of the impoverished, discontented middle class radical contains a kernel of truth. The traditional genteel values of communal service, paternal compassion, or affluent

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<sup>84</sup> G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, London, 1982, p. 48, and P. Gibbs, *England Speaks*, New York, 1935, p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour the Left in the 1930s*, London, 1986, p. 197.

<sup>86</sup> People’s History Museum, WG/SL/li (Constitution of The Socialist League, N.E.C. 26 October, 1932) and LP/SL/35/55 (*Catholic Herald*, 21 May 1937). Also, J. Stewart, *‘The Battle for Health’: A Political History of the Socialist Medical Association, 1930-51*, Aldershot, 1999, pp. 54-6, or N. Blake and H. Rajak, *Wigs and Workers: A History of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers 1930-1980*, London, 1980, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> G. Orwell, *Essays*, London, 2000, pp. 122-3 and K. Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, London, 1957, p. 4.

guilt could drive otherwise materially secure middle-class individuals to support left-wing politics. For instance, Philip Gould recalls that his teacher parents joined the Labour party at this time out of mixed feelings of ‘pity’, ‘duty’ or ‘service’, whereas it was first-hand encounters with working class poverty in London, Yorkshire, and Merseyside or hunger marches through Oxford which encouraged young Oxford students such as Michael Foot or K.D. Luke to pursue Labour politics.<sup>88</sup> At the London School of Economics well-healed sociology students motivated by a ‘general compassion’ of ‘Christian foundation’ (in Enid Warren’s terms), or ‘idealism’ about the potential for social reform (to cite Eileen Youngusband) flocked to lectures delivered by Laski and Dalton, ensuring the university’s reputation for ‘red’ politics throughout the thirties.<sup>89</sup> Here the Labour Oral History Project has also excavated the importance of social duty to middle class Labourites – consider the following account from Labour Research Department secretary Anne Swingler, who joined Kidsgrove Labour party with her husband Stephen (Labour MP for Stafford) in 1938:

We joined...so I used to have to go to the Labour Party. Had to go? Well, it was a bit like that at first as I was the only woman and I was also young and I wasn’t even from north Staffordshire.<sup>90</sup>

The Swinglers were not alone in their sense of obligation to the cause of social and gender equality. Another middle class convert, Maggie Britain of Bishop Auckland (formerly a school-teacher), admitted she was only willing to tolerate the ‘intrigues’ that dominated her local branch in the thirties because of a ‘strong political conscience’ and commitment to the

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<sup>88</sup> P. Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* London, 1998, pp. 4-5 and K. O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life*, London, 2000, pp. 40-1. Also, K. D. Luke, *Luke’s Log*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>89</sup> Interview no 26., The Cohen Interviews, accessed 11 February 2016, at [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject\\_guides/social\\_work](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/subject_guides/social_work). Also, R. Dahrendorf, *A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science 1895-1995*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 187-9.

<sup>90</sup> A. Swingler, cited in D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*, London, 1997, pp. 9-8.

local unemployed (some 50% of the local insured population).<sup>91</sup> This sense of obligation and compassion could also extend to the suffering of foreign peoples. The young Oxford students, Richard Crossman and Alan Yates, converted to socialism and the Labour party following their first-hand experience of German fascism whilst pursuing the modern equivalent of the ‘Grand Tour’, Yates in particular stressing that he joined after having ‘gone through Munich’ in 1939.<sup>92</sup> At home University Labour Clubs sprang up in opposition to antisemitic or fascist activity, whilst in the Oxford 1938 by-election the local Labour Party attracted support and new members by standing on an ‘anti-Munich’ platform.<sup>93</sup> As such it can be suggested that the expansion in Labour’s middle class membership, far from relying upon economic immiseration or ‘careerist’ ambitions (as Ernest Bevin feared), grew from sentiments of social guilt and compassion.<sup>94</sup>

However, if historians such as Branson and Heinemann are mistaken in linking middle class radicalism to a general economic insecurity, it would be unwise to devalue the importance of other socio-economic factors.<sup>95</sup> For changes in what Braverman has termed the ‘Social Division of Labour’ (the technical division of tasks) and ‘Labour Process’ (the activity of work, its object, instruments, control or management), were both central to middle class politics during the 1930s.<sup>96</sup> In the case of the scientific community, lack of control over the funding of research or its constructive application (in 1938 medical research was allotted £200,000 compared with £3,133,000 for the Air Ministry) prompted scientists to oppose war

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<sup>91</sup> M. Brittain’s diary cited in J. Hinton, ‘Middle-Class Socialism: Selfhood, Democracy and Distinction in Wartime County Durham’, *History Workshop Journal*, 62 2006, p. 130 and statistics cited in H. Dalton *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945*, London, 1957, p. 85.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Richard, Howard, Stafford Crossman’, *ODNB*, accessed 26 February 2016, at <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/30987?docPos=1>. Also, A. Yates cited in D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*, London, 1997, p 28.

<sup>93</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 167.

<sup>94</sup> Nuffield College, GDHC/D4/8/33/1-2 (Cole Papers, E. Bevin to G. D. H. Cole, 24 September, 1932).

<sup>95</sup> N. Branson & M. Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, Buckinghamshire, 1973, p. 281.

<sup>96</sup> H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1974, p 9.

and the profit motive.<sup>97</sup> At Cambridge, scientists such as Joseph Needham established a local branch of the S.L. (at least 300 strong), whereas in 1932 local pacifists founded the Scientists' Anti War Movement.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, medical professionals discontented with a health system which encouraged competition between self-employed GPs and impeded research, prompted the SMA in 1930 to pursue a municipal health policy that would (in Somerville Hastings' terms) provide 'better working conditions' for professionals and accessible care for the working population.<sup>99</sup> The restructuring of the financial sector after the 1931 fiscal crisis also served to promote Labour politics. Apart from efforts at unionisation within the banks or insurance companies, sympathetic economists and finance journalists established the XYZ group in 1932 to provide what H.V. Berry termed 'expert knowledge' of the City's financial institutions, and were instrumental in persuading Labour to adopt proposals for nationalising the Bank of England.<sup>100</sup> Thus, it would be a gross distortion to suggest (as Neal Wood has done) that a large body of alienated, discontented middle class intellectuals 'never existed' in England in the thirties.<sup>101</sup>

### **Subjective Cultural Concepts of Class – Respondents From 1930s Research**

Findings from the 1939 Mass Observation questionnaire on 'Class' threw up unexpected responses for the organisers, Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, in respect of respondents' complex psychological notions of perceived class and culture, replies at odds with the design of questions aimed to tease out issues around 'snobbery'. As Hinton observed, Mass Observation recruited disproportionately among people of left wing views

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<sup>97</sup> PHM, 589A ("The Frustration of Science": Exhibition Organised by The Left Book Club Scientists' Group, Descriptive Programme, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> M. Bor, *The Socialist League in the 1930s*, London, 2005, pp. 185-190 and H. & S. Rose, 'The Radicalisation of Science', in R. Miliband & J. Saville (eds.) *The Socialist Register: 1972*, London, 1972, p 110.

<sup>99</sup> Hastings cited in J. Stewart, *The Battle for Health: A Political History of the Socialist Medical Association 1930-1951*, Oxford, 1999, pp. 37-43.

<sup>100</sup> BLPES, 20.1.3A (Citrine Papers, Press Statement, 2 June 1938), pp. 1-2. Also, B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, 1977, p 37.

<sup>101</sup> N. Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, London, 1959, p. 28.

and this also then threw up unintentional responses of guilt around issues of egalitarianism.<sup>102</sup>

One young woman socialist from a professional background recalled her discomfort with the Hunger Marches when they came through Oxford, for although she had helped with the feeding arrangements she felt ill-at-ease and unable to communicate with working-class men with whom she was a kindred spirit:

‘I am embarrassed by anyone intensely class conscious, who will keep stressing differences instead of assuming equality’.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, a middle-aged London School Teacher active in Labour Party politics fretted about the strength of her own ‘class feelings’. She relayed an incident when, just because she was a teacher she was asked to adjudicate between two working-class activists on the correct wording of a handbill:

‘He turned to me and in a most humble voice “something wrong with the grammar ... I felt terribly humiliated – I suppose because I belonged to a privileged class’<sup>104</sup>

Some respondents chiefly identified their class identity with their profession. This view was equally shared in the case of a 61 year old male chemical technician from Luton together with the more famous, upper class intellectual, Naomi Mitchison. The former expressed the class he belonged to as:

‘Its intelligence, open-mindedness and honourable dealing, also its kindness and willingness to serve the race. It should have no strong predilections towards making money or property ownership, but should be as the theoretical Brahmins, owning nothing and serving all. The people of

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<sup>102</sup> J. Hinton, The “Class” Complex; Mass Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain’, *Past & Present*, Vol. 199, Issue 1, May 2008, pp. 207-236.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, Interview 1543, p. 232.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, Interview 1056, p. 232.

this class should be refined and artistic, dignified and artistic, and healthy in body and mind'.<sup>105</sup>

Naomi Mitchison responded in a similar vein of noblesse oblige, that associated with the social obligation of a privileged birth:

'I have had nothing to do with commerce nor have we been brought up to accept commercial competition as a good thing...we have instead accepted ideas of human relations in a series of services of a personal kind (feudalism) ... originally to the state ... army, navy – and in later generations in science, Etc'.<sup>106</sup>

Although Dick and Naomi Mitchison were members of the Labour Party, they were doubtful about the pro-war stance taken by the Party leadership. They had both survived one war and were not keen on living through another. Naomi in particular was very distressed about the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact and in common with many socialists, she had strong sympathies for the Soviet Union and was perturbed by the thought that the Soviets would be on the opposing side to Britain. In another Diary entry to Mass Observation she expresses her fears:

'16 September 1939

... I feel like hell deep down because of the Russian news, it is certain to prolong the war, at the least. And it is knocking the bottom out of what one has been working for all these years; not that I was ever orthodoxly anti-Trotskyite - one couldn't help knowing that it wasn't all jam. And it's understandable enough that they want to come out of this boss country. We've done that ourselves often enough. But ... In the meantime I don't want to talk politics all the time; I've done that since 1931 and I'm bored with it. It is useless to look possible death and defeat in the face. One can't do anything. Or not at the moment'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> J. Hinton, Mass Observation Interview 1099, in 'The "Class" Complex; Mass Observation & Class Distinction in Pre-War Britain', *Past & Present*, Vol 199, Issue 1, May 2008, pp. 207-236, p. 216.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>107</sup> D. Sheridan, *Among You Taking Notes – The Wartime Diary of Naomi Richardson 1939-1945*, London 1985, pp. 39, 40.

For upper middle-class diarist, Ernst van Someren, the comforts of class benefits in status and security brought agonising political and moral conflicts. Van Someren was a research scientist living in a North London suburb, married with two children. His diary accounts reveal a man active as a Fabian, an organiser for the WEA, holding christian socialist beliefs who went on to eventually become a Quaker. He registered himself as a conscientious objector quite early in the war and gave himself the odds of 10:1 to being imprisoned (which never happened). His entries hint at difficulties in his marriage but are never fully revealed or perhaps felt as self-indulgent as part of a public-school reserve. However, he does write of his political dilemma with being a conscientious objector yet doing reserved war work (as a chemist) for an employer involved in hardware for War. He cites the example of a conscientious objector friend in a similar position who threw his job in and lived off his wife's earnings as a secretary. Yet he does not choose to take this path or relinquish a comfortable, privileged existence, seemingly bearing out McKibbin's view of the 1930s middle-class acting as individuals, seeing themselves as democratic and progressive with notions of expertise and public engagement, but by the 1940s becoming increasingly ill at ease with the collectivism of organised Labour.<sup>108</sup>

Much of van Someren's political work was done through his role as a secretary to the local Workers' Education Association (WEA) and he saw it as part of his job to '....stimulate other peoples interest in their political responsibilities'.<sup>109</sup> For his own part he did not join the Labour Party or the Communist Party (as did many scientists on the left), but toward the latter part of the War (1943-44) he helped establish a short-lived branch of the Common Wealth Party, home to many middle-class intellectuals through the war years. Hilson and Melling, in a similar vein to McKibbin, argue that the Commonwealth Party was the product

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<sup>108</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 68-69.

<sup>109</sup> J. Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, Oxford, 2010, p. 146.

of a 'peculiar conjuncture' articulating a distinctive moral politics at a time of deep public anxieties and appealed to middle class radicals who felt marooned by the steep decline of the Liberal Party but suspicious of the collectivist appeal of the Labour Party.<sup>110</sup>

Another interesting case study from Mass Observation was that of Mathew Walton, a school teacher and his wife, Bertha, described as a 'democratic marriage'.<sup>111</sup> They are of specific interest in that they are typically representative of the middle-class joining the labour movement of this period, though with Communist leanings. When they joined the MO in 1937 they were both involved in left wing politics and seen as natural recruits for Harrison and Madge. For instance, early recordings note that they were organising fund raising for Aid for Spain, undertaking secretarial work for the unemployed workers' movement and for several years Mathew had been running a WEA (Workers Education Association) branch in one of the outlying Durham mining villages. They were also members of the Left Book Club and Mathew became Chair of the local Labour Party. Responding to a Mass Observation questionnaire in 1939, Mathew described himself as in a state of class anomie:

'... completely alien to the (lower middle) class to which, nevertheless, I feel I belong ... Social values entirely different.... I mix with individuals of a certain intelligence and political outlook - leading (he added dolefully) to an extremely restricted social environment'.<sup>112</sup>

However, Mathew, unlike Bertha, became quite demoralised, which led to his expulsion from the Labour Party for organising a public meeting in support of Stafford Cripps. He enjoyed the company of neighbours with left leanings and an art teacher friend who was a Communist. Yet despite being a graduate Walton had not progressed in his career to where he ought because he was seen as not being prepared to 'kow tow'. He was very

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<sup>110</sup> M. Hilson & J. Melling, 'Public Gifts & Political Identities: Sir Richard Acland, Common Wealth, and the Moral Politics of Land Ownership in the 1940s', in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2000, pp. 156-182.

<sup>111</sup> J. Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, Oxford, 2010, p. 173.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p. 174.

artistic, a gifted modernist painter and poet. His diaries are described as ‘peppered with despairing comments on the futility of politics and the ignorance and apathy of the masses – only the Soviet Union did not fail him’ and alarmed by reports from German Jewish friends, whereby he went through the house destroying diaries and paperwork, writing:

‘The last month I have been through the house with a small tooth comb burning, ironically enough, evidence of past anti-fascist activity (old lecture notes, collections of cuttings etc.) “Wait till you have to begin burning your beautiful books’ said one enemy alien to me .... I have begun’.<sup>113</sup>

On the other hand, his wife, Betha, was no intellectual gadfly. She came from a similar background to Mathew in that her father had been a manager and prior to marriage she worked as a teacher in an elementary school. She is seen as seeking refuge from the middle-class new estate by teaching needlecraft in adult education classes and social service centres. Yet whereas Mathew became the self-fulfilling prophecy of intellectual ‘game player’, Bertha remained with the Labour Party branch and grew in stature as the War progressed as an active shop steward. She writes of having developed a certain amount of forbearance in attending meetings that were often less than inspiring. Her comments are also indicative of a changing class membership:

‘.... looking round the dull, elderly gathering. On the opposite wall a row of pigs – at a height suited to giants – hung five head gears of delegates. Truly representative of the modern Labour Party – two caps – two trilbies, and one bowler. The cats looked at the hats and under both the meeting went on’.<sup>114</sup>

As I have argued, the identification of the 1930s ‘middle class’ is a vexing problem, one more complex than looking to relations to capital in terms of material assets, where false consciousness, adopted mores and perceived status (how the individual objectively sees themselves) also played a part in 1930s political allegiance. Here Lawrence argues that we

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<sup>113</sup> J. Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, Oxford, 2010, p. 176.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

need to pay attention to a significant gulf between official and vernacular understandings of twentieth century class as revealed in the finding from numerous social surveys. For instance, he cautions against seeing such things as the 1930s housing boom as a predominant middle-class phenomenon and argues that the ‘hungry thirties’ paradigm took hold in 1930s university research departments with a tendency to see social change from above as opposed to rising expectations and ‘democratic impulses from below’.<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, if we consider Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’ and ‘habitus’ it can be argued that the inter-war middle-classes occupied a rarefied space of cultural and material advantage, a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, distinguishable through taste, values and entertainment which hid the causes of inequality. Bourdieu looks to cultural products including systems of education, language, judgements, values which lead to an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchical organisation.<sup>116</sup> In a study of ‘English Social Differences’ one participant cites his childhood experience of class:

‘As children we lived on the lower-class fringe of an upper-class suburb ... We were constantly being picked up for some real or fancied coarseness of enunciation or vulgar phrase. I soon found that speech, which distinguished man sharply from animals, distinguished Briton from Briton almost as sharply... I saw that learning to speak English with a genteel accent was more important to getting on than learning to speak French or German’.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, Perkins looks to the 1930s as the era of the professionalisation of the middle-classes where, by the late 1930s they developed into a confident individualist, technical, scientific, commercial and managerial class based on notions of ‘expertise and public engagement’ who saw themselves, as McKibbin puts it, as the ‘progressive class’, as opposed to organised labour.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> J. Lawrence, ‘Class “Affluence” and the study of Everyday Life in Britain, c.1930-1964’, *Cultural and Social History*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 2013, pp. 273-299.

<sup>116</sup> R. Nice, *Bourdieu – Distinction*, London, 1984, pp. 388-468.

<sup>117</sup> T. H. Pear, *English Social Differences*, London, 1955, pp. 84-90.

<sup>118</sup> H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, London, 2002. R. McKibbin, *Classes & Cultures – England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998.

David Lockwood's empirical study, *The Blackcoated Worker* (1958), examined whether the inter-war clerk class (the fastest expanding occupational group in the first half of the twentieth century) perceived themselves as proletarianized in that, like manual workers, they were divorced from the ownership and control of the means of production and were consequently, '.....obliged to sell his labour power in order to make a livelihood'.<sup>119</sup> Yet in reality the nuances and subtleties of middle classness led to embourgeoisement for many white collar staff, particularly those working within smaller settings, almost in a cheek-to-jowl sense with their employer, where deference and loyalty reigned and where precarious job security often came to the fore, as one employee recounts:

'Men drawing comfortable salaries were soon tempted to acquire not only their jerry-built villas, but cheap cars, wireless sets, furniture and other amenities on the 'never-never system'. With each new obligation they became more and more the slaves of their employers. "Very well Mr. Smith I'm sorry. But if you are not satisfied, you know your remedy". This familiar phrase, translated into plain English, meant "Another word from you and you'll find yourself on your backside in the street". Mr. Smith may have been a hero at Mons, but he became a terrified rabbit when he thought of his "little palace" at Colindale, his Kory Kot at Wembley, or his overdue instalment on his Austin Seven'.<sup>120</sup>

Conversely, with the emergence of large corporations, state employment and the removal of immediate close working ties to managers, many lower middle-class, white collar workers did join unions, as Lockwood expanded:

'When the mechanisation and rationalisation of office work has proceeded to the extent that relatively large groups of semi-skilled employees are concentrated together, separated from managerial and supervisory staffs performing continuous, routinised and disciplined work, often rewarded in accordance with physical output with little chance of promotion – then clerical work becomes, in terms of social and physical environment extremely like that of the factory operative. The sense of isolation,

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<sup>119</sup> D. Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, Unwin University Books, London, 1958, p 14.

<sup>120</sup> D. Goldring, *The Nineteen Twenties: A General Survey and Some Personal Memories*, Worcestershire, 1945, pp 84.

impersonality, the machine-dominated tempo of work, the destruction of the unitary nature of the product, are all reproduced in varying degrees'.<sup>121</sup>

However, Lockwood's claimed separation from managerial and supervisory staffs is a complex one in that within the gamut of clerical workers lay differentiations between high ranking civil servants and lower middle-class filing clerks. The unionisation of middle-class, white collar professionals was also problematical in that this cohort saw itself as an aristocracy of labour and resisted representation from within the general unions. Out of the five main white-collar unions and associations, only three were affiliated to the TUC. For instance, the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) who, from its inception right up to its demise (when it merged with COHSE and NUPE into UNISON in 1993) had a strained relationship with the Labour movement for non TUC and Labour Party affiliation and were perceived by many local government workers, wrongly or rightly, as the 'bosses union'. For example, NALGO was denounced by rival unions at successive TUC conferences in 1934, 1935 and 1936. Out of the five main white-collar unions, the only two to non-affiliate in the 1930s were NALGO and the NUT (National Union of Teachers). Of those affiliated two, Public Employees and Clerks raised objections at the 68<sup>th</sup> Annual Trades Union Congress in 1936 as to the amount of financial support given by the Labour movement to NALGO and called for the General Council to follow in the footsteps of the Scottish TUC in declaring NALGO as not being a bona fide trades union. Walter Citrine responded in a more ameliorative tone, all too aware that many Labour Councils had been working closely with NALGO Officers:

'... the General Council have always to consider in these matters the reality of the situation. What are the realities in this case? First they are that NALGO has 80,000 members, that is the first point. The second point is that

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<sup>121</sup> D. Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, London, 1958, p 92.

NALGO is already recognised as a bona fide trades union by many local authorities, some controlled by Labour majorities'.<sup>122</sup>

However, it is important to bear in mind that following the 1926 General Strike the Government introduced the Trades Disputes and Trades Union Act 1927 banning civil servants from joining unions affiliated to the TUC. This Act also hurt the Labour Party by forcing union members to make a positive decision to pay a levy to a political party. For instead of 'contracting out' as stipulated by the 1913 Trade Union Act union members had to 'contract in'. As a result of this legislation the Labour Party lost about a third of its subscriptions.

Moreover, professionalisation also became prevalent within the Labour movement itself. For instance, out of sixty-five inter-war Labour ministers, twenty-five were from a professional background, but second only to twenty-eight union officials who, in effect, constituted a special kind of professional in their own right. As Perkin states, 'Politics was already more than half-way towards becoming a professional occupation, in both senses.'<sup>123</sup> For example, it is interesting to cite the case of Arthur Jenkins, father of former Labour Minister, Roy Jenkins. He had been a full-time union official with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and had been imprisoned during the General Strike and then progressed to becoming a Member of Parliament and aide to Attlee in the inter-war period. As Jenkins' biographer, John Campbell, notes: '...romantic class warriors like Michael Foot and Tony Benn would have given their eye teeth for such an impeccable socialist pedigree.'<sup>124</sup>

Indeed, Jenkins originated from heart of the South Wales Labour movement and was born into the Labour elite who grew in confidence as the new governing class in waiting. Whilst Jenkins' father had originally been a miner, there was never any question that Roy

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<sup>122</sup> *Report of Proceedings of the 68<sup>th</sup> Annual Trades Union Congress 1936*, pp. 254-256, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>123</sup> H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, London, 2002 p. 256.

<sup>124</sup> J. Campbell, *Roy Jenkins – A Well Rounded Life*, London, 2014, p. 9.

would follow in his footsteps and by the time Roy was born in 1920 Arthur Jenkins was already a union official and Chairman of the Pontypool Labour Party, as well as a Monmouthshire County Councillor. Arthur was a product of the South Wales mining community's autodidactic tradition of educational self-improvement and won a scholarship to Ruskin College. He later progressed to an Alderman, Justice of the Peace, Vice President of the South Wales Miners' Federation, a member of the National Executive of the Labour Party and in 1935, when Roy was fifteen, Member of Parliament for Pontypool. He quickly became Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Attlee and held the position throughout the war when Attlee was Deputy Prime Minister. In effect, Arthur Jenkins used his professional role within the NUM to become a pillar of the establishment.<sup>125</sup>

One of many criticisms levelled at Jenkins Jnr. was that he had rejected his roots and abandoned his class, but was this the case when he had enjoyed a fairly privileged, cosseted life when growing up in an environment that provided cultural capital enabling him to access a grammar school education and then Oxford? For instance, the family moved to a more elevated house when Roy was three and could count a head teacher and a builder for neighbours. By this time Arthur was earning an unquestionably middle-class salary of £300 a year and the Jenkins also had a live-in maid, together with a car provided by the union. A cousin later described the Jenkins' home in 1972 as: '...there were always bright fires during the winter and vases of fresh flowers in the summer. And books! Why, there were books everywhere!'<sup>126</sup> Roy Jenkins went up to Balliol in October 1938, where he read PPE (Politics, Philosophy & Economics). Is it perhaps naïve to suggest that he was 'betraying his class' when in effect he was the second-generation product of a professional middle-class, or some might say *petit bourgeois*?

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, pp. 9-10.

<sup>126</sup> *Sunday Express* 5 November 1972.

Further glimpses of this new ‘progressive’, professionalised class can be gleaned from a collection of interviews conducted by Alan Cohen with a number of inter-war trainee social work pioneers (some of whom trained at the LSE under such luminaries as Laski, Dalton and Ginsberg). It is apparent that this group were subconsciously carrying on the middle-class, paternalist tradition of the Charity Organising Society, often (like Attlee) with work placements in the Settlements of East London. The interviews were conducted in 1980-1981 and as such may be subject to a certain amount of anachronism. However, the social background of the early trainees reveals the way in which the middle-classes dominated entry into both the traditional as well as the new inter-war professions.

For instance, Margaret Simey was one of the early social work trainees of the 1930s who originated from Liverpool and in 1928 was the first woman social science graduate at the University of Liverpool. She later became a radical and an elected Labour Councillor in the 1960s-1980s. She was asked how she came into social work and the kind of people attracted to her social science degree course:

’... I think I was born into it because my father was in the magistrates courts in the Gorbals and mother was a passionate church worker’ ... ‘They weren’t students in our sense. They were middle-class ladies and vicars and people of that sort, who did voluntary work. And they realised that they needed to be trained. The only two who were in any way professionals, were two men who came up through the Workers’ Education Association (WEA) and had scholarships. They were all taking a two-year certificate, and I was taking a degree. It was the first degree course...This was a very new subject for ordinary people to take, and we had a very dried up man called, Caradog-Jones ... But I think officially the hope was that they would turn out an academic type who would be way above social workers and we would go into the civil service and research and so on’.<sup>127</sup>

Other trainees from this new profession revealed a similarly privileged background. For example, Rose Mary Braithwaite came from a socially concerned family. Her father

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<sup>127</sup> A. Cohen, Interview 17, 1980-1981  
<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/speakingarchives/socialwork/interviews/>

resided for a time at Toynbee Hall and was a major figure in community enterprises, with her father being a member of Lloyd George's team that created the National Insurance Scheme prior to the Great War and her mother being an early member of the London County Council's (LCC's) Care Committee staff. It was perhaps then no surprise that she became a student at the LSE, studying for the two-year Social Science Certificate. Once qualified in 1939 her first job was as a probation officer at a Juvenile Court in the east end of London.

Braithwaite relays feelings of middle-class democratisation when she writes:

'We looked forward to the day when we would have overcome social problems. It was an age of immense optimism really. Even though this was the Depression, and things were cruel and awful, it was not felt to be beyond the wit of man to devise a fair social system without a revolution, although of course at LSE there were a lot of communists and a lot of people who said it could only be done by revolution. But there were equally strong numbers of evolutionists that thought if we got Family Allowances (could remember that – oh! The difference Family Allowances would make) We would abolish the Means Test and all kinds of things that one hoped that could be brought in by legislation, which would make the lot of the very poor so much better that they'd be able to manage without social workers'.<sup>128</sup>

Another social work interviewee was Elizabeth Irvine, a Cambridge graduate in modern and medieval languages, who rejected a career in teaching and chose the LSE course in Social Science, with a specialism in child guidance and mental health. She later went on to become a senior tutor at the Tavistock Clinic and then a Reader in the first Master of Social Work course at the University of York. She talks of one of her trainee placements in London:

I was placed at the Southwark Office ... I remember taking lots of histories and writing lots of begging letters, which I really enjoyed as a kind of art form. There was an awful lot of trailing round collecting instalments of

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<sup>128</sup> A. Cohen, Interview No. 4, 1980-1981

<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/speakingarchives/socialwork/interviews/>

money that had been lent for dentures and spectacles and various prostheses. Because, of course, that was before the National Health Service'.<sup>129</sup>

When Cohen initially asked her if she had been involved in campaigns around poverty issues she was guarded and expressed the view that it would not have been her role, but then added that she had been more interested in international politics and the rise of fascism. She spoke of having several social worker friends of the time who were communists and said

'I was quite sympathetic to communism, although I never managed to muster sufficient conviction to join the Party, and of course I was considerably affected by all the pro-communist propaganda that was going on, under the cover of the wartime friendship for Soviet Russia. Once Russia came into the war on our side, then there was very active propaganda. I did belong to an organisation for cultural relations with the Soviet Union or something like it. I belonged to the Left Book Club for quite a while I remember. I also didn't mention that I did get involved on the side of the Spanish Government during the Spanish Civil War. Before I left London I used to go along once a week and address envelopes, but in Southampton I became Secretary of the local committee for Spanish Relief and helped to raise quite a lot of funds for food and medical aid. Once the Spanish war was over, I joined the local refugee committee and eventually became secretary of that'.<sup>130</sup>

Here Cohen comments on his overall findings that the middle-class interviewees practising as Social Workers in the inter-war years struggled to detach themselves from the processes of the profession to acknowledge that the very basis of the work around welfarism warranted the same political responses as, say, that of Spain:

'I've met a lot of social workers of that period who say, "Yes I was politically active and campaigning for this and for that as part of my professional life", yet the material they were dealing with professionally, the personal problems, were sometimes very much political. Certainly bordered on, were affected by; the social context of which they arose. Things we have talked about, the poverty, the unemployment and for other people international thing. I'm thinking of people who came over as refugees to this country and found themselves suddenly in sudden poverty because of no support through refugee committees and so on, and I wonder why social workers of that time didn't make the link between the job they were doing, social work as a job,

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<sup>129</sup> A. Cohen, Interview No. 13, 1980-1981

<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/speakingarchives/socialwork/interviews/>

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

and if you like what we would nowadays refer to as agency function, reflected in law or the terms of reference'.<sup>131</sup>

## Conclusion

Commenting upon middle class life in her *Personal Pleasures* (1935), Rose Macaulay reflected that every gratification had 'its reverse side, in brief, its pain'.<sup>132</sup> In this she arguably grasped the specific discontent of middle England, the dialectic of privilege and poverty which dominated middle class culture and politics during the inter-war period. For the white-collar residents of Ilford, Woodford, or Harrow politics and communal activity consisted in preserving educational, housing and material privileges through exclusion of the industrial work-force, whereas on a national stage the nation of home-owners, shop-keepers, and managers constituted themselves as the English nation against the exiled 'other' of organised labour. However, this 'othering' of industrial labour, the product of a structurally advantageous situation within the power-relations between capital and labour, was not always hostile in political intent. A sense of prosperity founded upon exploitation drove many professionals to embrace the ethos of 'service' and 'compassion' which Attlee saw as foundational to Labour politics, along with charitable work among the down and outs of the distressed areas epitomised by Mass Observation.<sup>133</sup>

A similar dynamic of prosperity and deprivation marked the divide between work, social and domestic life. Here loss of control and alienation at the workplace jarred with increasing consumption of leisure goods and outside service, whilst the isolation of suburbia often drove married middle class women to pursue Labour politics out of the need for

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<sup>131</sup> Cohen, A., Interview 13, 1980-1981

<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/explorefurther/speakingarchives/socialwork/interviews/>

<sup>132</sup> R. Macaulay, *Personal Pleasures*, London, 1935, pp. 13-4.

<sup>133</sup> C.R. Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective*, London, 1937, pp. 137-142.

‘friends’ or ‘social contact’ as Maggie Britain put it.<sup>134</sup> Yet, the specific choice of Labour politics requires further clarification. For these were commonplace anxieties, and as Denis Healey and others have noted, the Communist Party was usually the most attractive destination for the discontented middle-class youth.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> J. Hinton, ‘Middle Class Socialism: Selfhood, Democracy and Distinction in Wartime Country Durham’, *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 62, Issue 1, Autumn 2006, pp.116-141, 131 &132.

<sup>135</sup> See panel discussion in N. Deakin (ed.), *The Radiant Illusion: Middle Class Recruits to Communism in the 1930s*, Kent, 2015, pp. 156-9.

## Chapter II

### **Suburban Labourism? Middle-Class Members and the Everyday Practice of Labour Politics c. 1931-1935**

In this chapter I will critique the concept of 'Labourism' by examining the contribution of middle-class Labour Party members at constituency level. I argue that the Party's emphasis on the everyday issues of housing, health-care provision, or local services were as much inflected by the consumption-oriented concerns of clerks, teachers, or engineers as the production focused demands of organised labour. Thus 'Labourism' as a political practice is treated as the result of a compromise between working and middle-class activists, much like the Labour Party itself.

Commenting on the revival of membership in 1934, R.H. Tawney surmised that Labour was now less of a 'class party' than any other in Britain.<sup>136</sup> If his underestimation of popular Conservatism (symbolised by the 'working-class Tory'), or populist Liberalism seems hubristic, he nonetheless pinpointed what was a significant shift within the Labour Party's internal balance of power.<sup>137</sup> For Labour's recorded individual membership burgeoned from 297,000 to 419,000 between August 1931 and November 1935, whilst that of the Trade-Unions (though still dominant) fell from 2,024,000 to 1,913,000.<sup>138</sup> Most notably, the number of individual women members increased whilst, ironically, that of Women's Sections suffered a relative decline.<sup>139</sup> At the same time there occurred a pronounced 'south-

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<sup>136</sup> R. H. Tawney, 'The Choice before the Labour Party', in *The Attack and Other Papers*, London, 1981, p. 57.

<sup>137</sup> On the working-class Tory see R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 285-9.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Appendix 2 in D. Tanner, et. al. (eds.), *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 395.

<sup>139</sup> See P. M. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 182-5.

eastern' and urban shift in the concentration of local party strength and support. By 1934 it was Labour's recently won domination of the London County Council (LCC) which provided an example to municipal activists elsewhere, with many of the local parties in the London, Middlesex, Surrey, Sussex and Kent regions attaining a first time 1,000 plus membership.<sup>140</sup> Thus, Labour's socio-spatial centre of gravity was beginning to shift away from its origins in industrial, working-class collectivism, though this was fiercely resisted within the TUC dominated organs of Conference and NEC. In essence, by the end of the interwar period Labour was more southern, urban, middle-class and female than before.

Though agreeing upon the significance of this trend, historians and sociologists have drawn a number of conflicting (and often contradictory) conclusions. Tanner and Pugh have seen the thirties as the decade in which Labour 'threatened' to become a 'mass party' with a national appeal reaching beyond male trade-unionism. Ben Pimlott by contrast stressed that the unions' monopoly of tactics, policy and funding was never seriously shaken.<sup>141</sup>

Occupying an intermediary position, Nairn has suggested that by 1939 an elite liberal intelligentsia had assumed 'political leadership' over 'Labourism', whilst Davies has gone so far as to describe this middle-class influx as representing the birth of a 'New' Labour Party.<sup>142</sup> Yet, for all the debate over strategic or organisational ramifications, few historians have asked how this socio-spatial dislocation affected the everyday practice of Labour politics? For as an electoral machine often run on a shoe-string, Labour frequently depended upon the educational, social and financial activities of its constituency activists; in 1929 one

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<sup>140</sup> D. Tanner, 'Labour and its Membership', in D. Tanner, *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 252.

<sup>141</sup> Tanner, 'Labour and its membership' in D. Tanner, *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 252 and M. Pugh, *Speak for Britain: A New History of The Labour Party*, London, 2011, p. 217. Also, B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, London, 1986, pp. 131-3.

<sup>142</sup> T. Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, London, 1977, p. 50 and A. J. Davies, *To Build A New Jerusalem: The British Labour Party from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair*, Stirlingshire, 1996, p. 187.

journalist likened their enthusiasm to that of a religious ‘crusade’.<sup>143</sup> If the social composition of activists could vary, surviving first-hand accounts attest to the increasing prominence of the ‘Trilby’ at many-a-branch meeting in the thirties.<sup>144</sup> Yet to date only Worley and Weinbren have probed the contribution of these middle-class members in any depth.<sup>145</sup> This is a particularly important oversight in that local studies have usually assimilated branch-life to ‘Labourism’, defined by Miliband as an ‘ideology of social reform’ concerned with advancing the immediate demands of the organised working-class.<sup>146</sup>

In chapter I it was argued that the inter-war English middle-classes, due to a combination of factors including socio-economic prosperity and cultural isolation, acted as a politically conservative (though reform-minded) force. Indeed, the Conservatives’ electoral hegemony during this period is inexplicable without accounting for the appeal which Baldwin’s ‘safe’ property-owning democracy held for professionals, clerks, or even skilled labourers. Yet this structural emphasis left unanswered what Savage has termed ‘the problem of the un-determination of politics by interests.’ Or in other words, why middle-class reformers joined or remained within the Labour Party?<sup>147</sup> The following analysis will pursue this sociological and historical issue through three sub-segments. Section I examines the relationship between the Labour Party and the wider middle class through the lens of the

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<sup>143</sup> P. W. Wilson, ‘Once Again British Labour Takes the Helm’, from the *New York Times*, 9 June 1929, in N. Greene (ed.) *European Socialism Since World War I*, Chicago, 1971, p. 69.

<sup>144</sup> D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism – Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*, London, 1997, pp 57-99.

<sup>145</sup> M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars*, London, 2009, pp. 169-216 and D. Weinbren, ‘Sociable Capital: London’s Labour Parties 1918-1945’ in M. Worley, *Labour’s Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members 1918-1945. Studies in Labour History*, Aldershot, 2005, pp 192-211.

<sup>146</sup> See for e.g. R. Miliband, ‘Socialist Advance in Britain’, in *Class War, Conservatism and Other Essays*, London, 2015, pp. 291, 293 and J. Marriott, *The Culture of Labourism: The East End Between the Wars*, Edinburgh, 1991, pp. 3-13.

<sup>147</sup> See M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 9-12.

political crisis from August 1931 to the November General Election of that year. It is argued that theories of internal and external ‘betrayal’ by leading intellectuals or middle-class constituents greatly distort understanding of the problems which faced Labour during its reconstruction.<sup>148</sup> Rather, a more severe threat consisted in the demoralisation (or perhaps disillusion) of local activists who failed to renew their membership, attend meetings, or even vote. Section II pursues this problem through the lens of a comparative local study, focusing upon the reasons for Labour’s recovery in membership between 1932 and 1935. For by contrasting the educational activities, fundraising, and direct-action of branches located in the more prosperous regions of Greater London, Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, York and Manchester it is argued that Labour’s expansion of middle class membership was a result of the party’s more activist presence in those regions where it was (ironically) electorally weakest. Finally, section III explores how these members contributed to the *raison d’être* of the local party - the conduct of municipal and by-elections. Particular attention is paid to materials from the East-Fulham (1933) and Lambeth North (1934) elections, which demonstrate the role of activists and prospective MPs in crafting a political discourse of national reform, disarmament, social-justice and active citizenship. If the thirties truly represent the decade in which Labour repackaged itself as a ‘people’s party’ of social reform, then the activities of white-collar or black-coated constituency activists were essential in broaching this politics within a wider constituency.

### **A ‘Great Betrayal’? Crisis and Reconstruction, Aug. 1931- 1932**

In probing the contribution of Labour’s middle class membership it is essential to begin with the resignation of the second Labour government on 24 August 1931, for this

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<sup>148</sup> For theories of ‘middle class betrayal’ see J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, London, 2010, pp. 110-27 or J. Ramsden, ‘Note: 1931 to 1939’, in C. Cook, J. Ramsden (eds.), *By-Elections in British Politics*, London, 1973, pp. 109-113.

declaration of political bankruptcy magnified long-running tensions between working class and professional members at all levels of the party. In particular, the ‘sloughing off’ of non-Trade Unionist MPs (as McHenry termed it) to ‘National Labour’ in 1931 quickly gave rise to emotive accusations of middle class betrayal, regardless of veracity.<sup>149</sup> At the party’s Scarborough Conference, held between 5-8 October, described by Beatrice Webb several days later as ‘disillusioned, but not disunited’, veteran Clydesider, David Kirkwood, denounced the ‘middle-class gods’ and ‘adventurers’ who had betrayed the movement, whilst condemning those who remained in the party to draft ‘great programmes’.<sup>150</sup> In this respect Kirkwood was merely channelling the wider outrage of the party’s industrial wing. As Lord Sankey later recalled, those trade unionists who attended the PLP meeting at Transport House on 28 August brought with them talk of ‘class war’, and this sense of anger translated into the demand for a ‘bold socialist programme’ (to cite Henderson) as expressed during the course of the Scarborough Conference.<sup>151</sup> Consequently, R.H. Tawney was not so wrong to claim (if for different reasons) that a decade or so of Labour politics had been ‘tried, and found wanting’.<sup>152</sup> The political project established by the party’s 1918 Constitution, i.e. to secure for the ‘workers by hand or by brain’ the ‘full fruits’ of their industry (Clause IV), was now held to have subordinated the everyday needs of the former to the ambitions of the latter.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> See D. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition*, London, 1938, p. 237.

<sup>150</sup> M. Cole (ed.) *Beatrice Webb’s Diaries 1924-32*, London, 1956, p. 291 and *The Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1931.

<sup>151</sup> Sankey and Henderson cited in M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, London, 2005, p. 134.

<sup>152</sup> R. H. Tawney, ‘The Choice before the Labour Party’, *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 3, July-September 1932, p. 55.

<sup>153</sup> The 1918 Constitution cited in E. Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain*, London, 2010, pp. 530-1.

To Ernest Bevin and his fellow trade unionists it was Labour's 'University complex' which was above all else responsible for the party's political maladies.<sup>154</sup>

In 1931 the Labour Party therefore presented the middle-class social reformer with a vexing, if not openly hostile, social environment. Of course, as Keynes had complained with some justice in 1925, 'intellectual' or non-proletarian elements within the party had always exercised a limited influence subject to the surveillance of the TUC.<sup>155</sup> Yet the degree of inverse-snobbery and animosity displayed at Scarborough was unprecedented. As Egon Wertheimer noted, earlier conferences such as that held at Birmingham in 1928 had welcomed speeches from middle and upper class individuals such as the 'Mosleys, Kenworthys, Bakers and Wedgwood Benns', invited to speak on wide ranging issues such as foreign politics or electoral strategy.<sup>156</sup> However, at Scarborough even the left wing intellectuals within the ILP were fair game. On its first day the Conference began by expelling the 'National' rebels, and ended with a resolution forbidding the selection as a Parliamentary candidate of anyone who refused to obey the PLP's Standing Orders (this led to 19 ILP candidates being refused endorsement in November).<sup>157</sup> Considering that the PLP was overwhelmingly working class (even before the electoral disaster of November) the passage of this resolution was tantamount to a declaration of TUC dominance within the political wing of the party.<sup>158</sup> As George Lansbury (then PLP Chairman) put it to Fenner Brockway shortly after the election, the shared consensus within the commanding heights

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<sup>154</sup> Ernest Bevin to Josiah Wedgwood, 31 October 1931, cited in A. Bullock, *The Life & Times of Ernest Bevin: Trade Union Leader 1881-1940*, London, 1960, pp. 499-500.

<sup>155</sup> J. M. Keynes, 'Am I a Liberal?', in *Essays in Persuasion*, London, 1931, IV, 3, p 16.

<sup>156</sup> E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of The Labour Party*, London, 1929, pp. 145-6.

<sup>157</sup> J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain: 1931-1941*, London, 2005, p. 19.

<sup>158</sup> Butler and Freeman have put trade union sponsored Labour MPs at 114 out of 287 excluding others 'unsponsored' MPs of proletarian origin. D. Butler & J. Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, London, 1963, p, 100.

was that there ‘was no place for a Party within a Party’, this despite Lansbury’s previous warnings that such tight discipline would crush the ‘personal initiative’ and ‘enthusiasm’ of individual members.<sup>159</sup>

Consequently, by the end of 1931 the middle-class activist, whether through Conference or Parliament, had been subjected to a form of internal-exile within what was increasingly (to paraphrase Pelling) the ‘General’s Council’s Party’.<sup>160</sup> However, in retrospect this treatment seems unwarranted for the simple reason that the ‘guilty men’ of 1931, the majority of Labour MPs who had so patiently supported the government up until the last moment, were overwhelmingly composed of working class trade unionists who had ‘pushed themselves up from obscurity’ (to cite Ernst Thurtle).<sup>161</sup> It was these ‘good fellows’ (and they were largely men), described by John Scanlon as possessing an almost naïve faith in ‘their leaders’, who rejected Mosley’s proposal for a more active unemployment policy in 1930, and passed Margaret Bondfield’s ‘Anomalies Bill’ (which stripped at least a million married women of Unemployment Benefit) on the 9 July 1931.<sup>162</sup> The same type of trade unionist, this time within the context of the Cabinet, also accepted the rationale of public spending cuts in 1931. For instance, Margaret Bondfield, Tom Shaw, Jimmy Thomas, Arthur Henderson, J.R. Clynes, and A.V. Alexander all supported wider cuts to social services, though only Thomas, Bondfield and Shaw also approved the subsequent 10% slash in unemployment benefits on 23 August.<sup>163</sup> To this we can contrast the principled loyalty to

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. F. Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament*, London, 1942, p. 238 and G. Lansbury, *My Life*, London, 1931, pp. 274-5.

<sup>160</sup> The term belongs to H. Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party*, London, 1985, p. 71.

<sup>161</sup> E. Thurtle, *Time’s Winged Chariot*, London, 1945, p. 112.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. J. Scanlon, *Decline and Fall of the Labour Party*, London, 1932, p. 127 and N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, pp. 168, 178.

<sup>163</sup> PRO, Cabinet Conclusions, CAB 23/67/21(31), 23 August 1931.

rank-and-file displayed by prominent ex-Liberals and intellectuals during the Second Labour Government. In March 1931, C.P. Trevelyan, the ex-Liberal Minister for Education and a wealthy landowner, resigned his post due to the Government's lack of 'vigour and drive' in 'paving the way' for socialism, whilst Christopher Addison (another ex-Liberal and Minister of Agriculture) was by 1931 increasingly dissatisfied with Snowden's economy drive and voted against the benefit cuts proposed in August.<sup>164</sup> Indeed, as Cline has noted, it was Addison and Trevelyan who were instructing the party veterans in the Cabinet on 'the benefits of socialism', whereas other ex-Liberal MPs, such as Seymour Cocks, were struggling to persuade the government to adopt a loan for 'national reconstruction'.<sup>165</sup>

The extent of this middle-class insubordination within Cabinet and PLP can, of course, be overstated. Though the government's desire to curtail expenditure led to threats of resignation within its first six months of existence, only Mosley and Trevelyan took the decisive step when pressed.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, it was only at the very last cabinet meeting of 23 August 1931 that ministers even displayed something of a rebellious spirit, though Addison's proposed registration of dissent to cuts in unemployment benefit fell due to the feeling that 'nothing was to be gained' (as Lansbury put it).<sup>167</sup> Outside of the Cabinet, middle and upper class dissenters such as Arthur Ponsonby and Noel Buxton accepted Peerages in 1930, whilst even critics such as Harold Laski expressed interest in entering the Lords.<sup>168</sup> Yet, as we have seen, these ex-Liberals and intellectuals were too isolated within the decision-making process

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<sup>164</sup> Cf. C. Trevelyan, "Why I Resigned", p. 9, cited in C. A. Cline, *Recruits to Labour: The British Labour Party 1914-1931*, New York, 1963, p. 122, & C. R. Attlee, *As It Happened*, London, 1954, pp. 69-70.

<sup>165</sup> C. A. Cline, *Recruits to Labour: the British Labour Party 1914-1931*, New York, 1963, p 123.

<sup>166</sup> BLPES, Lansbury 25 III. n., 'The Cabinet Crisis of 1931', October 1931, 1.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>168</sup> N. Owen, 'MacDonald's Parties: The Labour Party and the 'Aristocratic Embrace' 1922-31', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2007, pp 38-9.

to have orchestrated a ‘betrayal’, even if they had desired so. As disreputable as their record in office may have been, they were no more culpable than the trade unionist majority within the cabinet or House and were also loyal to a fault. Consequently, it is with justice that McKibbin has described the events of August 1931 as the failure of a working class ‘autodidactic tradition’ in British politics.<sup>169</sup> For working-men and women eager for social recognition, the subtle, ‘club like’ atmosphere of Parliament was detrimental to external sectional loyalties, whereas that parliamentary procedure and ritual so effectively described by Bagehot encouraged reverence for ancient institutions.<sup>170</sup> As one Tory MP was alleged to have said, the middle class ‘revolutionary’ was more difficult to handle than the trade unionist, simply because he was ‘used to good manners’ and not affected by them!<sup>171</sup>

Therefore, from the perspective of high politics at least, the accusation of middle class ‘betrayal’ seems to have been founded more on myth than fact. In reality the Cabinet’s commitment to gradualism and orthodox economics had prostrated it before the Bank of England, whilst rigorous party discipline and the insular nature of Westminster life suppressed that internal and external resistance which could have checked the government’s slow decline. For instance, when the ILP MP for Peckham, John Beckett, infamously seized the Mace on 17 July 1930 in response to the suspension of Fenner Brockway (who had demanded a debate on the imprisonment of 6,000 Indian Congressmen), the PLP condemned his action by 90 votes to 28 and the *New Statesman* described Beckett as an ‘idiot’.<sup>172</sup> Here

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<sup>169</sup> This point is made by R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951*, Oxford, 2011, p. 84.

<sup>170</sup> On personal experiences of this atmosphere Cf. F. Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison & Parliament*, London, 1942, p. 222 & N. Nicolson (ed.) *The Harold Nicolson Diaries 1907-1964*, London, 2005, pp. 86-90. Also, W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, New York, 1963.

<sup>171</sup> *New Statesman and Nation*, Vol. X, 16 December 1935, p. 724, cited in D. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition 1931-1938*, Oxford, 1938, p. 159.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. F. Beckett, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause: The Tragedy of John Beckett, MP*, London, 1999, pp 92-3 & R. Toye, “‘Perfectly Parliamentary’? The Labour Party and the House of Commons in the Inter-War Years”, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2014, p. 21.

the perceived embarrassment of the party and breach of Parliamentary procedure were prioritised above what was, contrary to accusations, a genuine expression of discontent from Peckham activists disturbed by the Government's apparent support for colonialism.<sup>173</sup> Such stringent discipline would not have been so fatal had it served a constructive ideological platform. However, as Leah Manning later recalled, the PLP's approach was anything but: upon entering the house as Labour MP for East Islington in February 1931, Manning encountered everywhere 'frustration and defeatism' in place of hope and 'constructive ideas'.<sup>174</sup> What constructive (or rather critical) political initiative there was from the rank and file outside Parliament was merely brushed aside by the PLP. Thus, a resolution from York Labour Party to the Prime Minister (17 Dec 1930) calling for public ownership of transport amounted to nothing, as did those from Broxtowe (19 Oct 1929) and Wansbeck (1 Feb 1930) urging the nationalisation of mining royalties and enforcement of a national wage agreement within the coal industry.<sup>175</sup> As such, the fall of the Labour government in a sense represented the failure not merely of gradualism, but the wider system of high-politics upon which it was premised. To invoke Stafford Cripps, the 'nineteenth century form' of parliamentary government and the party system it entailed had shown itself ill-suited to the achievement of fundamental social change.<sup>176</sup>

Yet Labour's integration into the party system was never wholly successful in disciplining or (failing this) excluding dissident activists from 1929 to 1931. As Morgan has emphasised, Labour's historic appeal was founded upon its image as a different kind of party, a popular 'crusade' which had emerged out of discontent with the 'caucus politics' of

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<sup>173</sup> A special meeting of the Party branch passed a unanimous vote of congratulation for Beckett's actions. F. Becket, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause*, p. 95 & *The London News*, No. 66, April 1930, p 1.

<sup>174</sup> L. Manning, *A life for Education: An Autobiography*, London, 1970, p 87.

<sup>175</sup> N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, p 105.

<sup>176</sup> See Preface to S. Cripps, et. al., *Problems of a Socialist Government*, London, 1933, p 7.

Gladstonian Liberalism.<sup>177</sup> However, it was ironically Labour's middle class members, rather than its traditional working class support base, which frequently sought to preserve this spirit within the localities over the course of the government. During the debate concerning Trevelyan's Education Bill (April to June 1930) for instance, the National Union of Teachers led a delegation to the Board of Education welcoming both his proposal to raise the school leaving age and desire to gradually abolish state grants for faith schools.<sup>178</sup> By contrast, many members in strongly Catholic, working class regions of Manchester or Liverpool organised a movement to have the Bill thrown out (which eventually succeeded in June), led by John Scurr (MP for Mile End) and at least 35 other Catholic Labour MPs.<sup>179</sup> A similar class cleavage can be observed in the varying local responses to the Mosley Memorandum, eventually presented to the Conference at Llandudno in October 1930. Though defeated on a vote of 1,251,000 to 1,046,000, Mosley's proposal for a public works programme (estimated at £200 million in total), import controls, tariffs and industrial rationalisation received support from Doncaster Labour party (a relatively prosperous town), as well as many other local branches.<sup>180</sup> Yet, his ensuing decision to form a 'New Party' in February 1931 acquired less support, even if activists sympathised with Mosley's motives. The Birmingham Labour Party, long dependent upon the financial support of Mosley and other wealthy members, was troubled by the defection of prominent local figures such as John Strachey (M.P. for Aston)

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<sup>177</sup> See the critique of Maurice Cowling in K. O. Morgan, 'The High and Low Politics of Labour: Keir Hardie to Michael Foot', in M. Bentley & J. Stevenson (eds.), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain: Ten Studies*, Oxford, 1983, p 287.

<sup>178</sup> Cf. N. Riddell, 'The Catholic Church and the Labour Party, 1918-1931', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1997, p 184 & B. Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940*, London, 1974, p. 162.

<sup>179</sup> D. W. Dean, 'The Difficulties of a Labour Educational Policy: The Failure of the Trevelyan Bill, 1929-31'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 17, No. 3, October 1969, pp 292-300.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, p. 118 & S. Davies & B. Morley (ed.) *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis*, Oxford, 2013, Vol. III, p. 423.

and Allen Young (formerly a local organiser).<sup>181</sup> More serious was the desertion of W.J. Brown, M.P. for nearby Wolverhampton, disgusted by Labour's apparent drift towards what he branded 'timid Liberalism'.<sup>182</sup> In a move which split the Wolverhampton branch, Brown formed an Independent Labour Association (financed by a £1000 per annum grant from the Civil Service Clerical Union) which was to eventually poll more votes than the local Labour candidate in the 1935 General Election.<sup>183</sup>

This middle class 'ethic of conviction', if responsible for defections in the case of Mosley's followers, also (ironically) ensured that those activists remaining with the party would greet the formation of 'National Labour' in Aug 1931 with bitter hostility.<sup>184</sup> In London the socially mixed North Lambeth party quickly passed a resolution condemning the new government, whereas members of the similar Greenwich branch almost came to blows with National Government supporters when electioneering in November 1931.<sup>185</sup> For the Labour party situated in the overwhelmingly clerical and professional Hampstead, the collapse of MacDonald's government had a more schismatic effect.<sup>186</sup> Though the party had recruited 103 new members from 1929 to 1930 (amounting to 400 total), this was more than balanced by the departure of 160 (reducing membership to 240) before late 1931.<sup>187</sup> Despite the exodus of Communist sympathisers from the party, an enduring gulf remained between

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<sup>181</sup> R. P. Hastings, 'The Birmingham Labour Movement, 1918-1945', *Midland History*, 1979, 5:1, p. 85.

<sup>182</sup> *The London News*, no. 66, April 1930, p. , & *The London News*, no. 67, May 1930, p. 1.

<sup>183</sup> G. J. Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939*, Ceredigion, 1998, p. 533 & G. W. Jones, *Borough Politics: A Study of The Wolverhampton Borough Council 1888-1964*, London, 1969, pp. 60-1.

<sup>184</sup> See P. Lassman & R. Spiers (eds.) *Weber: Political Writings*, Cambridge, 2010, pp 311-312

<sup>185</sup> BLPES, Minutes of the North Lambeth Divisional Labour Party, 12 September 1931, & GHC, General Council Minutes, September 1931.

<sup>186</sup> On social composition of borough see *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, Vol. VI, London, 1934, p. 423.

<sup>187</sup> Statistics taken from *The London News*, No. 67, May 1930, p. 7 and LMA, ACC/2417/L/18, Individual members by constituency 1930-1937.

left-wing ‘newcomers’ and what Bea Serota describes as a ‘terribly reactionary’ General Management Committee, a wound that was to be reopened during the Popular Front years.<sup>188</sup> Similarly, to those activists situated in the largely clerical and artisanal suburb of Ilford, MacDonald’s actions represented a fundamental ideological betrayal.<sup>189</sup> Here Vi Willis recalls the reaction of her father, a prominent Ilford activist and organiser:

We had a beautiful picture of [Ramsay MacDonald] in our passage (we never called them halls)...Dad’s idol...We’d heard him come in with his key and there was such a commotion...There’s Dad in the passage, he’s got the frame round his neck...and he’s standing like this: ‘You bloody traitor, you bloody-’ tearing the picture up into little pieces.<sup>190</sup>

Outside of London the Southampton party, also in possession of a sizeable white-collar element, similarly experienced a violent reaction to the formation of ‘National Labour’. Consider the response of Daniel Cox, Charge-Hand at a local ship repair firm and member of the Peartree Ward Labour Party, to the events of 24 August 1931:

Today we learnt of the fall of the second Labour Government, and the setting up of a “National” government, under Ramsay Mac, pledged to take, among other things, 10% from our unemployment pay. To Hell with the lot of them, they are goading us to revolt.<sup>191</sup>

As the foregoing demonstrates, the middle-class activist’s response to 1931 was either characterised by bitterness or disillusionment, rather than enthusiasm for the supposed statesmanship of MacDonald and Snowden. Yet the majority of such members remained

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<sup>188</sup> Bea Serota cited in D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of a Life in the Labour Party*, London, 1997, p. 29.

<sup>189</sup> See A. A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport 1900-39*, Didcot, 1991, pp. 39-40.

<sup>190</sup> Vi Willis cited in D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of a Life in the Labour Party*, London, 1997, p. 86.

<sup>191</sup> SAO, D/Mus/Cox 1/4, Daniel Cox Diaries 1931, p. 70.

loyal to the crusading spirit of the party regardless of these setbacks – Vi Willis and Daniel Cox for instance later became prominent Labour campaigners in Ilford and Southampton respectively. By contrast, it was trade-union dominated branches which provided firm support for the ‘National’ defectors; Seaham Harbour only narrowly withdrew its selection of MacDonald as a Labour MP, whilst the Derby NUR and Colne Valley Labour Party continued to support Thomas and Snowden respectively well into 1931-1932.<sup>192</sup> Here a collapse in party membership, finances and morale posed a far greater threat to Labour’s survival than a supposed middle class Fifth Column – Riddell has for example calculated that from 1930 to 1931 membership only increased in 117 local parties, whereas it declined in 214.<sup>193</sup> As such, the party’s greatest chance for reconstruction depended upon the retention of precisely those grass roots campaigners, organisers and propagandists subject to such vilification within certain Labour circles. Of course, as the results of the November General Election later demonstrated, Labour urgently needed to recapture around ten million wage earners who had voted for the candidates of the National Coalition, whilst certain middle class constituencies such as Harrow, Kingston and Twickenham remained impervious to the party’s appeal.<sup>194</sup> Yet any attempt to reverse such a political blockade required the knowledge, skill, contacts and enthusiasm provided by white-collar and professional converts who often formed the most active minority of constituency members. Thus, it must be asked: was Labour able to craft a form of politics able to harness and accommodate this cohort?

### **Building the Mass Party: Middle Class Recruits to Labour, 1931-1935**

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<sup>192</sup> M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars*, London, 2009, p. 136.

<sup>193</sup> N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, p. 124.

<sup>194</sup> Cf. statistics taken from G. Phillips, *The Rise of The Labour Party*, London, 1994, p. 63 & J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, London, 2010, p. 127.

In approaching this problem it is necessary to consider Labour's recovery from the perspective of ward and constituency parties, for it was at this crucial level that the party necessarily focused its appeal to middle class reformers and campaigners. For the University-educated activist, 'Molly' Hamilton, the 'lively health' of the wards was an essential index of the Party's fortunes since they focused the 'dynamo' of 'disinterested enthusiasm' and 'self-sacrifice' directed towards constructing a new Jerusalem.<sup>195</sup> Similarly, as Dean McHenry observed from first-hand experience of the 1935 General Election, Labour's real source of strength was the day-to-day work of its constituency and ward activists who sacrificed 'their time and money for the "cause"' by organising speakers, by-election campaigns, membership drives, socials and propaganda.<sup>196</sup> Thus, any attempt to account for the role of Labour's middle class membership must begin by reappraising its practice at ward and constituency level. This is easier said than done, for the identification of 'middle class' branches, individual members, their occupation, or personal backgrounds pose considerable methodological and empirical issues. The following analysis will, for all its efforts, remain impressionistic to a certain extent due to the fragmentary nature of ward minutes, finance accounts, or personal recollections (most party members are deceased and so limiting the possibility for oral historical research). Nevertheless, a number of provisional conclusions regarding the social composition, values, and interests of this cohort can be ventured.

To begin with the problem of identification, it is possible to isolate constituency parties with a significant 'middle class' element by first considering those in possession of a sizeable individual membership. Fortunately for the researcher, internal documents are available from the party's National Agent (George Sheppard) and Secretary (J.S. Middleton)

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<sup>195</sup> M. A. Hamilton, *The Labour Party Today: What it is and How it Works*, London, 1939, pp. 64 & 70.

<sup>196</sup> D. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition 1931-1938*, Oxford, 1938, pp. 98-101.

detailing the total number of individual membership cards issued upon request to local constituency parties (including those unused), as well as affiliation fees paid to Head Office. This provides a rough indicator of social composition in that union membership (the typical home for affiliated Labour members), was notably poor among white-collar workers or professionals. In 1931 only 43.8% of all recorded trade union members (or 2,024,000) were affiliated to the Labour Party, yet within this statistic only a low proportion consisted of non-manual or white collar unions.<sup>197</sup> It is unlikely that a large number of middle class supporters would have been affiliated members for the simple reason that existing professional associations, such as the Law Society, British Medical Association, or National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), were frequently hostile to Labour politics.<sup>198</sup> Naturally it must be kept in mind that this social indicator is imperfect, and must be utilised in combination with wider census data or social survey information to determine the occupational and demographic stratification of each locality. The Woolwich and South Poplar Labour Parties for instance, though recording some 3955 and 2500 members respectively in 1931, drew much of their support from the poorly unionised casual and unskilled labour pool which dominated each locality.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, Oldham Labour Party, which claimed 3,865 individual members in 1933, was situated in an overwhelmingly working class cotton-spinning town.<sup>200</sup> This problem of identification is represented in visual format by Table I:<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Statistics calculated by R. Price, 'The Labour Force' in A. H. Halsey (ed.) *British Social Trends Since 1900*, London, 1988, pp. 190-3 & A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society*, Oxford, 1981, p. 67.

<sup>198</sup> See I. Bradley, *The English Middle Classes Are Alive and Kicking*, London, 1982, pp. 107-109.

<sup>199</sup> LMA, ACC2417/L/18, 'The London Labour Party, Constituency Individual Membership, 1930-1937', pp. 4-5.

<sup>200</sup> LMA, ACC/2417/L/17, 'Individual Membership', 9 September 1935, p. 5.

<sup>201</sup> The table was compiled from individual membership cards presented in LMA, ACC2417/L/17, 'Individual Membership', 9 September 1935, pp. 5-7.



**Table I**

Constituency Parties with more than 2000 members, 1933-1935			
Area	Membership		Membership
	1933	1934	1935
<b>North-East</b>			
Stockton	2,094	2,123	2,767
Sunderland	2,849	2,902	3,348
Central Sheffield	N/A	2,749	2,300
<b>North-West</b>			
Altrincham	660	1,327	2,400
Bolton	1,000	1,944	2,060
Gorton	1,050	1,134	2,500
Oldham	3,865	3,960	4,500
<b>Home Counties</b>			
Southampton	2,993	3,257	4,500
St. Albans	991	1,014	2,100
Faversham	1,864	1,914	2,200
N. Tottenham	1,509	1,635	2,117
Harrow	1,435	2,010	2,990
Hendon	1,078	1,454	2,130
Twickenham	1,738	1,796	2,733
Uxbridge	1,270	1,710	2,311
Mitcham	912	2,067	3,825
<b>London</b>			
Rotherhithe	1,351	2,177	2,750
East Fulham	N/A	2,010	2,000
N. Camberwell	1,068	1,750	2,250
Deptford	3,050	3,266	3,950
Greenwich	2,500	3,010	3,500
Whitechapel	1,123	2,049	2,800
Woolwich	4,013	4,360	4,500
<b>Eastern</b>			
Ilford	2863	2879	3200
Romford	3985	5345	6700

Apart from the lack of representation for the north-west and south-west (where no parties crossed the 2000 barrier), what is most striking is the dominance of London and the Home Counties, which together produced some 16 of the 25 parties examined. This in and of itself is insufficient to constitute a middle class dominance, for the high individual

membership of these regions can be attributed to the economic hegemony of the southern service sector, not to mention the low rate of unionisation that this entailed.<sup>202</sup> For example, according to the *New Survey* Northern Camberwell was overwhelmingly a ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ working-class residential district, whereas Rotherhithe was characterised by unskilled dock labour and poverty.<sup>203</sup> Similarly, Whitechapel’s main forms of employment were wholesale retailing and clothing, producing a population divided between small employers and a largely female, immigrant contingent of sweated labour.<sup>204</sup> In the case of Woolwich and Deptford, pockets of clerical workers co-existed with those employed in local industries such as clothing or metal-working (as was the case with Deptford), or the building trade and docks (Woolwich Arsenal was also important here), further complicating the picture.<sup>205</sup> However, Greenwich at least can be described as possessing a significant middle class component – to the south and west of Greenwich Park and Blackheath where ‘well-to-do’ city workers and civil servants lived, whilst artisans and clerks occupied the Charlton Council estate to the east of the borough.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, the Home Counties constituencies displayed above certainly demonstrate a bias towards the more affluent regions. Within the Greater London area Harrow was one of the most prosperous suburbs and possessed a low infant mortality ratio of 73, whereas the rapidly expanding Hendon provided a favoured destination for middle and lower-middle class Jews who would underpin the local Labour Party.<sup>207</sup> Outside of London, Southampton offered observers such as J.B. Priestley a spectacle

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<sup>202</sup> The *New Survey* for example found that ‘the great majority’ of London Clerks belonged to no organisation. *The New Survey of London Life & Labour*, London, 1934, Vol. VIII. III., p. 291.

<sup>203</sup> Cf. *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, London, 1934, Vol. VI, p. 443 & J. White, *London In the Twentieth Century*, London, 2016, pp. 74, 172.

<sup>204</sup> *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, London, 1931, Vol. II. I., pp. 269, 280.

<sup>205</sup> *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, London, 1932, Vol. III, pp. 373-4, 385-6.

<sup>206</sup> *New Survey*, Vol. III, pp. 377-8.

<sup>207</sup> Cf. J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, London, 2010, p 49 & T. M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000*, London, 2002, p 197.

of ‘well-fed, decently clothed’ citizens employed in the city’s booming passenger-traffic and import-export trades, marred only by a few squalid side streets.<sup>208</sup> To the north-east of the metropolis Ilford and Romford served as commuter dormitories for clerks, managers and shop assistants, as can be seen from their low population density (15.4 and 6.4 per acre respectively) in 1931.<sup>209</sup>

So, we have seen that a high proportion of the largest Labour parties were established in areas which can be described as ‘middle class’, and that their individual membership was subject to a consistent expansion during the first half of the decade. However, it has also been established that a significant number of the largest memberships, especially those of the London parties, were recorded in working class areas characterised by traditional casual labour or new service-sector and commerce related occupations. Indeed, further consideration of returns from those Labour branches with an individual membership between 1000 and 2000 members suggest a different picture from that painted by Table I, presented in statistical form by Table II:<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Cf. J. B. Priestley, *English Journey*, London, 1934, pp 12-3 & J. Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture*, Manchester, 2014, pp 107-8.

<sup>209</sup> M. Young & P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London, Middlesex*, 1962, p 177 & T. P. Linehan, *East London for Mosley: The British Union of Fascists in East London and South-West Essex 1933-40*, London, 1996, pp 105-152.

<sup>210</sup> Table II calculated from individual membership card returns provided by LMA, ACC/2417/L/17, ‘Individual Membership’, 9 September 1935, p. 2-3, 5-7.

**Table II**

<b>Constituency Parties with membership between 1000-2000,1933-1935</b>			
<b>Area</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Membership</b>
	1933	1934	1935
<b>North-East</b>			
Hartlepool	700	856	1,250
Spennymoor	800	1,060	1,340
Wansbeck	1,040	1,077	1,416
Halifax	650	750	1,020
Doncaster	738	783	1,020
<b>North-West</b>			
Birkenhead E. & W.	N/A	1,240	1,000
Crewe	N/A	1,000	800
Ardwick	995	1,160	1,300
Blackburn	N/A	1,450	1,400
Bootle	N/A	1,250	1,000
Eccles	N/A	1,000	800
Hulme	327	1,050	1,583
Platting	N/A	1,250	1,000
Preston	N/A	1,400	1,200
St. Helens	N/A	1,094	905
S. Salford	473	621	1,200
Middleton	776	1,002	1,100
Stretford	1,100	1,221	1,632
<b>Midlands</b>			
Northampton	N/A	1,200	1,040
Ilkeston	426	540	1,070
S. Derbyshire	725	796	1,230
Stroud	763	831	1,440
Harborough	524	958	1,500
Loughborough	240	240	1,090
C. Nottingham	662	1,137	1,271
Nuneaton	N/A	1,135	1,000
S. Nottingham	602	998	1,000
Stourbridge	N/A	1,000	975
<b>Home Counties</b>			
Buckingham	N/A	1,752	1,000
Bromley	890	1,100	1,500
Dover	1,069	1,591	1,663
S. Tottenham	674	713	1,025
W. Willesden	994	1,086	1,110
Wood Green	896	900	1,022
N. Croyden	854	939	1,336
Reigate	665	695	1,425
<b>London</b>			
N. Battersea	1,055	1,257	1,380
S. Battersea	485	586	1,000

West Fulham	N/A	1,027	1,000
Peckham	315	601	1,348
Bow & Bromley	N/A	1,550	1,400
N. Kensington	709	876	1,200
N. Lambeth	350	610	1,200
W. Lewisham	1,309	1,433	1,750
<b>South-West</b>			
Exeter	879	1,000	1,350
Drake	786	925	1,140
Sutton	935	1,015	1,400
W. Bristol	1,075	1,113	1,400
Swindon	1,340	1,695	1,839
<b>Eastern</b>			
Cambridgeshire	1,021	1,068	1,200
W. Walthamstow	870	1,007	1,130
Rutland & Stamford	N/A	1,532	1,122
Lowestoft	N/A	1,382	1,200
S.E. Essex	703	727	1,157
S. Norfolk	512	542	1,222

Of the 55 medium-sized parties analysed almost four fifths, or 41 branches in all, can be said to have been established in working class areas with a negligible middle-class element. For example, the Wansbeck Labour Party, established in 1918 under the tutelage of the Northumberland Miners, saw its otherwise respectable individual membership dwarfed by more than 10,000 affiliated members from the National Union of Miners.<sup>211</sup> In Preston, Lancashire, the local Labour Party formed in 1902 was able to record 1400 individual members by 1934, yet this was vastly outweighed by the thousands of affiliated members from the Cotton Unions, Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), and National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW).<sup>212</sup> Much the same can be said of Northern industrial branches like the Halifax party, which was dominated by the NUGMW

<sup>211</sup> *Wansbeck Divisional Labour Party 1918-1948*, Wansbeck, 1948, pp. 6, 22-2

<sup>212</sup> M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics: The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880-1940*, Cambridge, pp 146, 186.

and National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW).<sup>213</sup> To the south the new working class suburb of West Willesden, Greater London, was situated within what was the greatest single concentration of manufacturing industry in Southern England, whilst North Kensington was characterised by ‘overcrowding and poverty’ according to the *New Survey*.<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless, for all this proletarian dominance it is still possible to identify an increasingly important middle class contingent, once again mainly comprising of the Home Counties constituencies. To cite the 1921 Census, Buckingham had a sizeable population of professionals and clerks rated at 51 per 1000 and 38 per 1000 (‘personal servants’ were rated at 28 per 1000), whilst Bromley recorded a high percentage of commercial and professional occupations (12.6 and 4 per cent respectively).<sup>215</sup> On the outskirts of London, Croydon was one of the most spacious suburbs in England (overcrowding was only 0.9 per cent), whilst Walthamstow and Peckham embodied those ‘clerks’ suburbs’ pilloried by the upper-middle class literati.<sup>216</sup> The position was slightly different in North Lambeth and West Lewisham, where commercial development was simultaneously implanting middle class residents whilst expelling slum dwellers.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> J. Reynolds & K. Laybourn, *Labour Heartland: The History of the Labour Party in West Yorkshire during the Inter-War Years, 1918-1939*, Bradford, 1987, pp. 6, 101-3.

<sup>214</sup> *New Survey*, Vol. VI, pp. 459, 427.

<sup>215</sup> :-

[http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)&active=yes&mno=173&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=29](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)&active=yes&mno=173&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=29), accessed

14/11/16, p. xxix. And

[http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20\(by%20date\)/1921&active=yes&mno=193&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=30](http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser?path=Browse/Census%20(by%20date)/1921&active=yes&mno=193&tocstate=expandnew&display=sections&display=tables&display=pagetitles&pageseq=30), accessed 14/11/16, pp. xxx-xxxi.

<sup>216</sup> P. Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain 1914-1945*, Abingdon, 2014, pp. 156-178, and J. Carey, *The Intellectuals and The Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, London, 1992, p 59.

<sup>217</sup> *New Survey*, Vol. VI, pp. 393-4 & *New Survey*, Vol. III, pp 381-2.

## **Black-Coated Labourism? The everyday politics of Labour in five constituencies 1931-1935**

A clear trend emerges from the data provided by individual membership returns. The affluent constituencies, though largely impregnable from an electoral standpoint, were coming to underpin an increasing share of the Party's mass membership by 1935. From 1934 to 1935 the Home Counties membership as a percentage of the total members recorded in both tables increased from 22 per cent (25,633 of 116,663) to 24 per cent (34,987 of 143,532), whereas the share of north-western parties fell from 20 per cent (23,103 of 116,663) to 18 per cent (26,380 of 143,532). Yet it is less clear as to what socio-economic and political factors facilitated this socio-spatial shift. Here broad explanations of Labour's reconstruction in terms of trade union resilience or proletarian communitarianism are plainly inadequate, for they cannot account for the specific values, interests, or local concerns of the Home Counties or the white-collar suburbs of London.<sup>218</sup> Consequently, the following subsection will illuminate this phenomenon by comparing the local practice of five constituency parties with sizeable white-collar memberships: North Lambeth, West Lewisham and Greenwich in London, Southampton in Hampshire, and Faversham in Kent. From a methodological perspective, the five parties permit a reliable comparison in that minutes, accounts, and reports from each constituency cover the same period from 1931 to 1935, unlike much of the surviving materials from other Labour branches. Moreover, in spatial and demographic terms, the parties selected can be considered as representative of Labour's white-collar and black-coated membership. Apart from reflecting the south-eastern bias of the wider middle class, the selected groups also provide instances of urban (North Lambeth,

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<sup>218</sup> See R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*, London, 1972, pp 211-4 & J. E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain 1918-1979*, London, 1984, p 99. Also, D. Weinbren, 'Sociable Capital: London's Labour Parties, 1918-45' in M. Worley (ed) *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-45*, London, 2005, p 210.

Greenwich, Southampton), suburban (West Lewisham), and rural (Faversham) branches. Furthermore, excepting Southampton where Labour almost wholly drew its membership from the more affluent wards, the parties present a microcosm of the tensions facing Labour in its wider attempts to ‘dilute’ its trade union identity.<sup>219</sup> So, what do the everyday practices of these constituencies reveal of middle class Labour in the 1930s?

In answering this question it is best to begin by reappraising the organisation of those constituency parties active within the London and Greater London regions, for it was here that Labour elaborated a practice of participatory citizenship specifically aimed at individual party members.<sup>220</sup> The London Labour Party (formed in 1915) was a pioneer in this respect. Under Herbert Morrison’s tutelage from 1918 onwards, local branches hosted ‘Labour Weeks’ where activists took part in co-ordinated individual membership drives, established women’s sections, and emulated the German SPD by organizing sports, theatre or choral societies.<sup>221</sup> Central to this was the desire to harness the associational culture of London’s working class communities for electoral purposes, with cycling, reading, or football groups considered as means of linking a socialist vision of co-operation and participation to everyday proletarian leisure interests.<sup>222</sup> Yet, at the same time, the specific interests and needs of middle-class Londoners were never far from the minds of party organisers and agents. As early as 1921 local politicians such as Herbert Morrison spoke of the need to rally

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<sup>219</sup> Southampton Labour Party, ‘Report on membership organisation in 1936’, Llanelli Labour Party MS, D/POL/1/31, Carmarthenshire County Record Office, cited in D. Tanner, ‘Labour and its Membership’ in D. Tanner, P. Thane & N. Tiratsoo, *Labour’s First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, pp 248-280, 256.

<sup>220</sup> See A. L. Beach, ‘The Labour Party and the Idea of Citizenship, c. 1931-1952’, Doctoral Thesis., University of London, June 1996, pp. 16-17, 23.

<sup>221</sup> On the influence of the German Social Democrats see S. Berger, ‘Herbert Morrison’s London Labour Party in the Interwar Years and the SPD: problems of Transferring German Socialist Practices to Britain’, *European Review of History: Revue europeenne d’histoire*, 12:2, 2005, pp. 295-7.

<sup>222</sup> A. Gounot, ‘Social Democratic and Communist Influences on Workers’ Sport Across Europe 1893-1939’, *Labour History Review*, Vol. 80, No. 1, April 2015, pp. 8-9.

the ‘keen support’ of ‘lower middle-class ratepayers’ on the issue of unemployment, and it was for this reason that the LLP advised against relief measures which would have increased the burden upon the rates.<sup>223</sup> For instance, during the Poplar rates rebellion of 1921 the LLP issued a circular to local Trades and Labour councils dissuading them from taking ‘similar’ action, largely for fear of offending the ‘constitutional’ and fiscal sensibilities of middle class voters.<sup>224</sup> These fears were to some extent justified. ‘Poplarism’ remained an enduring bogey for affluent constituencies well into the 1930s, articles in *The London Ratepayer and Municipal Notes* frequently describing Labour rule in terms of ‘class legislation’ or freeloaders living at the expense of ‘those who work’.<sup>225</sup> Accordingly, Morrison attempted to downplay the role of public assistance as merely a ‘plank’ in Labour’s platform, whilst promising a democratic socialism which would ‘combine’ public ownership and ‘efficient business management’.<sup>226</sup> This moderate appeal to the middle class Londoner is best summarised by Morrison’s article entitled (revealingly) ‘Proved-Our Right to Rule’, published by the *Daily Herald* shortly before the 1934 council elections:

‘So the thousands of Labour candidates who will go to the poll at the municipal elections on November 1 are not only challenging the Tory doctrine of the right of “gentlemen” to govern...They are affirming the right of the workers by hand and by brain to seek to govern the country in which they are the most useful people’.<sup>227</sup>

Here was articulated a concept of participation particularly flattering to professionals and educated reformers, those ‘useful’ people who had long been courted at municipal level

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<sup>223</sup> British Newspaper Archive, *London Labour Chronicle*, No. 72, October 1921, p. 5.

<sup>224</sup> BNA, *London Labour Chronicle*, No. 73, November 1921, p 1 & H. Morrison, *Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography by Lord Morrison of Lambeth*, London, 1960, pp. 86-7.

<sup>225</sup> LMA, *The Ratepayer and London Municipal Notes*, No. 112, July 1935, p. 174.

<sup>226</sup> LMA, *The Ratepayer and London Municipal Notes*, No. 112, July 1935, p. 23 & *The London News*, No 63, January 1930, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> LMA, ACC/2417/M/001, *Daily Herald*, 19 October 1934.

by the Fabian Society. Nor should this surprise us – to Beatrice Webb and other Labour members Morrison was ‘a Fabian of Fabians’.<sup>228</sup> However, this respectable conception of citizenship was not merely the product of personal idiosyncrasy, but was widely shared and practised at local level by middle class activists. As Turner found in a study of three London parties with mixed social compositions (Fulham, South Kensington, and Bermondsey) carried out in the 1960s, the majority of middle and working class members (estimated at 77%) were either ‘moderates’ or ‘non-ideological’ reformists, who spent most of their time electioneering, recruiting, or fund-raising.<sup>229</sup>

Consideration of our three London constituencies, North Lambeth, Greenwich, and West Lewisham yields much the same picture for the 1930s. Founded as individual membership parties following Labour’s 1918 reorganisation, these London branches embodied the national leadership’s desire to harness the ‘initiative and enthusiasm’ of ‘brain-working’ members for electoral purposes.<sup>230</sup> In Greenwich organisational activities dominated the agenda of local wards throughout the inter-war period. Minutes from the party’s 1927 annual meeting for instance show that the affluent south and west wards spent most of their time that year enrolling 3 new dues collectors, or organising lectures to attract ‘new members’, whilst in the south-east ward much time had been taken in arranging ‘dances and social events’.<sup>231</sup> This tendency was reinforced by the defeat of local Labour candidates (Gibbons and T. Beacham respectively) during the March 1928 LCC elections, which the

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<sup>228</sup> B. Webb, cited in F. Sheppard, *London: A History*, Oxford, 1999, p. 326.

<sup>229</sup> J. E. Turner, *Labour’s Doorstep Politics in London*, London, 1978, pp. 6-10, 275-8.

<sup>230</sup> A. Henderson, cited in N. & J. MacKenzie (eds.) *The Diary of Beatrice Webb: Volume Three 1905-1924*, London, 1984, p. 294. Though Greenwich Trades Council established a Labour Representation Association in 1900, an individual membership section only emerged here in 1918. The West and East Lewisham Labour Parties were formed in 1918 following the division of the Lewisham constituency in the same year. The North Lambeth branch was founded in 1926, BLPES, North Lambeth Labour Party/1/1/A, p. 1.

<sup>231</sup> Greenwich Heritage Centre, G.L.P.1.1, Minutes of the General Council 1927 to 1933, Minutes of Annual Meeting 23 April 1927.

party agent blamed on the weak state of ‘organisation’ within the ‘wards’, or lack of ‘doormen’ at polling stations.<sup>232</sup> Thereafter activists spent considerable effort in contesting local council, guardian, and by-elections, whilst the party also began to publish a news-sheet, the *Greenwich Times*, to ‘disseminate its policy’ among the electors.<sup>233</sup> In this respect Greenwich Labour Party had some success; its constituency membership increased from 1,500 in 1927 to over 3,200 in 1938, whilst it also acquired a majority on the borough council in 1932.<sup>234</sup> Yet, as members of the constituency’s General Council frequently lamented, Labour was being outmatched by the ‘efficient organisation’ of local Conservatives in the south east ward, whilst members such as a Mr Phipps or Mrs Parker complained that the working class electorate ‘could not vote intelligently’ for socialism at by-elections.<sup>235</sup>

Therefore, as the experience of Greenwich Labour suggests, the Morrisonian conception of citizenship was not always successful in accommodating both middle and working-class constituents. Indeed, a quick glance at by-election returns for the constituency reveal Greenwich as an inter-war strong-hold of Conservatism, though Labour came close to reversing this at the 1935 General Election.<sup>236</sup> Here political apathy among working class electors and trade unionists posed a major obstacle, the General Council going so far as to suspend the local May Day procession in 1928 for fear of being humiliated by the ‘small number’ in attendance.<sup>237</sup> However, Greenwich was not the only party to encounter this

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<sup>232</sup> GHC, G.L.P.1.1., Minutes of Adjourned Special General Council meeting Thursday 22 March 1928, held at 32 Woolwich Road.

<sup>233</sup> GHC, G.L.P.1.1., Minutes of General Council Meeting 12 April 1928.

<sup>234</sup> F. Lindop, *Greenwich Labour Party (1920-1987): A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition of Greenwich Labour Party Records*, London, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>235</sup> GHC, G.L.P.1.1., Minutes of General Council Meeting 12 April 1928.

<sup>236</sup> In 1935 Labour polled 20,436 (47.6%) of the electorate compared with 22,526 (52.4%) for the Conservatives. F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*, Glasgow, 1969, p. 19.

<sup>237</sup> GHC, G.L.P.1.1., General Council Meeting Thursday 11 April 1929 at the office at 8.p.m.

dialectical interplay of active middle class members and relatively inactive working class constituents. The North Lambeth party also had to deal with poor electoral turnout throughout the 1930s, reaching a low of 52.6% during the 1934 by-election. Yet the situation was different in that North Lambeth Labour was able to bounce back from the 1931 defeat. Though the exceptional 1931 'doctor's mandate' had returned the Liberal, Frank Briant, with 16,368 votes to Labour's 8,766 (on a 64.6 per cent turnout no less), in 1934 the Labour candidate G.R. Strauss recaptured the seat with 11,281 votes (57.9 per cent) and maintained his position in the 1935 election with 10,577 (55.4 per cent) of the vote.<sup>238</sup> Impressive as this may have seemed at the time, it is now clear that Labour was just managing to sustain the level of support it had built in 1929, when Strauss had polled 11,264 or 43.8 per cent of the total turnout, and that the party's success was in large part due to the decline in turnout during the period.<sup>239</sup> A similar trend was also evident at the level of local government elections, which usually exhibited a much lower turnout than parliamentary contests. As late as the November 1937 council elections the North Lambeth Division, comprising Marsh, Bishop's, and Prince's wards, only recorded an average turnout of 25 to 30 per cent, Prince's for instance witnessing a poll of 2,991 out of 10,321 potential voters. Nevertheless, this proved no obstruction to the Labour Party, which had comfortably secured all of the 15 council seats on offer by 1937.<sup>240</sup>

So, in retrospect it would seem London Labour's true achievement lay in recruiting and maintaining an active cohort of members and supporters rather than expanding its electoral appeal. Indeed, though Labour's electoral support plateaued in North Lambeth

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<sup>238</sup> F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949*, Glasgow, 1969, p. 35.

<sup>239</sup> In 1929 total turnout was 66.2 per cent, by 1935 it was 54.2 per cent meaning that the same number of votes polled in 1935 would represent a much larger percentage of voters. See F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1945*, Glasgow, 1969, p. 35.

<sup>240</sup> BLPES, *The Free Press*, Friday, 5 November 1937, pp. 1-2.

during the 1930s, the local constituency party's membership increased from 350 in 1933 to 1,200 in 1935 (see Table II). The sympathies and practical support of middle-class reformers were important in this respect. In October 1934 Strauss, then protégé of Morrison on the LCC, wrote of the need to court ex-Liberals in the struggle for 'a really free and responsible democracy' and to persuade them that Liberalism was 'no longer an effective political force'.<sup>241</sup> A year later during the 1935 general election, Strauss further appealed to the middle-class dominated Peace Pledge Union by opposing the National Government's support for League of Nations Sanctions against Italy, accusing it of using 'sympathy for Abyssinia' to trick the populace into voting for rearmament.<sup>242</sup> This attempt to depict Labour as the party of democracy and international peace must have had some success amongst concerned professionals and ex-Liberals, for Lambeth North quickly became one of the most active proponents of extra-party cooperation on foreign and domestic affairs. By mid-decade the CLP had repeatedly flouted central instructions by accepting Communist help at elections, joining multi-party campaigns to aid the Spanish Republicans from 1936, and signing the Unity Manifesto of 1937. In response Strauss (also a prominent member of the Socialist League) was sacked from his role as LCC committee chairman in April 1937, despite contributing some £500 to the LCC election fund that year, and the North Lambeth Labour Party was suspended.<sup>243</sup> The central point made by Strauss and other North Lambeth members, that the Communists did 'an immense amount of canvassing, envelope addressing and other election donkey-work in the Labour Party offices', was lost on the LCC Labour

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<sup>241</sup> BLPES, *North Lambeth Elector*, 23 October 1934, p. 3.

<sup>242</sup> BLPES, NLLP 1/13, 97, G.R. Strauss, 'To the Electors of North Lambeth', 179 Kennington Road, S.E.11, 5 November 1935, pp. 1-2.

<sup>243</sup> M. Pugh, *Speak for Britain: A New History of The Labour Party*, London, 2011, pp. 247-8, 427.

Party, which upheld the proscription.<sup>244</sup> There were clear limits to individual initiative and conscience within the Labour Party, and where a select few middle class activists did embrace confrontational politics or inter-party co-operation it was widely expected that they would be excluded from policy formation, or even expelled.

The internal and external boundaries of Labour politics can also be observed at work in Lewisham, which according to Jeffery presented a ‘microcosm’ of all Morrison’s concerns for Labour in London.<sup>245</sup> Like other outer suburbs such as Ilford or Wandsworth, Lewisham contained a substantial working-class electorate, many of whom had arrived with recently constructed LCC cottage estates, as well as a strong middle class which held the electoral balance in both the West and East constituencies.<sup>246</sup> According to the *New Survey* the percentage of persons of ‘middle-class’ circumstances living in the borough (30.8 per cent) was higher than in any other borough of Greater London, whilst even in the more working-class Western region there were ‘practically no slums’ and overcrowding was ‘negligible’.<sup>247</sup> From an early date Morrison took an active interest in this seemingly unpropitious region, attending the inaugural meeting of East Lewisham Labour Party (ELLP) in 1919 and eventually standing (successfully) as the same constituency’s parliamentary candidate in 1945.<sup>248</sup> In the *London News* he heaped fulsome praise upon the ELLP for understanding ‘the value of being sociable in its fight for socialism’, a reference to the party’s frequent organisation of suppers, socials, and dances to support its Ward Secretaries or Street

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<sup>244</sup> G. R. Straus, *Tribune*, 12 March 1937, cited in B. Donoghue & G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of A Politician*, London, 2001, p. 229.

<sup>245</sup> T. Jeffery, ‘The Suburban Nation: Politics and Class in Lewisham’ in D. Feldman & G. Stedman Jones (eds.) *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, London, 1989, p 191.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 191-3.

<sup>247</sup> *New Survey*, Vol. III, pp. 381-2.

<sup>248</sup> Morrison reversed a previous Tory majority of 6,000 in 1935 to produce a Labour majority of more than 15,000 in 1945. See F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Result 1918-1949*, Glasgow, 1969, p. 37.

Captains, whilst commending its £250 per annum membership subscriptions.<sup>249</sup> This enthusiasm is unsurprising, for the ELLP closely followed Morrison's desire to place a middle class face on Labour politics. Apart from John Wilmot, local Labour pioneers such as Michael Stewart, and Arthur Skeffington (office holder in the 1945 government), or prospective candidates such as Freda Corbett, William Kendall, and Tom Crawford all worked as teachers.<sup>250</sup> In the case of Wilmot, a banker by trade, his personal popularity among the London middle class was such that he was later adopted as Labour candidate for the East Fulham by-election of 25 October 1933, where business ties to the Shareholders Provident Association worked to his advantage.<sup>251</sup>

Therefore, as the organisation of Lewisham activists demonstrate, the practice of citizenship inculcated by London Labour was hemmed in by considerations of respectability, responsibility, and (above all else) electability. Of course, there were occasional ruptures in the consensus. In the middle years of the decade a significant minority of Labour members to the East flouted party rules by co-operating with members of the small, but active, local Communist party through the Lewisham Spain Medical Aid Committee (LSMAC), or reading groups of the Left Book Club.<sup>252</sup> However, the ELLP never risked a decisive breach with the NEC on the matter of inter-party co-operation or direct action. The more artisanal West Lewisham Labour Party (WLLP) reacted in a similar vein, maintaining party discipline and policy against calls for co-ordinated action with outside bodies. For instance, in 1931 the Executive Committee decided against joint action with the local branch of the NUWM,

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<sup>249</sup> LMA, *The London News*, N0. 65, March 1930, p. 3.

<sup>250</sup> T. Jeffery, 'The Suburban Nation: Politics and Class in Lewisham' in D. Feldman & G. Stedman Jones (eds.) *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, London, 1989, pp. 196-7.

<sup>251</sup> M. Ceadel, 'Interpreting East Fulham' in C. Cook and J. Ramsden (eds.) *By-Elections in British Politics*, London, 1973, p. 124.

<sup>252</sup> T. Jeffery, 'The Suburban Nation: Politics and Class in Lewisham' in D. Feldman & G. Stedman Jones (eds.) *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, London, 1989, pp. 202-203.

although only by a narrow margin, on the basis of its status as a ‘proscribed’ organisation.<sup>253</sup>

It also went so far as to expel those members found associating with Communist organisations.<sup>254</sup> Thus, the case of Lewisham, together with those of North Lambeth and Greenwich, clearly indicate the practical and ideological limitation of London Labour’s middle class activists. Beyond the appeal of a new social life, the ethic of ‘compassionate professionalism’, or repeal of political abuses, most members were accepting of party procedure and practice which shunned all forms of direct action likely to place them in conflict with the state or capital.<sup>255</sup>

Of course, as Weinbren has noted, London was an exceptional case in that local factors making for the ‘dilution’ of class politics, i.e. the comparative weakness of trade unionism and communal solidarity, were particularly prominent here.<sup>256</sup> Indeed, Morrison’s favourite question ‘Can Labour win London without the middle classes?’ was as much a recognition of electoral necessity as a conscious choice.<sup>257</sup> Yet, London Labour’s specific conception of responsible citizenship was also echoed elsewhere, particularly within the Home Counties regions. The Southampton Labour Party for instance adhered closely to the electoral *raison d’être* of the constituency parties – by September 1931 Daniel Cox was despairing of the local branch’s lack of ‘any constructive thought’ and its focus on the issuing of ‘handbills’, posters and propaganda material.<sup>258</sup> By 1932 Cox, in frustration, was

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<sup>253</sup> Executive Committee Minutes 1931 A89/100, West Lewisham Labour Party, Lewisham Local Records Office.

<sup>254</sup> Executive Committee Minutes 1931 A89/100, West Lewisham Labour Party.

<sup>255</sup> On ‘Compassionate Professionalism’ see L. Baston, ‘Labour Local Government 1900-1999’, in B. Brivati & R. Heffernan (eds.), *The Labour Party: A Centenary History*, London, 2000, p. 456.

<sup>256</sup> D. Weinbren, ‘Sociable Capital: London’s Labour Parties, 1918-1945’ in M. Worley, *Labour’s Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members 1918-1945*, Oxford, 2017, p. 194.

<sup>257</sup> D. Wring, ‘Selling Socialism: Marketing the Early Labour Party’, *History Today*, Vol. 55, Issue 5, 2005, accessed at, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/selling-socialism-marketing-early-labour-party>

<sup>258</sup> SAO, D/Mus/Cox 1/4, *Daniel Cox Diaries* 1931, p. 75.

attending local CP meetings on an almost regular basis and began to sell the *Daily Worker*, whilst he even participated in multiple NUWM meetings in 1933.<sup>259</sup> Nonetheless, though his actions were tolerated until the late 1930s, the majority of members agreed with the National Membership in condemning inter-party co-operation. At its inaugural conference in 1931, the Southampton Joint Council of the Labour Party, Trades Council and Co-operative Society passed a resolution stating its position in the following terms:

This conference expresses its absolute antagonism to either a political, economic, or an industrial dictatorship, claims that the forms of democracy are more suitable than any dictatorship to a developing society, and believes that an extension of autocracy in any form would be disastrous to its constituent members.<sup>260</sup>

So much for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, in reality the Southampton Labour Party had committed itself heart and soul to the defending the ‘vital principle’ of ‘constitutional democracy’.<sup>261</sup> Other parties, if less enthusiastic, also upheld this ‘democratic’ consensus. In North Kent the Faversham Labour party, though cultivating close links to the Unity Theatre (formed in 1936) and Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), nonetheless accepted anti-Communist standing orders when pressured by the national leadership. Thus, when an Alfred D’earth was later proposed as an electoral candidate in 1945 he was rejected by the NEC as a Communist sympathiser, merely the latest in a series of proscriptions to be implemented.<sup>262</sup> No meetings of support were organised by Faversham members to protest this action, unlike those evidenced for George Strauss by his North Lambeth comrades in 1937. If Labour truly was a welcoming and ‘sociable party’ as

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<sup>259</sup> SAO, D/Mus/Cox 1/5, pp. 10-11.

<sup>260</sup> Loose newspaper cuttings from the *Southern Daily Echo* (1931), in SAO, D/Mus/Cox 1/4.

<sup>261</sup> Loose newspaper cuttings from the *Southern Daily Echo* (1931), in SAO, D/Mus/Cox 1/4.

<sup>262</sup> L. Black, *Faversham Labour Party 1918-1944: A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, London, 1998, pp. 3-4.

Morrison believed, then it is equally true that it presented the face of a leviathan when dealing with those middle-class activists branded as unsociable or ‘disruptive’.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the dire situation of his former comrades from the vantage point of 1932, the ‘national’ defector, Lord Clifford Allen, argued that Labour was being held back by a working-class identity which impeded ‘the thought and practical policy of our party’. Though few seriously considered his suggestion that ‘Socialist’ be substituted for the word ‘Labour’, Allen’s comments still grasp what was a growing sentiment among the increasingly prominent middle and lower middle class membership of the party.<sup>263</sup> By 1935 Labour’s traditional image as a party of the organised, skilled working class was becoming increasingly anachronistic within the cities and suburbs of south east England. For those flourishing branches established in the Home Counties or the London suburbs organised Labour’s demands for higher wage levels, worker’s control, or overtime pay were of secondary importance compared with the provision of efficient health services, transportation, or educational resources. In other words, the restructuring of the spatial ‘matrix’ enforced by the new services dominated economy, together with the segregation of the ‘two Englands’ described by Priestley, meant that Labour had to adapt to a southern region where issues of collective consumption and distribution were paramount.<sup>264</sup> The London Labour Party, which attained its first LCC majority in 1934, had the greatest success in this regard. To the increasingly urbanised working-class, Morrison and other London politicians offered a politics of municipalization and communal support, whilst the

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<sup>263</sup> C. Allen, *Labour’s Future at Stake*, London, 1932, p. 66.

<sup>264</sup> On spatial-temporal ‘Matrices’ cf. N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London, 2014, pp 115-6 & ‘Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Law’, in J. Martin (ed.), *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, Middlesex, 2008, p. 48.

suburbanized professionals and clerks were persuaded to participate in a ‘compassionate professionalism’. However, as with Southampton and Faversham, there were fault lines in this class alliance – professional reformers and sympathisers frequently bemoaned the conservatism and rigid loyalty of their working-class comrades, or the apathy of the wider proletarian electorate. The latter point in particular is worth bearing in mind; though Southern England recorded a significant proportion of the largest individual membership CLPs, outside of London itself Labour only won 15 seats in the 1935 General Election.<sup>265</sup>

Yet, within this socio-spatial shift Labour’s middle-class membership ironically fulfilled a stabilising role. As much as activists may have been discontented with what they considered the excessive influence of the trade unions, a resentment which erupted in the form of the brief Constituency Parties Movement (1933-1937), in the event such members upheld the party’s commitment to representative democracy, electoral politics and ‘responsible’ government. Indeed, the mass defections to the Communist Party experienced within the Hampstead CLP throughout the 1930s, or the sustained co-operation with CP and ILP in North Lambeth were exceptional, and the majority of middle-class activists adhered to party discipline. At the everyday level, parties such as those established in Greenwich or Lewisham pre-occupied themselves with socials, fund-raising, dues-collecting, lectures, and electoral campaigning. As such, the Communist accused the Labour Party as being an ‘ally of capital’.<sup>266</sup> Only a minority of middle class members embraced the type of confrontational politics and class struggle which Poplarism had sown so effectively at the level of local government in the 1920s, and rather preferred a passive practice of citizenship which stressed electoral supervision of local or national services. Thus, Labour’s middle-class members

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<sup>265</sup> S. Fielding et. al. (eds.), *“England Arise!” The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain*, Manchester, 1995, p. 9.

<sup>266</sup> Cited in M. Worley, *Class Against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars*, London, 2002, p. 11.

were crucial in facilitating the party's development as a national (in ideological and spatial terms) agent of social-welfare reform, the true heir to the historical mission of radical Liberalism.

### Chapter III

#### Case Studies of Two South East Constituency Parties Between the Wars

##### Hendon & Faversham

This chapter will provide a case study of the inter-war workings of two south east constituency Labour Parties: the Hendon district Labour Party, sited within the County of Middlesex (bordering on North West London), with that of the rural suburban divisional Party of Faversham, Kent. The 1931 Census records the Hendon Parliamentary constituency as one of the largest in the country, with an electorate of 100,000.<sup>267</sup> The comparisons are interesting for a number of reasons. For instance, during the 1930s Hendon was one of the largest urban Labour constituencies in the country as a result of support and membership from the Jewish community and, as we shall see from inspection of Party records, their political loyalty and patience was often sorely tested by the local Executive. Indeed, religion and religious tensions were powerful forces in London politics between the wars.<sup>268</sup> For as Renshaw contends in his examination of ‘otherness’ and the Jewish and Irish diaspora to the East End, ‘insular’ socialists often deemed immigrants as a threat to the social cohesion of the working class.<sup>269</sup> Faversham on the other hand comprised a suburban/rural divisional Party whose recruiting methodology differed and was more in accord with Weinbren’s notion of ‘communitarianism’, with surprising results in terms of a thriving membership regularly taking part in social functions and activities such as The Unity Theatre.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> ‘The Development of London Suburbs’, *Daily Herald*, 24 January 1931.

<sup>268</sup> The development of class politics did not lead to a rejection of organised religions. See: P. Catterall, ‘Morality and Politics: The Free Churches and the Labour Party Between the Wars’, *Historical Journal*, 1993, pp. 667-685; N. Riddell, ‘The Catholic Church and the Labour Party 1918-1931’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 8:2, 1997, pp. 165-193.

<sup>269</sup> D. Renshaw, *Socialism and the Diasporic ‘Other’: A Comparative Study of Irish Catholic and Jewish Radical and Communal Politics in East London 1889-1912*, Liverpool, 2018, p. 7.

<sup>270</sup> D. Weinbren, ‘Building Communities, Constructing Identities: The Rise of the Labour Party in London’, *The London Journal* 23, 1, 1998 pp. 41-60. Weinbren argues that ‘...more frequently local Labour Parties developed because their distinctive flavours allowed the Party to make numerous appeals across class, ethnic and sometimes gender lines’, p. 53.

Yet whilst historical attention has been given to the study of the local Labour parties in the north east, seen as the traditional heartland of Labour, the south has largely been overlooked. In this way I have attempted to add to a burgeoning wave of scholarship trying to redress this imbalance.<sup>271</sup> Indeed, in the south the task of research has been made all the more difficult owing to many records having either been destroyed during the Blitz or those remaining being piecemeal and incomplete.

### **Hendon Labour Party**

Hendon became the largest urban district in the country as a result of rapid suburbanisation following the arrival of the railway in 1867 and the underground in the 1920s. The size of the population was reflected in the constituent Labour Party which, with a membership of 3,483 in 1938, was the sixth largest in Britain. The Party is seen as building its 'respectable' campaigns and social activities for a decade or more when reaching its zenith of a quarter of local Council seats. New settlers arrived into the area in the 1930s and Weinbren highlights that there were 14,000 aliens (the Aliens Act was introduced from 1914-1919) almost all of them Jewish, in the Metropolitan Police 'S' Division, which covered the geographical areas of Hampstead, Golders Green, Hendon, Edgware and Mill Hill (all forming part of the wider Hendon Labour Party). This amounted to near a quarter of the entire alien population of Britain at the time.<sup>272</sup> As this study will show, these newcomers brought fresh perspectives to the Hendon DLP and helped to make a number of changes to

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<sup>271</sup> This growing scholarly interest in the south east local Labour parties includes: D. Bowie, *Reform & Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires*, Westminster, 2018; C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007; B. Humphries, *The Origins and Development of the Labour Party in West London 1918-1970*, Doctoral Thesis, University of West London, 2018; T. Jeffrey, 'The Suburban Nation: Politics and Class in Lewisham', in D. Feldman & G. Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, Oxford, 1989; A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organisation in Second World War Britain*, Oxford, 2009; D. Weinbren, *Hendon Labour Party 1924-1992 – A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, London, 1998; M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars*, London, 2008.

<sup>272</sup> D. Weinbren, *Hendon Labour Party 1924-1992 – A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, London, 1998, p 1.

Labour's policies and shifts of opinion during the years leading up to and during the War, both on local activities and international affairs. They also played a pivotal role in securing, for the first time, the Parliamentary seat for Labour in 1945 with the election of Barbara Gould.

In looking to the Hendon Labour Party records, held at Barnet Archive, it is a case of learning more from what is not said as opposed to what is! With the use of wider, background knowledge and the local press, controversies and cracks inevitably appeared in a district Labour Party which contained a large intellectual, oppressed minority by way of Jewish membership in Golders Green, Hampstead Garden Suburb, Edgware and Childs Hill, together with the organised aristocracy of Labour, the 'blackcoatier' and proletarians that comprised 'Little Moscow', the Watling estate in Burnt Oak (built by the LCC in the 1920s).<sup>273</sup> This was indeed a heady mix of 'trouble-makers' as perceived by the Hendon Party Officers and Executive, for the district was in essence a very Conservative one and this did not fit well with attempts at 'respectability' and gradualism. Indeed, one of the Wards reached national acclaim by expelling James Ramsay Macdonald from its membership in 1931 (he was living in Hampstead at the time). Other Wards carried out their own political agenda on what they felt were the bigger, more important issues and did not readily adhere to what they saw as petty officialdom.

### **Burnt Oak Ward & The Watling Estate**

The first substantive AGM Management Committee and Branch minutes effectively begin in 1933. A number of resolutions were passed, including a proposal that all members should belong to a trades union and that the Hendon Labour Party should amalgamate with

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<sup>273</sup> D. Bayliss, *Council Cottages and Community in Inter-War Britain: A Study of Class, Culture, Politics and Place*, Doctoral Thesis, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1998, p. 2. Bayliss argues that the discourses of community on inter-war housing estates has be understood in terms of occupational structures, cultures and the politics of these estates.

the local Trades Council (later to become a bone of contention). Here the question of Nazism first appeared (most likely due to awareness of Jewish members of the rise of the National Socialism in Germany). A resolution was proposed that a meeting of all progressive organisations be arranged to protest about the repression carried out by the Nazis of such groups – carried unanimously. There was also much discussion about which Wards were going to stand and contest seats in the forthcoming local elections and the consequent ongoing struggle to fund the campaign as a result of outstanding printing costs. At the General Committee of Hendon Labour Party held on 23 January 1933 displeasure was expressed about the hinted profligacy of Burnt Oak Ward Party (which housed the Watling estate) whereby it was suggested that they seemed to have had plenty of money to build themselves a Hall but nothing in the account to fund a forthcoming election. They were also chided for not collecting dues since they had ‘...not paid in any contributions in respect of their Individual membership’ since January of that year’.<sup>274</sup> Whilst the General Committee gave a fleeting nod to such concerns when stating ‘That Burnt Oak be informed that we appreciate that as a result of the economic situation the income receivable by the Ward Committee may have diminished.....’, they nevertheless wanted their money and became high-handed.<sup>275</sup> The following was noted: -

‘Further, unless these liabilities are met, a serious situation will arise, affecting not only Burnt Oak Ward Committee, but the whole party’ (proposed Miss Levett, seconded, Mr. Flower).<sup>276</sup>

The Burnt Oak Ward and its Watling estate, dubbed ‘Little Moscow’, was something of a thorn in the side of the Hendon Executive. It comprised 4,000 houses and flats, built by the LCC in 1927 within the south side of Hendon. The population of Burnt Oak increased

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<sup>274</sup> Minutes of Meeting of the General Committee of Hendon Labour Party, Ref 627, 23 January 1933, Barnet Archive.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

nineteen-fold between 1921-1937. Watling was initially inhabited by the aristocracy of labour in respect of engineers and lower clerk class but as it moved into the 1930s rents lowered and more working-class tenants moved in, creating a mix of occupants. The estate also had a vibrant Conservative Association which in many respects may have acted as a catalyst in spurring the Labour support. Bayliss' interviews with a number of Watling residents confirm the radical reputation of Watling: -

“Because of all the people that lived here you see. They said they were Communists and, and they probably were a lot of them, and Socialists. And I mean for Mill Hill and Edgware that wasn't a Socialist Section’.<sup>277</sup>

‘Well it was called Little Moscow, Burnt Oak you know...Yes it was called little Moscow, more reds then’.<sup>278</sup>

‘When the buses stopped at the top of the road, the conductor would shout out, you know, “Anyone for little Moscow”’.<sup>279</sup>

In the lead up to the War the middle-class members of the Hendon constituency had been preoccupied with all things international, as in the case of Hampstead and Golders Green Wards and this placed local Labour at odds with the concerns of the wider electorate in a Conservative supporting area. Similarly, the more working-class Wards, such as Burnt Oak, whilst communitarian in their approach in sharing local political events on the estate with the Communist Party, were not seemingly raising class issues within the constituency. As Savage suggests, a local elite (as in the guise of Burnt Oak's adjoining suburb of Mill Hill) would likely have engendered feelings of deprivation and so fuelled working-class militancy.<sup>280</sup> Yet this did not happen. Hence, the Hendon Labour Party failed to marry-up

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<sup>277</sup> D. Bayliss, *Council Cottages and Community in Inter-War Britain. A Study of Class, Culture, Politics and Place*, Doctoral Thesis, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1998 Interview with Mrs. Ryall, p. 156.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>280</sup> M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics*, Cambridge, 1987, p. 60.

high politics by way of internationalism with ‘bread and butter’ issues of municipal socialism and service provision.

Like many of the newer ‘Cottage Estates’ Watling did form a Tenants Association in keeping with its more salubrious neighbours in Mill Hill, but this too became a bone of contention when charged with being taken over by Communists, though the CP had been active in agitating on rents from the off.<sup>281</sup> The anti-Watling sentiment expressed and often perpetuated by the local press could often be gleaned from nuanced comments within constituency minutes and the free spirit of Burnt Oak Ward can be found from external activities. For instance, the Hendon & Finchley Times had a weekly column entitled ‘Watling News’ which covered social and political events on the estate, both Labour and Conservative. On 23 February 1934 they reported a meeting held under the auspices of the ‘Hendon Provisional Solidarity Committee’ held at the Watling Centre. The speakers were J. H. Lloyd (Edgware Labour), Mr. A. Roberts (Independent Labour Party) and Mr. J. Carson (Hendon Communist Party), with Mr. A. Mason of Burnt Oak presiding. Workers and delegates from a number of trades union branches were also present. The meeting was in protest at the ‘menace’ of the new Employment Bill and welcomed the arrival of hunger marchers from Yorkshire into the borough.<sup>282</sup> Speakers spoke of deploring the present ‘division among workers’ movements and hoped all would soon unite in common action’. Suffice to say the meeting constituted the earliest gathering of a United Front promulgated by the Communist Party following the ending of ‘class against class’ and the notion of ‘social fascism’ allied to social democracy. Such actions were in strict contravention of official

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<sup>281</sup> D. Bayliss, *Council Cottages and Community in Inter-War Britain. A Study of Class, Culture, Politics and Place*, Doctoral Thesis, 1998, University of London, p. 286. Bayliss writes ‘This was not the sort of Federation NECC had expected and the Party’s uses of the local Association – holding, for example, a Communist Sunday School in the Community Centre’.

<sup>282</sup> ‘Watling News – ‘Hunger Marchers Welcome – Appeal to Workers Organisations to Show United Hospitality’, *Hendon & Finchley Times*, 23 February 1934.

Labour Party policy.<sup>283</sup> This meeting was in stark contrast to ‘*Watling News*’ conveying the meeting of the Burnt Oak Conservatives some months later to give a ‘vivid description’ of a journey by air to Paris, praising ‘the speed, comfort and economy of aerial travel’.<sup>284</sup>

Another press report in the *Hendon & Finchley Times* of 26 May 1933 serves as reminder that however perceived by the Branch hierarchy, Burnt Oak constituted the foot soldiers. For instance, Labour Councillor, Richardson, grudgingly admitted that: ‘When they looked around Hendon and realised what a large district they had to cover they would see what they were up against. They had to depend more- or-less on areas like Watling for their support’.<sup>285</sup> As we can see below from the record of local Wards, Burnt Oak consistently retained the largest membership.<sup>286</sup>

Ward Membership as Indicated by Membership Cards Retained

	<u>1937</u>	<u>1936</u>	<u>1935</u>
Burnt Oak	296	243	250
Central & Park	182	155	168
Childs Hill	-	16	64
Edgware	14	15	-
Hampstead Garden suburb	108	100	109
Golders Green	154	127	122
Mill Hill	80	98	95
West Hendon	163	104	161

<sup>283</sup> G. Dimitrov, *Selected Works, Volume 2*, London, 1972, pp. 86-119.

<sup>284</sup> ‘Burnt Oak Conservatives’, *Hendon & Finchley Times*, 14 September 1934.

<sup>285</sup> *Hendon & Finchley Times*, 26 May 1933.

<sup>286</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Report of Executive Committee 1977, Ref. 744, Barnet Archive.

## Hendon Labour League of Youth

A further conundrum arose within Hendon Labour Party, as indeed it had with many other DLPs, that of the setting up and then retention of a Labour League of Youth. As Marwick has pointed out, youth organisations were something of a double-edged sword for political parties in that whilst they provided the foot soldiering they were, by nature, idealistic and inevitably left leaning.<sup>287</sup> In this way Webb captured such sentiments of Labour Youth in her interviews with former London Youth League members such as Sol Frankel and Charlie Mathews, both spurred into action by the Spanish Civil War. Frankel was of East End Jewish origin who had been initiated into the fight against fascism whilst a member of the League of Youth, during which time he had joined members in digging up paving stones to make barricades during the Cable Street riots.<sup>288</sup> Mathews became an International Brigader at a young age, but just before joining had been a member of the Labour League of Youth. He was expelled for joining an anti-fascist demo at Hammersmith Town Hall. Like many, he consequently left and joined the Young Communist League, YCL.<sup>289</sup>

The first semblance of interest in a youth movement (seen as prompted by the existence of the rival Young Communist League, YCL) appears in the Hendon Executive Committee on 20 September 1931, headed ‘Youth Sections’ where the Secretary relayed to the meeting steps required to set up youth sections involving a conference and mass meeting.<sup>290</sup> By 1934 the Executive Committee reported that five Labour Leagues of Youth Sections had been formed within the party and were ‘....doing excellent work’ and a financial

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<sup>287</sup> A. Marwick, ‘Youth in Britain, 1920-1960: Detachment and Commitment’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 Generations in Conflict, 1970, pp. 37-51.

<sup>288</sup> J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain 1931-1941*, Oxford, 2004, p. 57. Jupp points out that ‘...the battle of Cable Street broke out to prevent an attempt by the Fascists to march through Stepney. After the riot, which involved 100,000 people, political processions were banned in the Metropolitan Police area for six months’.

<sup>289</sup> M. Webb, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour League of Youth*, Doctoral Thesis, July 2007, University of Huddersfield, p. 70. Interviews with Sol Frankel & Charlie Mathews.

<sup>290</sup> Minutes of Meeting of Local Party Executive Committees, Ref 651, 20 September 1933, Barnet Archive.

payment was made from constituency funds to each Youth branch, together with amendments to the Hendon Party Constitution to give the Youth representation on the General and Executive Committees.<sup>291</sup> Yet despite the Ward hierarchy's seeming initial enthusiasm for the local League of Youth such support was no doubt predicated on the younger members supporting the status quo, whereas the League of Youth had other ideas.

It is not clear whether the Labour Party's idea for a vibrant Youth Movement was to ape that which had existed in the Weimar Republic, one placing a high emphasis on culture, learning and aesthetic exploits. Here the Hendon Labour League of Youth did partly conform to this model. For instance, on 5 July 1935 the *Hendon & Finchley Times* reports that the Hendon League of Youth held a burlesque cabaret evening, including an '....Argentine Tango dance' and a play "'Skit on the Films'", rounded off with the singing of the Red Flag.<sup>292</sup> However, two months later they had tempered such frivolity with political education and arranged a one day school, held at the Labour Hall, Burnt Oak, with no less a luminary than G.D.H. Cole giving a lecture on "'Socialist Policy in Great Britain'".<sup>293</sup> Interestingly, another attendee was a young George Brown (who went on to become Deputy Leader in the Wilson Government). However, the Ward Minutes of 5 March 1938 state that the League of Youth had 'almost ceased to exist and need reforming'.<sup>294</sup> Then at an EC Meeting of 29 April 1938 it was reported that a Conference had not been arranged in an effort to resurrect the League of Youth. A social evening was being arranged instead and all members urged to get as many young people there as possible.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Executive Committee's Report 1934, Ref. 670, Barnet Archive.

<sup>292</sup> 'Labour League of Youth – Burlesque, Cabaret & Skit on Films', *Hendon & Finchley Times*, 5 July 1935.

<sup>293</sup> 'Hendon Labour School', *Daily Herald*, 11 September 1935.

<sup>294</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Annual Meeting of the General Committee, Ref 745, 5 March 1938, Barnet Archive.

<sup>295</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee, Ref 75u 3C, 29 April 1938, Barnet Archive.

Once again, with the Hendon DLP you have to read between the lines. The national historical picture reveals that trouble erupted at the Labour Party Conference of 1935 whereby the Youth Section voted against all wars as ‘capitalist’ and during the League’s own Conference in Manchester in 1936 a motion was passed in favour of a United Front of working class youth organisations by 82 to 75 votes. This then brought the League into immediate conflict with the Labour Party Executive. By 1937 the National Advisory Committee of the League had been suspended, along with the Youth journal, ‘The New Nation’. The National Executive adopted a heavy-handed approach and attempted to re-brand the League as ‘Youth Section of the Party’ and reduce its upper age limit from 25 to 21 years, presumably feeling that the younger a member was in age the more pliable and manoeuvrable they might be. However, the Hendon minute reference to a ‘Conference’ seems more likely to have been referring to the thawing of hostilities in 1938 and plans to convene a national League of Youth Conference by Transport House. It seems that factionalism then set in the following year within the national League of Youth in terms of splits between the ‘official’ Youth League who supported the Popular Front and a pro-revolutionary group which set up its own paper, ‘Youth for Socialism’ (the organ of militant Youth Leaguers and the Independent Labour Party youth). The relationship with the Young Communist League YCL fell apart.

### **Hampstead Garden Suburb Ward**

The various Hendon DLP Ward papers reveal little of the controversies surrounding the Hampstead Ward in that in 1931 they were mired in national notoriety when (as in the way of Ealing/Southall in 1984 with Neil Kinnock) they had passed a resolution to expel James Ramsay MacDonald (still then Party Leader) from the membership of the Labour Party as a result of his having gone in with the National Government in August 1931. They were able to do so because MacDonald was a resident of Hampstead at the time and as such a

member of the local Ward. For though the TUC, Labour National Executive and Parliamentary Party had issued a joint statement on 27 August 1931 denouncing the National Government, the hierarchy was seen as dithering on the issue of MacDonald and figures such as Henderson were thought to have secretly hoped that he would resign the coalition and come back to the Labour fold. The joint statement read as follows:

‘A new coalition Government, for which the Labour Movement repudiates all responsibility, has been formed. It is a Government of persons acting without authority from the people.....The forces of Labour are vitally concerned with the national interest, but we emphatically reject the view that this can only be secured by the impoverishment of the workers’.<sup>296</sup>

For although MacDonald was officially expelled from the Labour Party on 28 September 1931 it was, as Skidelsky puts it a ‘rubber stamp’ and many in the grass roots had been exasperated that the leadership dithered so long.<sup>297</sup> In this context Hampstead had decided to move matters along. National and local newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail*, *Portsmouth Evening News* and the *Sheffield Independent* of 29 August 1931 reported that ‘Mr. Ramsay MacDonald whose London residence is in Hampstead has been expelled from the Hampstead Labour Party of which he has been a member for several years’.<sup>298</sup>

Hampstead Ward issued the following statement: -

‘In view of Mr. MacDonald’s disloyalty to the Labour Party and his open flouting of Party principles in joining an anti-socialist government, formed for the purpose of forcing through Parliament anti-working-class legislation, the Hampstead Labour Party expels him from membership of the local Labour Party’.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> TUC Archive, Ref: 292/420/2/1 ‘The Joint Meeting of the Trades Union Congress General Council, The National Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Consultative Committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party’, 27 August 1931, 1-5, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>297</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump – The Labour Government of 1929-1931*, London, 1967, p. 423.

<sup>298</sup> ‘Premier Expelled – Hampstead Labour Party’, *Portsmouth Evening News*, Saturday 29 August 1931. ‘Mr. MacDonald & Labour Party’ *Daily Mail*, 26 August 1931.

<sup>299</sup> ‘Premier Expelled – Hampstead Labour Party’, *Portsmouth Evening News*, 29 August 1931.

The 1931 Executive Meeting of Hendon had talked more of the EC's rejection of proposals to hold a poor children's outing, which 'was not a practicable proposition'.<sup>300</sup>

The Hampstead Ward was a Left-thinking contingent and this is revealed in their various campaigns and proposals throughout the 1930s, eventually leading to their expulsion in 1940. For instance, as reported in the *Daily Herald* of 28 November 1932, Stafford Cripps had officially opened the Hampstead Ward's headquarters in Willoughby Road NW3, where he said '...doubts had been expressed whether a constitutional revolution, political, financial and economic could take place' and 'Leaders are not so important as a mass of people inspired and determined to carry these things through'.<sup>301</sup> This was at a period when Cripps was part of the Socialist League, a supporter of the Unity campaign, and an opponent of rearmament, all of which rankled with Transport House. Hampstead Ward had made further open expressions of support for the principles of the United Front and anti-rearmament in their active support at a 'United Protest Meeting Against the Air Force Display' held at Hendon Town Hall in June 1933. As well as joining forces with Church groups and Liberals, they had worked with the Hendon Communist Party, Hendon Young Communist League, Burnt Oak Friends of the Soviet Union, Burn Oak Independent Labour Party, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, Hendon Socialist League and the Edgware Bus Branch of the T&G. The meeting issued a statement: 'We believe the task of this generation is not to be sent to die for its country, but to live for it'.<sup>302</sup> This meeting does indeed appear in the Hendon EC Committee Minutes of 9 June 1933 under the heading 'Correspondence' reporting that they had received a notice from the Hendon & District Anti-War Movement and from the Secretary of the Garden Suburb (Hampstead) Ward Committee 're. Meeting at

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<sup>300</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Executive Committee Minutes, 31 January 1931, Barnet Archive.

<sup>301</sup> 'Loyal to the Party', *Daily Herald*, Monday 28 November 1932.

<sup>302</sup> 'United Protest Meeting Against the Air Force Display – "Propaganda for War"' *Hendon & Finchley Times*, Friday 23 June 1933.

Hendon Town Hall on May 25 and June 21, with an addendum that ‘no action be taken’ In other words, no support.<sup>303</sup> Other controversies involving Hampstead Ward were reported by the *Daily Herald* on 3 September 1936 of an investigation to be carried out following allegations of ‘unconstitutional conduct by the Police in breaking up certain meetings’ which were being investigated by the NCCL (National Council for Civil Liberties). It involved complaints from Hampstead Labour Party members who advised that when they tried to hold a meeting on the Spanish question they were met by a squad of Police. The article relayed that ‘An Inspector stated that the meeting could not be held because householders had complained of interference’. Hampstead Ward replied that ‘We are sending a letter asking for an explanation to the Superintendent of the West Hampstead Police – if his reply is not satisfactory we shall lay the matter before the Home Office’.<sup>304</sup>

Yet the most contentious matter concerning the Hampstead Garden Suburb Ward was its expulsion from the Party in 1940. It was not mentioned in the local press but popped up in a number of brief lines at the end of an article in the *Daily Herald* on 25 January 1940 covering a Labour National Executive meeting. The announcement stated:

‘The National Executive confirmed that the disaffiliation of the Hampstead Labour Party and Trades Council, on the grounds that ‘its declarations of policy destroyed the basis on which it was affiliated to the Party’.<sup>305</sup>

This statement alludes to the Hampstead Ward as having worked too closely with Communists and having adopted the Soviet line (pre their entry into the War) of an unjust imperialist War. This can be gleaned from the content of a Hampstead Ward Newsletter of 1939 when they write:

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<sup>303</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Minutes of Executive Committee of Local Party, Ref. 646, 9 June 1933, Barnet Archive.

<sup>304</sup> ‘Protest at Banned Meeting’, *Daily Herald*, 3 September 1936.

<sup>305</sup> *Daily Herald*, 25 January 1940.

‘The two fundamental points for which the people must strive are PEACE and SOCIALISM. The immediate issues are the stopping of this imperialist war and for removal of this reactionary Government of high finance. These are the tasks before us.’<sup>306</sup>

A month later, the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* of 5 February 1940 tells us that Hampstead Ward has been reformed ‘...by the London Party.’<sup>307</sup> Indeed, the new Ward Party was obviously more acceptable to the hierarchy in that they were visited by Herbert Morrison at a publicised meeting in April 1940 to criticise neutrality whereby Morrison spoke of ‘The unhappy situation of Norway and Denmark conclusively demonstrates that an attitude of nervous neutrality towards Germany is almost an invitation to be attacked’.<sup>308</sup> Further into the War in 1943 an acclaimed academic educationalist and Fabian idealist philosopher, Professor C. E.M. Joad (a Balliol alumnus), appeared at several, national Labour Conferences and was noted as a member of the Hampstead Ward.<sup>309</sup> Joad’s membership did not signify a shift back to the Left for Hampstead Garden Suburb in that he was known for his opposition to Marxism and Psychoanalysis.

When returning to the Hendon DLP minutes we find that Hampstead is mentioned in the 6 January 1939 EC Minutes by way of one of their Councillors, Morgan, informing the EC of an all-Party Meeting for a Jewish Refugee Fund (here this would be in line now with the Popular Front as per the shift in the Third International). Hampstead then appeared in the General Committee Minutes of 28 January 1939 when they submitted a Resolution for the Party Conference which called upon the ratification of the Anglo Italian Pact which is seen as having had two-fold aims, that of trying to get Italy to remove its forces from Spain and the

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<sup>306</sup> Mass Observation, File: Political Organisations & Movements 1939-1940, ‘Hampstead Labour News’, Dec. 1939, The Keep, University of Sussex.

<sup>307</sup> ‘Hampstead Labour Party Re-Formed’, *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 5 February 1940.

<sup>308</sup> ‘The Fence – Mr. Morrison to Neutrals’, *Daily Herald*, 11 April 1940.

<sup>309</sup> ‘Dr. Joad on Education’, *Liverpool Daily Post*, Friday 18 June 1943. Joad (12 August 1891 – 9 April 1953) was an English philosopher and broadcasting personality. He appeared on The Brains Trust, a BBC Radio wartime discussion programme. He popularised philosophy and became a celebrity before his downfall in a scandal over an unpaid train fare in 1948. He re-joined the Fabian Society in 1943.

other, trying to prevent an Italian/German alliance.<sup>310</sup> Hampstead then appeared in the Local Party Annual Meeting of 25 February 1939 with another Resolution which condemned the expulsion of Stafford Cripps, ‘...registers its emphatic protest against the undemocratic actions of the National Executive in expelling Sir Stafford Cripps...’, which was defeated.<sup>311</sup> However, there was no further mention in any Minutes of 1939 or 1940 in relation to formal complaints or disciplinary actions against Hampstead, its disaffiliation and re-start of new Ward within a month. Yet Party records of the 1930s revealed an even greater controversy, that of antisemitism.

### **Unsatisfactory Response to Antisemitic Inquiry**

A controversy arose concerning two members of the Golders Green Ward, Jewish brothers, John and Sidney Lewis (who shared a House on the Hendon Way). They had joined the Ward in 1930 and were known for their left leanings as supporters of the United Front. As members of the Golders Green branch, the Lewis brothers had been part of a Ward with a high percentage of Jewish membership and prospective Jewish voters. At the time of the incident Golders Green had been a predominantly Conservative area with three Tory Councillors in situ, two of whom were Jewish. Many in the Labour Party thought that if they ran a Jewish candidate then this would give them a good chance of winning a seat. John Lewis was successfully selected in 1937 and he doubled the Labour share of the vote when standing against a Jewish Conservative candidate. He was then selected to stand as a Candidate in 1938 while the Conservatives selected two Jewish candidates. However, some people questioned the validity of the internal selection process and during an angry exchange

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<sup>310</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Minutes of Meeting of General Committee of Local Parties, 28 January 1939, Barnet Archive.

<sup>311</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Local Party Annual Meeting, Ref. 776b, 25 February 1939, Barnet Archive.

on the subject one of John Lewis' Labour opponents for the nomination, Mrs. G. C.

Henderson said:

'If Hitler has people like Mr. Lewis in Germany no wonder he cleared them out'.

The Chair asked her to withdraw her remark, but she refused. She wrote some months later to George Richardson that her remarks came about as a result of months of alleged abuse and provocation. She wrote:

'Mr. Lewis' conduct towards me was beastly and I expressed my thoughts to him personally. I have no anti-Semitic feelings' She further added that John Lewis 'seldom had any respect for the Chair'.

John Lewis expressed his concerns at the expression of anti-Semitism and added that Councillor Pugh had also made similar remarks, which Pugh denied. The Executive then made counter-claims against the Lewis brothers, inferring "fiddling" of the books and irregularities.<sup>312</sup> Though Sidney had nominated his brother, he had not contravened any rules by doing so. In an effort to resolve the matter, J. T. Baxter, from the National Agent Department intervened and held an Inquiry in September 1938. The findings of the Report were that John Lewis was '...a little overbearing in his manner' and that there had been slackness in the administration of the Ward and that Mrs. Henderson's statement was 'not to say the least, unfortunate'!<sup>313</sup> The Chair, Richardson, then added further insult to injury by way of suggesting that Jewish members had brought it upon themselves, when writing:

'There is a definite racial problem in the Ward, Jew and non-Jew, and the suggestion of the latter section is that they are being pushed out by Jewish new members who have come only since the fascist menace'.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Minutes of Hendon Labour Party Executive Committee 17 June 1937 Ref 756, Barnet Archive.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> D. Weinbren, *Hendon Labour Party 1924-1992 – A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition*, London, 1998, p. 6.

The increase in membership referred to Sidney's recruitment drive, but Richardson surely misses the very point as to why a Jew might find the need for political involvement when news had undoubtedly been reaching the community about actions of the Nazi regime in Germany. The selection was re-run and John Lewis won by a narrower margin of 30 votes to Henderson's 26. He increased his poll at the election but did not win the seat. Mrs. Henderson resigned. However, the matter was discussed at a Local Party EC Meeting of 6 January 1939 whereby the Golders Green Ward had, effectively, been brow-beaten into accepting the EC Report, which Golders Green, 'neither accepted nor rejected', and a vote was taken at the meeting to accept the findings by eight votes to nil '...that the Golders Green Committee be called upon to accept the conclusions'.<sup>315</sup> Unsurprisingly, the minutes of 25 August record that the Secretary of Golders Green resigned to join the Communist Party and figures for early 1940 show the Golders Green membership as going down from 150 to 97.<sup>316</sup>

There is a weighty historiography of research into the institutional, both overt and covert, workings of anti-Semitism in Britain in the inter-war period revealing how it permeated the professionals, commerce, politics and civic society alike. As Goldman argues, 'Highly placed Tories believed that socialism was Jewish and, therefore, doubly alien and a danger to Britain'.<sup>317</sup> Many politicised Jews were seen as joining the Communist Party in that they felt it was the only organisation that would do something and, unlike the Labour Party, offered an active and organised means to opposing Fascism.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Hendon Labour Party, Minutes of Meeting of Local Party Executive Committee, Ref. 771, 6 January 1939, Barnet Archive.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, Ref. 799, 25 August 1939.

<sup>317</sup> A. Goldman, 'The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism in Britain During World War II', *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Winter 1984, pp. 37-50.

<sup>318</sup> D. Tilles, *British Fascists, Anti-Semitism and Jewish Responses 1932-1940*, London, 2016, p. 108.

The Hendon DLP Wards actively raised issues such as Germany and the fascist rise to power from 1933 onwards, together with Spain, the United Front, the expulsion of Stafford Cripps and the Japanese invasion of China. I have touched on this in the chapter dedicated to the War years and reconstruction, revealing the various Hendon Wards' vocal and active dissent in the lead up to and during the War.

### **Faversham Divisional Labour Party**

As part of this case-study I have chosen to compare the Hendon DLP with that of the suburban/rural Faversham divisional Labour Party, in the south east county of Kent. Akin to Hendon it too comprised one of the largest DLPs in the inter-war period. For instance, at the AGM of the N.E. Kent divisional Labour Party in May 1930 a report confirmed that they had a membership of 2,500 and a healthy 1,000 new readers signed up to the *Daily Herald*. Indeed, the newly elected prospective Labour Party candidate (getting ready for a 1940 election that was not to be), Alban Gordon, praised Faversham as '...one of the best managed parties which he had come into contact during his long association with the movement'.<sup>319</sup> Whether this comment was made in respect of Faversham's sound finances and political compliance is open to interpretation.

Faversham elected a Labour MP for the first time in 1945 and Labour then held onto the seat for the next 25 years (often with very close results) until losing the constituency to the Conservative candidate, Dr. Roger Moate in 1970. The parliamentary constituency area has remained in Conservative control ever since, with rising support for UKIP prior to the Brexit referendum in 2016, though the parliamentary seat of Faversham itself was replaced in 1997 and formed into Sittingbourne & Sheppey and Faversham & Mid Kent. In the 1930s

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<sup>319</sup> 'Faversham Divisional Labour Party – The Annual Minutes', *East Kent Gazette*, 24 May 1930.

the Faversham DLP comprised the Wards of Sittingbourne, Sheerness and Sheppey in the district of Swale.

The comparison between an urban and suburban/rural local party is an interesting one in the way differing demographic, cultural and economic factors played a part in recruitment and political allegiances. Few historians have examined the Labour Party's history in the countryside, with the exception of Griffiths, though there is a weighty rural historical literature contesting the role of the labourer, together with Hobsbawm and Rude's theory of proletarianization.<sup>320</sup> Yet what is fascinating is the sheer practical differences required in recruiting and campaigning methods used by the rural Labourite, for there was no recourse to accessible meetings within a half mile for most attendees. Instead, the rural Labourite had to make considerations regarding appropriate attire such as heavy farm boots and leggings and it is here that the modern concept of the 'battle bus' appears, in that rural campaigners used 'propaganda vans' and loud hailers to spread the message. The work on the ground would often be curtailed at times of harvest and the use of social events and venues took on a greater importance in recruitment and propaganda, as did the importance of newspapers. These factors, coupled with a history of feudal deference, the prominence of paternalist charities and a dominance of the Conservatives as the 'party of the countryside' created additional hurdles.<sup>321</sup> Here Egerton Wake (the Labour Party National Organiser) identified four County models, that of industrial, industrial and rural, rural and suburban and rural.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> A. Howkins, 'Labour History and the Rural Poor', *Rural History*, 1990, 1, pp 113-122. Howkins argues that the concept of proletarianisation greatly over-simplifies the actual experience of the labouring poor in the nineteenth century. Proletarianisation is derived from Marx and, at its simplest, involved the appropriation of the means of production but also the socialisation and division of labour. 'While the former occurred in the countryside, the latter did not', p. 118. See C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside – The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007, p. 109.

<sup>321</sup> C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside – The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007, p. 109.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

Faversham falls into the third category in that in the 1930s it contained a growing 'blackcoatier' allied to the commute to London.

It is perhaps helpful to provide a brief overview of the District of Faversham. As one of the prestigious Cinque Ports of Kent, Faversham's prosperous story includes the Romans, shipbuilders, brewers, farmers and pioneers of England's explosives industry and the makers of bricks. Indeed, all three sites of the gun-powder industry were closed in 1934 (owned by ICI) due to concerns around German rearmament and worries that this would make Faversham open to air attack or invasion. The factories were moved to Ardeer in Scotland. Interestingly, there had also been Belgian refugee migration following the Great War and like many parts of Kent, Faversham played host to the annual influx of London Hop pickers.<sup>323</sup>

The town of Faversham is 48 miles from London and 10 miles from Canterbury and lies next to the Swale, a strip of sea separating mainland Kent from the Isle of Sheppey in the Thames Estuary. Faversham is close to the A2 which follows an ancient trackway used by the Romans and Anglo Saxons, known as Watling Street. The name, 'Faversham' is of old English origin and means, 'the metal workers village'. The Census tells us that in 1931 Faversham had a population of 13,427.<sup>324</sup>

### **The Knock-on Effects from the Second MacDonald Government**

The records for Faversham divisional Labour Party are not as accessibly presented as Hendon's in that they are mostly written by hand. Nevertheless, there are similar patterns in the way that anything contentious is glossed over and the researcher needs to read between the lines. Yet, like Hendon, the Faversham divisional Party's hierarchy followed a rigid, bureaucratic approach and the Chair, as with Hendon, was also a local J.P. (Justice of the

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<sup>323</sup> <https://www.faversham.org/history> Accessed on 04.03.2020.

<sup>324</sup> <https://www.faversham.org/history>

Peace), denoting respectability and authority. Indeed, her role as a J.P. appeared in the local press on issues such as birching orders of child miscreants, something that would not have sat well with the liberal social thinkers of Hendon who condemned such measures in their minutes.<sup>325</sup>

At the DLP AGM of 30 December 1930 the President, Mrs. A. Durant, JP, reported a slackening of political interest and activities compared to previous years and bemoaned a decline in membership from 2381 in 1929 to 2036 in 1930.<sup>326</sup> The ‘elephant in the room’ so to speak was the correlation between falling membership and disillusionment with the second MacDonald Labour Government. In Riddell’s words, as the Government’s domestic record faltered throughout 1930 local parties suffered a swift reversal in fortune, ‘reflected both in membership levels and in local election results’.<sup>327</sup> The effects of central cuts were also filtering through in terms of reduced funding for local DLPs newspapers (many of which were eventually funded by the Co-op movement) and the EC minutes of 1930 reported slumped distribution of their paper, *The Clarion* and cautioned against apathy. For any fall in circulation and loss of advertising could leave a local party in financial difficulties. For instance, in London the Greenwich DLP’s paper, ‘The Greenwich Times’, was beset with similar difficulties.<sup>328</sup> Yet for the rural or semi-rural divisions any threats to newspaper circulation took on even greater significance for, as Griffiths maintains, this was often their chief method of proselytising given that sheer geographical locality made it harder to get to people or readily set up meetings.<sup>329</sup> Additionally, as part of the economy drive the national Party discontinued the work of its National Propagandist, an agent whose salary was paid from national funds, further reducing the overstretched National Rural Campaign Fund

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<sup>325</sup> ‘Went to Police to be Birched’, *Daily Herald*, 1 August 1939.

<sup>326</sup> Faversham Labour Party, Minutes of AGM of 30 December 1930, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>327</sup> N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis – The Second Labour Government 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, p. 125.

<sup>328</sup> Greenwich District Labour Party, Minutes of 8 October 1929, Local History Library, Greenwich.

<sup>329</sup> C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside – The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007, p. 111.

available to rural activists.<sup>330</sup> The attendant financial hardship made it equally difficult for many DLPs to continue to pay a full-time Agent and whilst the Meeting of 30 December 1930 talked about having chosen a candidate, Albon Gordon BSc, for the prospective Parliamentary Candidate, an Agent was found, 'A Mr. A.E. Castle', but no mention was made of his status as to whether he was a volunteer or a full-time official.<sup>331</sup> Yet whereas the minutes for 1930 side-stepped any overt mention of MacDonald it was unavoidable by the time of the DLP AGM of 31 December 1931 where MacDonald's desertion to a National Government was referred to in an encoded way by Mrs. A. Durant, JP (still President) which is recorded as follows:

In spite of the bad effect of the great national happenings of a few months ago.... they came through 1931 in a manner which reflects credit on the good spirit of the Labour Movement in this wide and scattered constituency.<sup>332</sup>

The 1931 minutes acknowledged further falling membership, from 2,381 in 1930 to 1,923 in 1931 reflected in the minutes: -

'We regret very much that our local parties at Newington and Teynham have almost ceased to function and we are sorry too that all Sections of the Labour League of Youth in this division have suspended activities for the time being'.<sup>333</sup>

### **Concurrent Themes with Hendon – Labour League of Youth & Communism**

As we have seen, Hendon's Labour League of Youth was defunct by 1940, but there was nevertheless evidence of their having been a thriving group who were disillusioned by the local hierarchy's lack of action on Spain, the United Front, and the expulsion of Cripps in 1939. Could the demise of Faversham's Youth League also be ascribed to such internal

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<sup>330</sup> Labour Party NEC, 'Memo on Financial Position of the Party', April 1939, Peoples History Museum, Manchester. The first Propagandist to be appointed by Transport House was, F. J. Hopkins, a former primitive, Methodist Minister.

<sup>331</sup> Faversham Labour Party, Minutes of AGM of 30 December 1930, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

divisions? Whereas Hendon's Youth were holding active public meetings and debates on contentious issues and working closely with the Communist Party's YCL, there was no evidence of this in Faversham's DLP. The Kent Communist Party issued various press releases throughout the 30s but at no point mentioned co-hosting meetings or getting involved in Unity or Popular Front campaigns with the local Labour Party, even taking into account a League of Youth revival in the Sheerness Ward in 1933, comprising 120 members. By 1934 they were still the only League of Youth in the whole of the North East Kent division and at the 1936 AGM on 31 December the League of Youth was discussed again but this time it was reported that there was only one Youth League left, in Sittingbourne.<sup>334</sup> As with a resurgence in national Labour support at the close of War, the Labour League of Youth appears to have re-emerged in Kent. For instance, the Thanet League of Youth was launched at a meeting in Ramsgate in September 1945.<sup>335</sup>

Yet, unlike Hendon, where members had talked openly of leaving to join the CP, there is no such reference or inference to the Communist Party within the Faversham minutes and the two, as was the case with Hendon, were not sharing official or unofficial platforms on areas of shared interest. For instance, both parties had organised public meetings around the impending international crisis in mid-1939 but had not shared platforms. The Communist Party's Kent Organiser, Mr. Bradbury, addressed a meeting held in May 1939 (prior to the outbreak of War and the Soviet, German pact) urged an alliance between Britain, Russia and France as '...the only sure alternative to war and fascism'.<sup>336</sup> The Faversham Labour Party held a public meeting three weeks previously on a similar theme, billed as hosting (using hyperbole) '...one of the greatest modern trades union leaders, A.G. Walkenden, M.P. a

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<sup>334</sup> Faversham Labour Party, Minutes of AGM of 31 December 1936, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone

<sup>335</sup> 'Youth of Ramsgate', *Thanet Advertiser*, 18 September 1945.

<sup>336</sup> 'Communists and Conscription', *Chatham News*, 26 May 1939.

former Chairman of the TUC General Council' to talk on the international situation.<sup>337</sup>

Again, whilst certain Wards of Hendon were inviting left notables such as Cripps to speak at their public meetings, Faversham had been happier associating themselves on platforms arranged by the Sittingbourne National Union of Distributive & Allied Workers with less contentious speakers such as, 'Red Ellen' Wilkinson, seen as fiercely anti-Communist and who by that time had made a rightward shift in her politics, slipping into what Perry describes as an 'apolitical humanitarianism'.<sup>338</sup> Yet whilst Wilkinson said that the Labour Party was concerned with four vital interests, 'finance, land, transport, coal', the prospective candidate for the Faversham Division, John Belcher, criticised the government's foreign policy.<sup>339</sup> By December 1939 any possibility of joint working had been firmly knocked on the head when the Faversham Divisional Labour Party issued the following resolution condemning the Soviet invasion of Finland:

'That the Faversham Divisional Labour Party records its profound horror at the callous and unjustified invasion of Finland by the USSR and extends its sincere sympathy with the Finnish people at this time'.<sup>340</sup>

### **The Rural Social Way & the Unity Theatre**

Griffiths has highlighted the way in which communitarianism and social gatherings were employed in the countryside, particularly within the villages, as a way of breaking down a deep-seated fear of politics.<sup>341</sup> Yet although Hendon DLP had held lots of functions and fund-raisers it was, ironically, Faversham who had strong ties with the left leaning Unity Theatre. One local press report recounted how the Unity Theatre players had been given a

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<sup>337</sup> 'Meeting', *Faversham Times and Mercury and North-East Kent Journal*, 22 April 1939.

<sup>338</sup> M. Perry, *'Red Ellen' Wilkinson*, Manchester, 2014, p. 326. Perry refers readers to the William Gilles Collection and a letter in which she withdraws from a Public Meeting at the Friends Meeting House about Spain on grounds that she objected to its 'all party' rather than humanitarian character.

<sup>339</sup> 'Criticism of Government Policy', *Chatham News*, 17 February 1939.

<sup>340</sup> 'Finland Invasion', *Faversham Times and Mercury and North-East Kent Journal*, 23 December 1939.

<sup>341</sup> C. Griffith, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007, p. 137. Griffith refers to the tactics the Labour Party used in the countryside to overcome villagers' fears about attending meetings, such as holding functions with drink and entertainment.

big reception at the Sheerness Pavilion in February 1939 when they had performed ‘Senora Carrar’s Rifles’ (a one Act play by Bertolt Brecht, set in Spain at the height of the Civil War) and ‘Plant in the Sun’ written by Bengal and centred on a sit-in among a group of New York sweet factory workers when one is fired for talking about Unions. The gathering was organised under the auspices of the Sheerness Ward of the Faversham DLP. The organisers had hoped the underlying political message of the plays would encourage people to join the Labour Party, whilst the Unity Players said that in London alone they had a membership of 250,000 and hoped they could build on this in Kent.<sup>342</sup> The Unity Theatre were a group of Marxists who wanted to make the arts accessible to working-class people. As Chambers points out, it pioneered direct political commentary on stage and gained support from the wider Labour Movement.<sup>343</sup> There is a famous anecdote about Paul Robeson being billed to appear on the West End stage but turning it down for a part in a Unity Theatre production. The group were responsible for bringing a large number of household names to the fore, such as Lionel Bart, Alfie Bass, Michael Gambon, Bob Hoskins, Warren Mitchell, David Kossoff, Bill Owen and Ted Willis. The Unity Handbook proclaimed that true art by truthful interpretation of life as experienced by the majority of the people ‘...can move the people to work for the betterment of society’.<sup>344</sup>

Faversham, like Hendon, had also used bazaars, socials and the like, but unlike Hendon had shown far more enthusiasm for organising events for children, including trips, which Hendon all too frequently batted away as ‘impractical’. For a semi-rural division it was all part and parcel of communitarianism and recruitment methods. For example, the 1930 AGM Minutes referred to a successful Summer Festival on 12 July where 1,500

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<sup>342</sup> ‘Unity Group’, *Chatham News*, 3 February 1939.

<sup>343</sup> C. Chambers, *The Story of Unity*, London, 1989, p. 18.

<sup>344</sup> *Unity Theatre Handbook*, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, 1.

children and 500 adults took part.<sup>345</sup> Again, the Children's Festival was held in 1931 and every year after that. The Sheerness Ward held annual parties for on average 300 children, comprising games, dancing and musical entertainment.<sup>346</sup> Similarly, Sittingbourne Ward held an annual 'Grand Novelty Whist Drive and Dance'.<sup>347</sup> Indeed, the Faversham AGM Minutes reported the usefulness of the open air meetings held that summer, particularly with picking up new members and contacts.<sup>348</sup> The Minutes of 1936 talked of having run an early summer rural campaign and of visiting 15 villages, where they distributed considerable quantities of literature within 5 days, noting 'the intention to augment this campaign by the monthly issue of 1,000 copies of a new paper, especially suited to rural villages', but Head Office was against this.<sup>349</sup> What then of the controversial issues of the day that so clearly arose with the activists of Hendon Wards?

### **What of the Battle for Hearts & Minds?**

When reading the Faversham Divisional records something happened towards the late 1930s. There may have been a new Secretary, for the proceedings began to be typed and pockets of ideology crept in. Within the various AGMs there were snippets of references to activism, but unlike Hendon DLP, extra curricular activities of any wayward kind are not readily found, whereas Hendon members regularly flaunted their dissension in the local press. Nevertheless, some cracks did appear, as with the case with the Unity Theatre. For instance, the AGM Minutes of 1934 reported having organised a successful, two week 'Victory for Socialism' campaign.<sup>350</sup> In the AGM Minutes of 1936 we are told that a Women's Section was starting whereas Hendon had one quite early on. Importantly, in the AGM Minutes of

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<sup>345</sup> Faversham Labour Party, Annual General Meeting, 30 December 1930, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>346</sup> 'Labour Childrens Party', *Chatham News*, 13 January 1939.

<sup>347</sup> 'Preliminary Notice – Labour Party', *East Kent Gazette*, 12 April 1930.

<sup>348</sup> Faversham Labour Party, AGM Minutes of 31 December 1935, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*

1936 and 1937 there was no mention of Spain. There was a ‘Socialist Crusade Week’ mentioned that year, but this was purely to recruit new members and nothing ideological. However, some dissent started to appear in 1938 and while the Secretary was still Mr. Wise, a Mr. Chance appeared and we get the impression that he is of the Left in that things become more political. There was also mention of a Mr. Thilthorpe, who we are told was doing everything by way of doubling up as Election Agent, Registration Secretary, Propaganda and Liaison Officer, hence the Minutes seemed to flatter his ego to keep him on side, stating: ‘He is carrying out his duties energetically with conspicuous success’.<sup>351</sup>

We learn that Faversham division held a one-day conference in 1938 at Sheerness with the main speaker being, Margot Heinemann, from the Labour Research Department (LRD). The LRD disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1919 and became increasingly Left in orientation. Margot Heinemann was a member of the Communist Party and later went on to set up the Communist History Group with Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Raphael Samuel, E.P. Thompson and Noreen Branson. More evidence of a Leftward shift appeared in the minutes of 1938 when a statement on Spain was read out by the Secretary and addressed to the Executive Committee. However, it should be borne in mind that the divisional response may not be as emboldened as first appears in that Attlee went out to Spain in 1937 and the national Party shifted to criticism of non-intervention, but did not go as far as calling for arms for the Republic (as touched upon in my separate chapter on the Home Counties Association and the Labour Spain Committee).<sup>352</sup> The Secretary read out the following statement:

‘Although your committee is always loyal in its support of the National Executive, it was decided to register a protest against the lack of vigour and

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<sup>351</sup> Faversham Labour Party, AGM Minutes of 31 December 1938, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>352</sup> C. R. Attlee, *As it Happened*, London, 1954. Attlee went to Spain with Phillip Noel Baker and Ellen Wilkinson and John Dugdale in 1937.

imagination shown by Headquarters in the campaign to force the government to allow republican Spain their right to obtain arms for their defence'.<sup>353</sup>

The 1938 minutes are also interesting in that a general election for 1940 was expected and Faversham division had chosen their prospective candidate, J. Belcher, who sent them a rousing, tub-thumping message: '...all over Europe the forces of reaction were triumphing' and adding on the National Government:

'.... there must be many who long for the opportunity to rid the country of a government whose activities in assisting its Fascist friends was only equalled by its impotence when it came to dealing with the troubles of our own people'.<sup>354</sup>

The 1938 minutes are the last substantive recording in that there is nothing for 1939 and proceedings then jump to 1942, when it was recorded that they had their first reunion since the War had begun and 'right well did we do ourselves', with over 500 members and friends gathering together at Sheerness on 1<sup>st</sup> May. We are told that the ladies of Sheerness Women's Section were active in the campaign for 'Aid to Russia' (raising money through sale of toys). In 1942 we are also told that Mr. Thilthorpe (who is now also doubling up as Propaganda Officer) invited Harold Laski down to speak (this would have been at a time when he was a member of the national Party's NEC (his 'Revolution by consent' period)).<sup>355</sup> Beveridge came up for discussion with a noted comment that '...its integrity will depend on the degree of submissiveness shown by the Cabinet'.<sup>356</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>353</sup> Faversham Labour Party, AGM Minutes of 31 December 1938, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> H. Laski, *Where Do We Go from Here – An Essay in Interpretation*, London, Reprinted 1941, pp. 87-88. Laski had written 'For, in effect, the purposes of this war is the revolution to which British success will give rise. The power to make it will come, in part from the impact of British victories themselves, in part from the hope these victories will arouse in the victims of Fascism', p. 87.

<sup>356</sup> Faversham Labour Party, AGM Minutes of 31 December 1942, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

The grass roots membership of the constituency parties comprised the un-sung heroes, the foot soldiers of the Labour movement. Though Hendon was an urban and Faversham a rural/suburban party both had some of the highest membership figures in the 1930s. Whilst our archival records accredit this success in Faversham to good organisation skills, Hendon's success in attracting members was its ideological appeal to a politically committed, middle-class, Jewish intelligentsia, coupled with the 'misfits' and communitarian organisation skills of the working-class and aristocracy of Labour from the Watling estate, 'little Moscow'. The Hendon party epitomised the growth in middle-class membership examined in this thesis, for whereas the party's traditional support waned in the early post MacDonald years, its steady recovery and eventual victory in 1945 was attributable in large part to its growth in middle-class, south eastern membership. Kirk has also proposed that the growth in Labour membership between the wars in London 'owed much to skilful activists'.<sup>357</sup>

Yet the class composition of Hendon was something of a double-edged sword by way of its focus on international issues which then made it more remote from the local electorate in an essentially Conservative constituency. Indeed, the Hendon party was unable to marry up internationalism with local, communitarian and municipal issues, much in the same way as the national Party. Working class local concerns rarely appeared within the Executive minutes and it is queried whether the local campaigning on the Watling estate was largely taken up by the Communist Party and whether the working class Labourites co-worked with the 'enemy' on issues of rents and the like, for the local press revealed that they regularly shared platforms with local Communists on various campaign, so openly flouting the local Executive. Indeed, the Communist Party was a tour de force in the Watling Association.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> N. Kirk, "'Traditional Working-Class Culture' and the 'Rise of Labour': Some Preliminary Questions and Observations' *Social History*, 16:2, (1991), 212-13.

<sup>358</sup> D. Bayliss, *Council Cottages and Community in Inter-War Britain: A Study of Class, Culture, Politics and Place*, Doctoral Thesis, 1998, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. As Bayliss writes: The Communist Party published a circular known as the *Watling Spark*, attacking its Association, its Council,

Turning to the suburban/rural constituency party of Faversham (as defined by Egerton Wake's model), they successfully deployed the rural inventive means of recruitment in overcoming logistical barriers such as geography and long-standing suspicions of Labour. For the Tories had long portrayed themselves as 'the party of the countryside'. We learn that propaganda by way of the constituency newspapers was vitally important. Likewise, the utilisation of a 'battle-bus' was first pioneered by rural campaigners seeking to overcome the obstacles of distance. Their proselytising was also often seasonal due to the vagaries of the agricultural calendar. However, Faversham followed a suburban model in that they invited the avowedly Left leaning Unity Theatre to provide local drama workshops whilst making little links with agricultural unions. Similarly, they had invited well known Communist, Margot Heinemann from the LRD (Labour Research Department), to present a day conference. Ironically, the sophisticated intellectuals of Hendon would have struggled to have had such an association approved by their Executive.

In looking at the Faversham minutes it appears that it is more representative of a suburban, commuter belt community in that specific rural questions do not arise. There are no agenda items referring to the inter-war decline in the rural economy. Issues pertaining to the land question for reconstruction, as raised by rural constituencies in our War years chapter do not appear on the Faversham agenda, despite there being the emergence of a strong preservation and town planning movement in the 1930s.<sup>359</sup> Indeed, national Labour Party support for land nationalisation increased during this period. Faversham in the latter 1930s also became vocal on international causes, so denoting a growing middle-class membership. Consequently, though Faversham DLP adopted rural recruitment methods,

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its speakers at the Annual General Meeting for refusing to transfer control of the W.A. to the ordinary membership, p. 308.

<sup>359</sup> M. Tichelar, 'The Labour Party and Land Reform in the Inter-War Period', *Rural History* (2002), 13, 1, 85-101, p. 86.

such as their targeting of 15 villages in 1936, it failed to galvanise opinion on the crucial socialist issue of land ownership and as such perpetuated the damaging urban-rural divide within Labour politics.<sup>360</sup>

Thus, the notable southern trends to be found in the constituency parties of Hendon and Faversham were that of a middle-class membership who brought a new welfarist, consumptionist form of politics to Labour as well as a preoccupation with international issues. They enlisted to Labour as a creed as opposed to social class. Consequently, their enthusiasm for Labour politics and loyalty to Party institutions later waned with national Labour's perceived inaction during the Spanish Civil War, or the failure of local officers to fully cooperate with anti-fascist Popular Front activism. As Tanner aptly puts it: 'It was easy to make members, notoriously difficult to retain them'.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Faversham Divisional Labour Party 31 December 1936, Kent History & Library Centre, Maidstone.

<sup>361</sup> D. Tanner, P. Thane. & N. Tiratsoo, *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, p 252.

## Chapter IV

### A 'Cake-Makers' Division? Labour Women and the Practice of Politics in South-East England c. 1931-1939

In this chapter it will be argued that the Women's Sections were instrumental in Labour's attempt to develop a populist politics of collective consumption anchored within the social and recreational activities of local women's branches. For proletarian women like Mary Clayton of Battersea, the decision to join Labour politics was closely bound up with a communitarian desire to help working-class neighbours.<sup>362</sup> However, lower middle class and professional women such as Anne Swingler, also valued the opportunity to 'get out of the house' and forge social contacts, all whilst contributing useful work for the community.<sup>363</sup> Though more prosaic than the cause of women's liberation, satisfaction of this felt need for political involvement (limited as it may have been) provided important foundations for Labour's political expansion. To paraphrase Brian Harrison, the majority of women in the inter-war period were not feminists, let alone suffragists, and seen in this light Labour's efforts represent a significant forward step.<sup>364</sup>

The following chapter will pursue the everyday politics and organisation of Labour women through three sub-sections. Section I considers the legacy of the 1918 Party constitution and the internal debate surrounding the power of women members leading up to the 1931 crisis. It is suggested that the ambiguous stand of leading women members (i.e. Marion Phillips and Margaret Bondfield) with regards to cuts in unemployment benefits had a detrimental effect on internal and external political confidence, only made good by the mid-

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<sup>362</sup> On Mary Clayton see J. Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and The Making of The Modern Self*, Oxford, 2013, pp. 79-81.

<sup>363</sup> 'Anne Swingler Obituary, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2011..

<sup>364</sup> B. Harrison, 'Class and Gender in Modern British Labour History', *Past & Present*, No. 124 August., 1989, pp. 138-146.

1930s. Section II examines the *Labour Woman* and the Papers of the Chief Women Officers for the period spanning 1931-1935 and reappraises the expansion of women's membership in the south-east of England. A complex inter-relationship of cause and effect was at work here: Labour's emphasis on collective consumption appealed to the new suburban housewife and the inner-city working class, but social undercurrents such as an expanding female work-force in London, or a uniquely liberal attitude to women's political involvement favoured Labour's strategy. Finally, Section III combines written accounts, autobiographies and newspapers to evaluate the politics of Labour women in light of international affairs and the United Front from 1936-1939. The segment argues that the women's politics of collective consumption and democratic involvement assumed an internationalist slant, with the Sections emphasising the oppression of women in Nazi-Germany or Francoist-Spain in order to galvanise the wider party. Of course, neither the Women Advisory Committee or Chief Women's Officer (Mary Sutherland from 1932) were willing to clash with the NEC over Labour's attitude to non-intervention or domestic issues such as birth control and equal pay. The fact that such issues were being raised at all within the Women's Conference is significant in itself.

Indeed, Labour's 'Socialist Renaissance' was perhaps too successful in politicising its women supporters, with issues such as equal pay remaining a thorn in the side of the party grandees well into post 1945. However, the support for equal pay, divorce law reform, or family endowments demonstrated by the Women's National Liberal Federation (founded in 1887) failed to make it into any of the National Liberal Party's election manifestos from 1929 to 1935, whereas Conservative HQ thought it enough to placate the Women's Unionist Association by pursuing reductions in the cost of living and income tax.<sup>365</sup> The Labour Party

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<sup>365</sup> According to Pugh the WNLF at its highpoint had 723 branches and 95,217 members in 1920, the Women's Unionist Association had 4,067 branches in 1924 and a million members in 1928. For further discussion see M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain since 1914*, London, 2015, pp 103-4, 116.

was no exception to this trend, notwithstanding its nominal commitment to sexual equality and the protection of the female workforce. As German Socialist Egon Wertheimer observed in 1929, the most significant schism between European social-democracy and the British Labour Party was precisely the latter's unease with sex questions, a taboo that Socialist-Feminists like Stella Browne attributed to the 'deadly influence' of 'Non-Conformist pseudo-Puritanism' within the party.<sup>366</sup> This did not fundamentally change in 1918 with the formation of the Labour Womens Sections. To cite Arthur Henderson, the new divisions were to promote a common 'Democratic' programme with the men and to avoid the 'unhappy sex-antagonisms' of 'feminist agitation'.<sup>367</sup>

The inter-war cause of Labour women, euphemistically then termed the 'sex questions', was marginalised by the Labour grandees as 'petty' and 'disloyal' at a time when class, unemployment, the growth of Fascism and the threat of another war loomed large.<sup>368</sup> Socialist Feminists have described the Labour Women's Sections as having acted as little more than defensive, cautious social clubs, comprising largely of older activists incapable of understanding profound changes in the structure of women's work or capturing the imagination of a younger generation.<sup>369</sup> Yet though the 1930s saw attempts to subordinate gender issues those of class, Graves argues that Labour women's agitation marked an auspicious, if unfulfilled, beginning to the inter-war relationship between Labour and the women's cause where it could be used to harness the promotion of universal healthcare, education and collective consumption as part of a modern 'citizenship'.<sup>370</sup> Others have

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<sup>366</sup> E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party*, London, 1939, p. 90. Also, S. Browne cited in L. A. Hall, *The Life and Times of Stella Browne: Feminist and Free Spirit*, London, 2011, p. 128.

<sup>367</sup> See introduction of M. Phillips (ed.), *Women and the Labour Party, by Various Women Writers*, York, 1918, pp. 5-6.

<sup>368</sup> J. Hannam, 'Women as Paid Organisers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party Between the Wars', *International Labour & Working-Class History*, No. 77, Spring 2010, pp. 69-88.

<sup>369</sup> S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London, 1992, p. 165.

<sup>370</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women – Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, pp 181-216.

argued that Labour had an uphill struggle in attracting the political support of women between the wars in that the sexual divisions within the home served to encourage working-class women to identify with the Conservative party's supposed deflationary politics as opposed to Labour's 'irresponsible' and 'feckless' ones.<sup>371</sup>

Labour women also formed an important role in promoting a politics of social welfare, for many women were attracted either by the hope of using political parties as vehicles to advance women's positions in society and advance levels of social-welfare provision, or often both. Thane maintains that the experience of poverty, which many middle-and upper-class women acquired through philanthropic work, drew many to the belief that only the state had the adequate resources to relieve it and parties were the channels through which the state could be held to account.<sup>372</sup> For example, many notable women on the inter-war Labour Left, such as Frida Laski, campaigned around abortion and maternal mortality.<sup>373</sup>

Yet for all its anti-feminism, the Labour Party was still able to exude a democratic image which appealed to a significant number of women. Indeed, according to party estimates membership of the Women's Sections increased from roughly 100,000 at the beginning of the 1920s to a peak of 250,000 in 1930, and although this number declined in the decade following the 1931 crisis, by 1939 female members still comprised at least half of the individual membership.<sup>374</sup> This was, admittedly, rather poor when compared with the

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<sup>371</sup> R. McKibbin, *Ideologies and Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1990, p 285.

<sup>372</sup> P. Thane, 'Women in the British Labour Party and the Construction of State Welfare, 1906-1939', in S. Koven & S. Michel, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, London, 1993, pp. 343-377.

<sup>373</sup> S. Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day*, Oxford, 2011, pp 39-64.

<sup>374</sup> Cf. Table 4.5 Compiled from Annual Reports of the Labour Party Women's Organisation in M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain since 1914*, London, 2015, p. 108.

total number of women Conservatives for the same period.<sup>375</sup> Yet this maintenance of a stable female membership, if an inglorious feat, was essential to the party's long-term political and organisational success. The women members were not only the lynchpin of organisation at CLP level, but, as argued by Thane, their politicisation of everyday issues such as housing, maternal welfare, unemployment and sickness insurance, birth control, or equal wages formed the crucial historical matrix of the London Labour Party's municipal socialism, not to mention the 1945 Labour government's welfare-state.<sup>376</sup> Yet, as the previous list implies, the women membership's involvement in politics was largely circumscribed along the lines of traditional 'welfarist' or 'social' issues. Feminists were understandably upset – for instance, Hannah Mitchell, a veteran Suffragette and ILPer who refused to join the Women's Sections, explained that she was not prepared to become a permanent social organiser or 'Official Cake Maker'.<sup>377</sup> Thus, the specific socio-ideological appeal and potential of the Labour Party's Women's Sections requires further exploration. In looking to this problem, Smith and Rowan have suggested that the Women's Sections were inherently hostile to feminism in that they based women's rights on the primacy of motherhood and that the organisation appealed to more class-conscious, working class housewives or wage-earners.<sup>378</sup> Yet this is to ignore the continued presence in the ranks of prominent birth control campaigners like Dorothy Jewson, Emma Sproson and Frida Laski,

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<sup>375</sup> It has been variously estimated that more than a million women were members of the Conservative and Unionist Party in the 1930s, see J. Lovenduski, P. Norris, and C. Burness, 'The Party and Women', in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900*, Oxford, 2011, pp. 623-4.

<sup>376</sup> P. Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: The Case of Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy, 1906-1945', in G. Bock & P. Thane (eds.), *Maternity & Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*, London, 1994, pp. 93-9.

<sup>377</sup> H. Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up: The Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel*, London, 1977, p. 189.

<sup>378</sup> H. Smith, 'Sex vs. Class: British Feminists and the Labour Movement, 1919-1929', *The Historian*, Nov 1, 1984, 47, 1, pp. 34-7 & C. Rowan, 'Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920', *Feminist Review*, No. 12, 1982, p. 90.

or middle-class feminists MPs such as, Edith Summerskill. How was the Labour Party able to square the circle?

### **I – Partnership or Tutelage? The Political Initiation of Labour Women, February 1918 – May 1929**

Firstly, before evaluating the political practice of the Labour Women's Sections in the south east it is necessary to contextualise their formation in 1918, as historians have suggested that this separate sex organisation had little chance of success within the anti-feminist atmosphere of inter-war Britain. For Hannam has argued that the sacrifices made by soldiers during the First World War, a heightened awareness of class, together with mass unemployment, fascism and the threat of another war all combined to marginalise sex demands as petty or disloyal for the duration of the inter-war era.<sup>379</sup>

However, there were some grounds for optimism. In 1919 the PLP introduced a Women's Emancipation Bill which (to cite William Adamson) would have repealed the disqualification of women from 'holding civil and judicial appointments' and amended the Representation of the People Act (1918) to 'place women upon an equal footing with men', so also allowed women to sit and vote in the Lords.<sup>380</sup> The Coalition government subverted the Bill by introducing the much less radical Sex Disqualifications (Removal) Act 1919, but Labour's gesture to its women supporters was still important. Furthermore, in 1926 women activists finally persuaded the NEC to revoke its ban on discussion of birth control at Conference.<sup>381</sup> Moreover, there were important successes when it came to recruitment :from the Women's Labour League (WLL) membership of roughly 5,000 in 1918 to that of its

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<sup>379</sup> J. Hannam, 'Women and Politics' in Purvis, J. (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945*, London, 2000, p. 234.

<sup>380</sup> HC Deb 04 April 1919 vol 114 cc1561-627, viewed at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1919/apr/04/womens-emancipation-bill>, 01:00 23/07/17.

<sup>381</sup> M. Francis, 'Labour and Gender', in D. Tanner et al, *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 191-220, 196.

successor Sections of 250,000 by 1929 before decreasing to roughly 180,000 in 1937.<sup>382</sup> Consequently, women consistently provided approximately half of Labour's individual membership throughout the interwar period, comparing favourably with many continental socialist or social-democratic parties.<sup>383</sup> Crucially, the number of Sections increased significantly from 271 in 1919 to 1,949 by 1930 and though this fell to 1,631 in 1937, Labour acquired an enduring organisational base increasingly national in scope.<sup>384</sup>

This should not be allowed to obscure the considerable social and cultural obstacles confronting Labour's efforts to galvanise the female electorate. Though established with an eye to winning over millions of newly enfranchised female voters (or at least preventing their opponents from doing so) and recruiting a mass membership, the new Women's Sections had limited success in either of their objectives. Impressive as the Sections' expansion may have appeared, this paled in comparison with the simultaneous development of the Conservative Associations – by 1929 they numbered 1 million members, overwhelmingly middle-class and female, with plenty of time on their hands for party work.<sup>385</sup> Labour's organisational disadvantage was compounded by its long-term electoral underperformance. Despite providing some 38.8 per cent of all women candidates from 1918-1955, the percentage of success for women Labour contestants was 24.5 per cent, as opposed to 22.6 and 34.8 per cent respectively for the Conservatives.<sup>386</sup> Most worryingly, as Rasmussen has convincingly demonstrated, there was within the constituencies an inverse relationship between the size of

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<sup>382</sup> M. A. Hamilton, *The Labour Party Today*, London, 1939, p. 81.

<sup>383</sup> Hannam notes that women comprised 23 percent of the German SPD's membership in 1930, and 33 per cent of the Netherlands' SDAP members in 1938. See J. Hannam, 'Women as Paid Organizers and Propagandists for the British Labour Party Between the Wars', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 77, Spring 2010, p. 85.

<sup>384</sup> Labour Party Conference Reports in Pugh, M., *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain Since 1914*, London, 2015, p. 108.

<sup>385</sup> J. W. B. Bates, 'The Conservative Party in the Constituencies, 1918-1939', Doctoral Thesis, 1994, (Oxford), p. 4.

<sup>386</sup> P. W. Buck, *Amateurs and Professional in British Politics 1918-59*, Chicago, 1963, p. 34.

the female electorate and Labour support.<sup>387</sup> Thus, a cursory examination of the Sections' political record over the *longue-durée* seems to vindicate their subsequent portrayal as an untimely and/or ill-considered political venture.

Yet such historical interpretations arguably adopt a circular logic. In these terms the anti-feminist, socially conservative reaction of the inter-war era is held to have produced precisely those politics or laws which reproduced the sacrosanct institution (or ideology) of the family and which benefited the Conservatives' view of Britain. Consequently, the specific influence of politics, the organisation of collective conflict and dissent in pursuit of the common good, is excluded from historical judgement, as is the crucial role of political parties in mediating between the political (state and law) and social (civil-society, community and family) spheres.<sup>388</sup> Of course, politics cannot be autonomous from social life and the power relations (i.e. class and status divisions) which define it and the collective practices of politics are always bound by 'intentionality'.<sup>389</sup> However, if parties cannot conjure up positive policies or campaigns suspended above those of the social or everyday life, their negative prioritisation of specific social issues above others, or deliberate omission and suppression of select demands, can have an important impact on setting the terms of collective debate and the pace of social change. As Karl Mannheim put it in his *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), politics differs from administration in that it is a creative activity dealing with frequently unprecedented social-problems, for which general solutions or the principles of which are unavailable.<sup>390</sup> As such, in evaluating the Sections' success it is essential to ask:

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<sup>387</sup> The major exception was the 1929 Election, which saw 30% of Labour's 30 women candidates (i.e. 10) elected. Statistics from Table 1. in J. Rasmussen, 'Women in Labour: The Flapper Vote and Party System Transformation in Britain', *Electoral Studies*, 1984, 3:1, p. 56.

<sup>388</sup> See N. Poulantzas, 'Marxist Examination of the Contemporary State and Law and the Question of the 'Alternative'', in J. Martin (ed.), *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law and the State*, London, 2008, pp. 25-33.

<sup>389</sup> Here we diverge from theorisation of the 'Autonomy of Politics' as presented in E. Laclau and J. Butler, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, 2014, pp. 126-8.

<sup>390</sup> K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, Abingdon, 2000, pp. 99-100.

did the Labour party devise an adequate programme for dealing with the needs of the new female electorate and, if not, how did this detract from its long-term political prospects?

In considering Labour's political response it can be argued that the party's problems were in large part of its own making, for the overwhelmingly male leadership adopted a policy of 'containment' which neither fully appeased feminists nor conservative leaning housewives. The principal architects of the reorganisation, Arthur Henderson (then party secretary and leader of the PLP), Sidney Webb and Marion Phillips, were determined to stamp out anything approximating to feminist separatism and to this end defended the new constitution by emphasising (in Henderson's terms) that there was 'no fundamental difference of view' between men and women on political issues or in the field of social reform.<sup>391</sup> As Henderson elaborated, the organised working class movement in appealing to women 'as citizens and as workers':

...has evolved a policy intended to promote the common interests of both sexes, and we believe that when this policy is properly understood by the bulk of the enfranchised women they will recognise that separate sex organisations are fundamentally undemocratic and wholly reactionary.<sup>392</sup>

### **Fear of a Frustrated Feminist Consciousness**

Such anxiety was not the preserve of male officialdom, for women labour leaders were also concerned that the frustration of war-time demands for equal pay had fostered a divisive feminist consciousness among working women, what Mary Macarthur described as the beginnings of a 'Sex War' with male comrades. Thus, in her opening remarks to the 1918 Labour Party Women's Conference, Susan Lawrence, a member of the NEC, implored those attending to resist soundings that women should organize on 'a sex basis', as did Chief

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<sup>391</sup> *The Labour Woman*, vi, 7 October 1918, p. 82, cited in M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1999*, London, 2000, p. 110.

<sup>392</sup> M. Phillips (ed.), *Women and the Labour Party*, London, 1918, pp. 5-6.

Women's Officer, Marion Phillips.<sup>393</sup> In similar terms the semi-autonomous Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations (or SJC), stressed the importance of its members identifying with working-class comrades in the Labour Party (an affiliated organisation from 1919) and branded voluntary groups like the Women's Citizens Associations as conservative, middle class clubs.<sup>394</sup> The most influential female opponent of militant feminism was Marion Phillips, General Secretary of the Women's Labour League (1913-1918) and the key broker in its fusion with the Labour Party. Writing in 1918 following unification with the 'men's party' (which resulted in her appointment as Chief Women's Officer), Phillips emphasised that for all their differences the interests of men and women were essentially 'one and indivisible'. In looking to the new Labour Party she envisaged an internal division of labour: Sections comprised of working-class housewives would add their unique, everyday experience of home-life, child-care, care for the sick and the standards of housing to the 'common knowledge' of the national party so that 'right solutions' could be found.<sup>395</sup> It was in these terms that leading women socialists justified unification with Labour to members of the WLL in early 1918. The women would be permitted neither an autonomous organisational existence from which to potentially undermine organised Labour, nor full equality and influence within the party. As Phillips put it, from 1918 onwards women would 'conduct special work suitable to their interests', these 'interests' being defined in terms of campaigns unlikely to erode the consensus within a male-dominated party apparatus.<sup>396</sup>

### **The Containment of Internal Dissent**

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<sup>393</sup> H. Smith, 'Sex vs. Class: British Feminists and the Labour Movement 1919-1929', *The Historian*, November 1984, pp. 19-37, 21 & 23.

<sup>394</sup> C. Collette, *The Newer Eve – Women, Feminists and the Labour Party*, Basingstoke, 2009, p. 70.

<sup>395</sup> M. Phillips, 'Introduction', in Phillips (ed.), *Women and the Labour Party*, London, 1918, pp. 10-11.

<sup>396</sup> *Labour Woman*, January 1918, p. 253, cited in P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working Class Politics, 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 24-5.

Thus, the Women's Sections were from birth intended to harness the energy of activists, whilst at the same time dissipating potential feminist or separatist movements. This aspiration was genetically imprinted upon the structure of the new Labour party, which consigned the Sections to a propagandistic or consultative rather than policy making role. Of the twenty-one seats on the new National Executive only four (increased to five in 1929) were reserved for women whom were elected by the entire party conference (numerically dominated by the trade unions) and not the Women's Sections. The separate NEC Women's Advisory Committee, membership of which *was* chosen by industrial and political organisations of women, could only offer recommendations and not initiate policy, as was also the case for resolutions passed by the annual women's conferences.<sup>397</sup> Most notably, the Chief Women's Officer, whose job it was to supervise organisers and branch work, was responsible to the NEC or party Agent and not the Sections. This had important practical consequences. For instance, Marion Phillips, first Chief Women's Officer (1918-1932), was able to use her position to effectively obstruct support for birth control at successive women's conferences.<sup>398</sup> So at a negative level the organisation was quite successful in containing internal dissent.

For instance, though delegates to the 1921 National Women's Conference narrowly passed a resolution (against opposition from the platform) enjoining that the four female members on Labour's NEC in future be elected by that Conference, rather than 'the (male) trade union influence' at annual Conference, the party's structure did not fundamentally change as a result.<sup>399</sup> By 1935 a minority of female delegates to the national party's annual

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<sup>397</sup> M. Francis, 'Labour and Gender' in D. Tanner, P. Thane & N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 196.

<sup>398</sup> M. Honeyball, *Parliamentary Pioneers: Labour Women MPs 1918-1945*, Chatham, 2015, p. 38.

<sup>399</sup> *The Labour Woman*, 9 June 1921, p. 90, cited in H. Smith, 'Sex vs. Class: British Feminists and the Labour Movement 1919-1929', *The Historian*, November 1984, p. 36.

Conference were still complaining that women were ‘not expected to be political people at all’ and that they were treated as those ‘who make the tea and do the washing up’.<sup>400</sup>

### **Sections Valued by its Members – In Their Own Words, Female Camaraderie & the Politics of the Everyday**

Still, discipline of this severity would have been intolerable had members not felt that the Sections offered positive (if limited) opportunities for women’s entry into and integration within politics. Though aggrieved by Phillips’ lack of consultation with branches during negotiations with the Labour NEC, delegates to the 1918 WLL Conference nonetheless offered their overwhelming endorsement for her plan of amalgamation.<sup>401</sup> Commenting on this trend, critics such as Graves acknowledge that it marked an ‘auspicious’ (if unfulfilled) beginning to the inter-war relationship between Labour and the women’s cause.<sup>402</sup> Indeed, available sources suggest that the Labour Women’s Sections offered three main draws for potential members – a chance to support male relatives in the party or to escape the squalor of domesticity, an opportunity to ‘ginger-up’ local government and aid working class neighbours and finally, a platform from which to argue the feminist case for birth control or family allowances. For instance, in a response to one of the essay competitions ran by *The Labour Woman* (the subject was ‘What My Section Means To Me’), one housewife from Devon details how before joining she had ‘no very great cares outside my own home’, and that the Section brought her into contact ‘with women whose lives were similar to my own’, whose philosophy of life ‘I came to admire’.<sup>403</sup> The author goes on to state that the Section

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<sup>400</sup> Comments from Mrs. Betty Fraser at Labour’s 1935 Conference, cited in B. Harrison, ‘Class and Gender in Modern British Labour History’, *Past & Present*, Volume 124, Issue 1, August 1989, pp. 121-158, 154.

<sup>401</sup> See C. Rowan, ‘Women in the Labour Party, 1906-1920’, *Feminist Review*, No. 12, 1982, pp. 86-7.

<sup>402</sup> P. Graves, ‘An Experiment in Women-Centred Socialism: Labour Women in Britain’ in H. Gruber & P. Graves, P. (eds.) *Women and Socialism-Socialism and Women: Europe Between the Two World Wars*, New York, 1998, p. 181.

<sup>403</sup> Letter by E. Blackmore, Newton Abbot, 09/09/32, *The Labour Woman*, October 1932, p. 155.

interested her in politics by relating municipal and world affairs to ‘our humble daily lives’, whilst also encouraging members to ‘improve’ them and become ‘better citizens’.<sup>404</sup>

A similar story is told by another correspondent (this time from South-London), a housewife and ‘convinced socialist’ for whom evening meetings of the local Section represented a responsible way of spending ‘precious’ leisure time. Again, great importance is attached to association with ‘kindred spirits’, and the openings that Sections provided for ‘free interchange of ideas, sympathy and understanding’.<sup>405</sup> Older members carried over from the WLL tended to value the welfare activism of the new Sections more and stressed the necessity of maintaining a working-class consciousness in their practical measures. Thus, Jessie Clarke, a founding member of the West-Ham WLL (established April 1918) took considerable pride in the group’s ‘great work-stopping landlords raising rents to tenants, protesting re. dustbins, etc.’, and Mrs E. Holroyd (of Halifax) spoke of the new activists and Sections as ‘doing work as important and as good as the women of yesterday’.<sup>406</sup>

Of course, it must be kept in mind that these optimistic letters were selected for publication by the Editor (Marion Phillips) and as such echo the official political approach to woman as the ‘domestic chancellor of the exchequer’.<sup>407</sup> Yet, careful editing can only go so far and subsequent interviews with members confirm that the Sections’ main attraction lay in their ‘politics of the everyday’ and its relevance to working and lower-middle class housewives. For example, Frances Wyver, a member of Putney Labour Party, admitted that she was ‘never one for politics’ except to help her husband George Wyver (a founding member of the party) and that she ‘made buns for refreshments’ whilst ‘Mrs Munn made the

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<sup>404</sup> *The Labour Woman*, October 1932, p. 155.

<sup>405</sup> Letter by E. Jackson, E & S. E. A. Brockley 9 September 1932, *The Labour Woman*, November 1932, p. 171.

<sup>406</sup> Jessie Clarke, Pitsea, Essex, *The Labour Woman*, March 1933, p. 45. Also, Mrs Holroyd, E., Halifax, *The Labour Woman*, October 1934, p. 154.

<sup>407</sup> M. Worley, *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Culture and Perspective, 1900-1939*, London, 2016, p. 209.

coffee'.<sup>408</sup> Interestingly Putney Labour Party was, according to leading member Hugh Jenkins, a 'Left of Centre' party comprised of lower middle class and working class residents, with the prevalence of the woman's traditional support role here undermining prejudices that this was wholly a preserve of working class branches.<sup>409</sup> Still, there were convinced women socialists who, whilst committed to improving social amenities, charted their own independent path. Notable in this respect is Margaret Gibb, convinced pacifist and a founding member of the influential Durham Labour Women's Advisory Council (1921). Reflecting upon her reason for joining, Gibb (a Teacher) recalled that it was the educational and electoral work of Lillian Anderson Fenn (North-Eastern Organiser) which made an impression in encouraging over seventy people to begin attending Section meetings.<sup>410</sup> Aside from the active encouragement of veteran socialists, or passive appeal of husbands, the influence of parents was also crucial – particularly within working class communities. In the case of Vi Willis, member of the Ilford North Section (numbering at least 100 in the early 1930s) it was her socialist father and his strong belief in working-class mutual aid who persuaded Vi to join up. Intriguingly, Willis notes that her mother (a previous Secretary of the Section) and older women members had what her father termed 'a curtain and drapes' mentality:

...there was my mum- she was secretary of the ward then... and then there was a couple whose husbands went to the meeting and their wives were sort of interested to a point, and lets be perfectly honest then it go to a couple of hours away from the kids...big families, sevens, tens, and um that's how it really got, well then we got like Mrs. Taylor, cause that's how she started, someone that was actually political, Mrs Nichols, political, not Mum, my mum wasn't.... and gradually it got together in that way.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> F. Wyver interview in H. Jenkins, *Rank and File*, London, 1980, pp. 29-30.

<sup>409</sup> Jenkins, *Rank and File*, London, 1980, pp. 13-20.

<sup>410</sup> M. Gibb interview in D. Clark, *Voices from Labour's Past: Ordinary People Extraordinary Lives*, Cumbria, 2015, pp. 166-8.

<sup>411</sup> British Library, Oral History Archives, C609/52/01-02 John Casson interviewing Vi Willis, 1991, part 2.

In discussing the development of the Section Willis notes that with time ‘it got that it was more on the social side’, a tendency aided by the fund-raising objectives of Ward officers and distinct opposition to women voters among the male membership.<sup>412</sup>

### **Letting the ‘Genie Out of the Bottle’**

Consequently, in considering the accounts of women such as Vi Willis, it can be suggested that the Women’s Sections sat balancing upon an uneasy political razor’s edge. From politicising the everyday, the Sections could just as easily lead to reproducing divisions between the quotidian female domain and the male public sphere. This dilemma was grasped by a select few activists who called for a more active crusade which would animate and attract the interests of the apolitical female electorate. One frustrated correspondent, writing in response to *The Labour Woman’s* essay competition on municipal politics, complained that some Sections were ‘too modest’ and held a defeatist mindset:

They say “We are only a small Section, no notice will be taken of us.” So their protests, suggestions and desires are not placed before their Council. They forget that it is quite possible that the council does not know their strength; may even be under the impression that they represent a large portion of the working-class women.<sup>413</sup>

Apart from the significant admission that Sections only represented a minority of local working women (itself an indication that Labour’s political strategy was somehow lacking), these comments also speak to the presence of considerable internal dissent within the women’s branches by the end of the 1920s. This growing disenchantment was most visible at the National Women’s Conference held in Buxton from 23-25 April 1929, the last meeting of the women before the formation of Labour’s second government. During the proceedings Sandwell Ward (Handsworth) Women’s Section defied the platform by referring

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid..

<sup>413</sup> Dorothy L. Pragnell, *The Labour Woman*, May 1933, p. 77.

back the SJCIWO's Report on Women and the General Election so that it would "include information on Birth Control", whereas the North Portsmouth and Hitchin Sections moved that Labour's proposed Pensions Act be expanded to encompass provision for all Widows, old age pensions set at 30s. per week and the disbursement of pensions at sixty-five.<sup>414</sup>

Yet the most impressive display of discontent was the ILP's resolution urging that Labour's election programme include 'a definite declaration of acceptance of the principle of non-contributory children's allowances in the form of weekly state payments funded through 'direct taxation of the wealthy'.<sup>415</sup> The debate on Family Allowances had always been a live one for the Labour Party. Ever since Eleanor Rathbone first published *The Disinherited Family* (1924), the working-class male wage-earner had taken issue with its depiction of him as an irresponsible and unaccountable despot, who preferred pigeon-fancying to keeping a family.<sup>416</sup> Nor did they appreciate Rathbone's scheme of indirectly funding Family Allowances through a macro-economic policy of wage cuts.<sup>417</sup> Nonetheless, such proposals were popular among female Labourites and, indeed, some men, and as such could not be totally suppressed by the Labour Party's NEC. At the ILP's Annual Conference in April 1926 a committee led by H.N. Brailsford and J.A. Hobson proposed a legal minimum wage to be supplemented by Family Allowances at the rate of 5s. for each child up to 14, the benefits to be limited to those covered by the National Health Insurance Act and financed through taxation of the wealthy. This proposal was smothered when Labour's Annual Conference referred it to a committee for consideration, only to re-emerge (as we have seen) with even more vigour at the men's and women's conferences three years later.<sup>418</sup> Consequently, it would appear that Labour's strategy of containment was beginning to disintegrate by the end

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<sup>414</sup> *Report of The National Conference of Labour Women*, Buxton, April 23-25, London, 1929, pp. 5-6.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>416</sup> E. Rathbone, *The Disinherited Family*, Bristol, 1986, pp. 122-3.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid*, p. 164

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid*, p. 381.

of the 1920s. In its effort to isolate and control those equal rights agitators within the movement, the party's leadership had ignored the possibility that the interests of working women as mothers (harnessed by the 'New Feminism') may have been at odds with those of the male wage-earner. Thus wishful thinking became a substitute for strategic analysis.

## **II – From Zenith to Nadir: Women's Sections and the Second Labour Government (May 1929-Aug 1931)**

So far this chapter has re-examined the formation of the Labour Women's Sections and those internal-contradictions which coloured their particular brand of maternalist politics. We have seen that the branches were the issue of an uneasy marriage of convenience, imposed from above by women's leaders hopeful of preserving organised Labour from feminist secession and sustained by support from a membership increasingly ambivalent about their potential to increase women's political standing. Fortunately for Labour, this troubled union was sustainable so long as it offered the female membership tangible prospects of legislative success at a national level, or increased its influence on welfare policy within the sphere of local government. In both respects there was much to be optimistic about by 1931. Within the legislative arena Labour's second term in office saw some noted successes for women – the Housing Act of 1930 (an extension of the 1924 'Wheatley Act') benefited the living conditions of thousands of working-class women, as did Labour's extension of the Widows and Old Age Pensions Act (1930) which incorporated 572,000 more widows, children and older people.<sup>419</sup> At the Women's Conference held in London from June 3rd-5th 1930, delegates took justifiable pride in the symbolic victory provided by the election of nine women MPs the previous year (more than any other party), as well as the appointment of Margaret Bondfield and Susan Lawrence as Minister for Labour and Parliamentary

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<sup>419</sup> *Labour Woman*, 1 November 1929, p. 167.

Secretary to the Ministry of Health respectively. The Chairman (Clara Rackham), speaking to those delegates who were ‘tense, thrilled even’, effused that with their upcoming campaigns on equal-pay or the Domestic Workers’ Charter ‘Politics were never so interesting and vital as they are to-day’.<sup>420</sup>

### **Positive Trends for Labour Women in the South East – the 1929 Results**

Of particular note was the electoral progress of Labour’s women candidates within the south-east, which provided considerable consolation for the Sections. Though only two of Labour’s nine successful women held seats in the south-east, many of those unsuccessful in this region made considerable inroads into Conservative majorities at the 1929 election.<sup>421</sup> For example, in Brentford and Chiswick, Stella Churchill received 10978 or 37.90% of the vote (compare with 14025 or 48.8% for Walter Morden), which was significantly better than Labour’s poll of 6114 (or 29.5%) in 1924. In Wycombe a Mrs Townsend, increased the Labour vote by 4273 (18.14%) compared with Labour’s male candidate of 1924, and though the party was still in third place here behind Conservatives and Liberals this demonstrated the potential for expansion. Finally, Dorothy Jewson was just pipped to the post by the Liberal candidate at Norwich – she won 31040 votes (23.97%) as opposed to the Liberal’s 33974 (26.24%), though this was still better than her showing of 22.03% in 1924.<sup>422</sup> However, as Marion Phillips admitted, progress within the Home Counties still lagged behind that in the rest of the U.K., and only when Labour learned the right way of reaching domestic servants and hotel workers would it be able to make a ‘solid and victorious attack’ on the ‘rich residential areas of the great towns’ or ‘wealthy health resorts’.<sup>423</sup> Rather, the Sections’ main hope in the south-east consisted in the foothold for progressive women established by

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<sup>420</sup> *Report of The National Conference of Labour Women*, London, 3-5 June, London, 1930, pp. 5-9.

<sup>421</sup> Susan Lawrence for East Ham North and Dr. Ethel Bentham for East Islington, *The Labour Woman*, 1 July 1929, p. 105.

<sup>422</sup> Statistics for returns drawn from <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ge1929/index.html>, accessed 23:30, 04/08/17.

<sup>423</sup> *The Labour Woman*, 1 July 1929, p. 1.

London Labour. As Herbert Morrison (then Minister of Transport), put it in his address to the 1930 Women's Conference:

Before the war, London was the despair of the Labour Party in Great Britain, and every one of the provincial women "turned their noses up" when London was mentioned. Now, London ... had a majority of Labour Members in the House of Commons. They had 48 Labour Members out of 144 on the London County Council, and eight of the Metropolitan Boroughs had Labour majorities, with Labour Mayors in control of local civic affairs.<sup>424</sup>

### **London Politics and Labour Women 1929 – a Pyrrhic Victory**

Though typically conceited, Morrison's portrayal of London as providing the progressive vanguard of the Women's Sections (and by implication the wider Labour Party) had some credibility. As early as 1919 fifty Labour women were elected to local Councils in London, whilst in 1922 Ada Salter of Bermondsey became the first woman mayor in London and Mabel Crout of Woolwich its first female JP.<sup>425</sup> When Labour eventually won control of the London County Council from the Municipal Reformers in 1934, women comprised 16 (or 23 per cent) of their successful councillors.<sup>426</sup> Once in power Morrison appointed Dr Esther Rickards as Chair of the Establishments Committee, Eveline Lowe and Agnes Dawson Chairwomen of Education and General Purposes respectively and, finally, placed Helen Bentwich in charge of the Fire Brigade Committee.<sup>427</sup> All four women made crucial contributions to shaping London Labour's welfare and educational programme. For example, in 1926 Eveline Lowe led the LCC in successfully opposing the Board of Education's Memorandum 44, which would have raised average class sizes to 50 (from the LCC's target

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<sup>424</sup> *Report of The National Conference of Labour Women*, London, 3-5 June, London, 1930, p. 2.

<sup>425</sup> Cf. A. Baldwin, 'Women Councillors and the Growth of Local Labour' in A. Baldwin et. al. (eds.), *Class, Culture and Community: New Perspectives in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Labour History*, Newcastle, 2012, p. 115 & D. Weinbren, 'Building Communities, Constructing Identities: The Rise of the Labour Party in London', *London Journal*, 23 January 1998, p. 48.

<sup>426</sup> In total Labour won 69 of 124 seats. See J. Martin, 'Engendering City Politics and Educational Thought: Elite Women and the London Labour Party, 1914-1965', *Pedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, 2008, p. 7.

<sup>427</sup> B. Donoghue & G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician*, London, 2001, p. 193.

of 40) and cut funding for school-building, and from 1934 she presided over implementation of a three year plan to modernise sixty two schools and build thirty more.<sup>428</sup>

So it would not be so far wrong to suggest that the second Labour government marked a political and electoral zenith for Labour Women in the south-east. For old campaigners it seemed that their hard effort was finally being rewarded and Marion Phillips (in one of her more millenarian moods) hailed the extension of the female franchise in 1928 as the beginning of a ‘great revolution’ which would break ‘Tory domination’ and secure a Labour Cabinet.<sup>429</sup> Yet the fact remains that this projected electoral *jacquerie* never materialized. The gains of 1929 were not sustained – all of Labour’s 36 women candidates (including sitting MPs) were defeated at the polls on 27 October 1931, and thirteen of the fourteen women MPs returned were Conservatives.<sup>430</sup> Even in London only five of the thirty-six Labour MPs elected in 1929 survived the rout, all of whom were men.<sup>431</sup> In fairness, the circumstances of this election were unique. The fall of the Labour government at a time of severe economic crisis, amidst profound internal divisions, engendered an unprecedented crisis of confidence amongst its own supporters. As the Conservative candidate for East Fulham, Sir Kenyon Vaughan-Morgan noted, men and women ‘who hitherto have voted either Liberal or Labour’ were not only taking greater interest in Conservative meetings, but were also more active in the run up to the election.<sup>432</sup> Also, pundits noted that the suddenness of the election meant that women’s organisations (such as NUSEC) which had previously given considerable help to Labour women, like Edith Picton Turberville, were unable to build up a sufficient fighting fund this time.<sup>433</sup> Nevertheless, there were signs even as early as

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<sup>428</sup> J. Martin, ‘Engendering City Politics and Educational Thought: Elite Women and the London Labour Party, 1914-1965’, *Pedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, Vol. 44, issue 4, 2008, pp. 14-6.

<sup>429</sup> *Report of The National Conference of Labour Women*, London, June 3-5, 1930, p. 11.

<sup>430</sup> Labour ran thirty women candidates in 1929 and thirty-six in 1931. See *The Manchester Guardian*, 29 October 1931, p. 1.

<sup>431</sup> D. Butler & J. Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, London, 1963, p. 125.

<sup>432</sup> *The Observer*, 25 October 1931, p. 18.

<sup>433</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 October 1931, p. 14.

1929 that the women's success in the south-east was built on foundations with serious fault lines. Contrary to Phillips' suggestion, the extension of the female electorate achieved by the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act of 1928 did not benefit Labour alone. In constituencies like Brentford & Chiswick, Camberwell North West, or Hythe an average increase of 10,000 in the electorate from 1924-1929 occasioned by a wider female franchise typically yielded between 1000 to 4000 more votes for Labour, but the Conservatives were to gain by picking up 1000 extra votes as well.<sup>434</sup>

### **Thwarted from Within**

Thus, even at its electoral apogee, Labour was unable to win and retain enough of the 'flapper vote' to overturn the Conservatives' electoral hegemony in England, let alone the south-east. But why was this so? Here Rasmussen has identified two main explanatory factors: Labour's neglect of its female support base and its poor choice of constituencies for female candidates. According to this interpretation Labour's unique appeal to young, single women in 1929 was not maintained and in 1931 the party made 'not the slightest effort' to mobilise the uncommitted, its election manifesto omitting the women's interest altogether. This neglect was allegedly compounded by Labour's strategy of putting up women nominees where the party had few chances of success, for the bulk of those largely female constituencies where the party ran women candidates tended to be in 'middle class urban seats in southern England', which was 'hardly prime Labour territory'.<sup>435</sup> The available election returns for 1931 partially vindicate this interpretation. Of the 36 Labour women candidates fielded in 1931, 22 ran for seats (without success) in the south-east among which were white-collar and suburban professional constituencies such as Aylesbury, Brighton, Hendon, Horsham & Worthing, Maidstone, St. Albans and Tonbridge. Most of these seats

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<sup>434</sup> Statistics for 1924 and 1929 taken from <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ge1929/index.html>, accessed 01:56, 06/08/17.

<sup>435</sup> J. Rasmussen, 'Women in Labour: The Flapper Vote and Party system Transformation in Britain', *Electoral Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1, April 1984, pp. 47-63, 53.

were already in Conservative hands in 1929 and it was only those south-eastern constituencies with a larger working-class population (East Ham North, Islington East, Norwich and Norfolk North) which represented new gains for the Tories two years later.<sup>436</sup>

However, Rasmussen's analysis is flawed in several important respects. Firstly, even if Labour neglected the young, single, working woman in 1931, it is hard to see why this group would have been any more attracted to such a pro-family party as the Conservatives. Indeed, the Conservative Women's Associations voted against Family Allowances in 1926, rejected the provision of birth control as late as 1931 and were utterly hostile to those working-class women who refused jobs as domestic servants after 1918.<sup>437</sup> Secondly, Rasmussen's own analysis of voting patterns contradicts his suggestion that Labour erred in sponsoring female candidates in southern, suburban seats. Though the party's share of the national vote declined by 6.5% in 1931, upon excluding 'middle class', 'mining' or 'agricultural' constituencies Rasmussen found that this drop in the vote share increased to 10.3 percent, implying that it was northern, working class women who deserted Labour during the crisis.<sup>438</sup> Moreover, former women candidates attest that supporters of birth-control and family planning were more likely to obtain a fair hearing in the south-east. As Dr. Edith Summerskill (Labour candidate for Putney in 1934 and Bury, Lancashire in 1935) later recalled from experience:

Although in London my views on these matters were known and I had contested a local and parliamentary election without having them challenged by the Catholic Church, I was to discover that the attitude of Catholics in the North whose ancestral roots were in Ireland was another matter.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Statistics taken from *The Times*, accessed at, <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ge31/ge31index.htm>, 06/08/17 22:31.

<sup>437</sup> M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement* in Britain since 1914, London, 2015, p 106.

<sup>438</sup> J. Rasmussen, 'Women in Labour: The Flapper Vote and Party System Transformation in Britain', *Electoral Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1, April 1984, pp 47-63, 58.

<sup>439</sup> In the event, the local Catholic Priests advised their congregation to vote against Summerskill due to her refusal to disavow birth control, securing Bury for the Conservatives in 1935. E. Summerskill, *A Woman's World*, London, 1967, p. 51.

Of course, Summerskill also states that Labour members in Bury were, like the ‘army of London Labour Women’ down south, a ‘resolute body’ of progressively minded activists, but she crucially admits that they were out of touch with the importance attached to sectarian and gender hierarchies within northern culture.<sup>440</sup> This is not to say that the southern constituencies were (by comparison at least) an easy ride for women candidates. For instance, the Labour candidate for the Islington East by-election of 1931, Leah Manning, found that the local CLP was ‘disgusted’ at the prospect of fighting a difficult campaign with a ‘school-marm’ as their nominee. Yet Manning admits that her status as an outsider was more of an impediment than her class or sex: her predecessor, Dr. Ethel Bentham, commanded considerable ‘affection and respect’ from working class activists and constituents.<sup>441</sup> In the event Labour triumphed – working-class concerns about the threat to trade union rights and wages during a depression handed the party a majority of 2,277 over its nearest competitor in East Islington.<sup>442</sup>

Consequently, it would seem that Labour’s near-annihilation in 1931 was more to do with the disintegration of its core support-base within the northern working-class electorate (especially among the housewives) and not simply the supposed anti-Labour prejudice of female wage-earners or voters in the south east. Several socio-political explanations have been advanced for this phenomenon. For McKibbin it was the sexual division of labour within the working-class household, with its emphasis upon the housewife’s individual responsibility for child-care, house-keeping or budgeting which encouraged working-class women to identify with deflationary economics against the irresponsible, feckless men in the

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-3.

<sup>441</sup> Manning was originally scheduled to stand at the East Bristol by-election, but was displaced in favour of then party favourite Stafford Cripps. See. L. Manning, *A Life For Education: An Autobiography* London, 1970, p. 83.

<sup>442</sup> The respective share of votes at the East Islington by-election of 1931 was as follows: Labour 10591, Empire Crusade 8314, Conservatives 7182, Liberals 4450. See B. Ron & S. Newens, *Leah Manning*, Essex, 1991, p. 30.

Labour Party.<sup>443</sup> This proposition bears considerable validity – though informal credit, pawn brokers and later hire-purchase, formed a shadow economy over the interwar period, working (and lower middle) class communities still considered borrowing as something to be ashamed of, a damning indictment of the housewife’s competence or moral stature.<sup>444</sup> Hence, Labour’s appeal to woman’s needs as the ‘domestic chancellor of the exchequer’ in the context of 1931 was likely to be counterproductive, especially considering that Labour’s former Chancellor, Phillip Snowden (now a ‘National Labour’ candidate), was publicly denouncing the party’s economic policies as ‘Bolshevism run mad’.<sup>445</sup> Nevertheless, as Barrett and McIntosh have noted, this interrelationship of working class women, ‘familialism’ and liberal (or neo-liberal) economics has been a long enduring feature of British capitalism and by itself hardly explains the scale of Labour’s defeat in 1931.<sup>446</sup>

### **A Stab in the Back by Their Own – the Anomalies Bill**

Rather, we must look to the unprecedented mood of pessimism and disillusionment which had taken root in the women’s Sections and the wider membership by June 1931. That month Head Office felt the need to issue ‘Thirty Points for Defeatists’ in leaflet form for members, emphasising Labour’s triumph in adding ‘300,000 widows and orphans’ to the Pensions List’, re-enacting rent restriction Acts, securing benefits for 170,000 more unemployed and loans of up to £90,000,000 to the Unemployment Fund.<sup>447</sup> What the circular did not mention was that the government had been contemplating cuts to ‘rebalance’ the Unemployment Insurance Fund for some time, and later that month Margaret Bondfield (Minister of Labour) introduced an Anomalies Bill which rendered married women ineligible

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<sup>443</sup> R. McKibbin, *Parties and People – England 1914-1951*, Oxford, 2011, p. 99.

<sup>444</sup> Cf. E. Roberts, *A Woman’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 149-150; R. Roberts, ‘Class Structure in the Classic Slum’ in M. Mollona, et. al. (eds.), *Industrial Work and Life: An Anthropological Reader*, Oxford, 2009, pp. 420-1.

<sup>445</sup> C. L. Mowat, ‘The Fall of the Labour Government in Great Britain, August, 1931’, pp.353-386

<sup>446</sup> M. Barrett & M. McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, London, 2015, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 7., No. 4, 1944, pp. 29-33.

<sup>447</sup> Draft leaflet cited in *The London News*, No. 80, June 1931, p. 1.

for benefit unless they could prove that they had been employed in an insured trade, or paid 30 insurance contributions since marriage.<sup>448</sup> The measure was successful in saving £3 million on the Insurance Fund, but Labour paid a much heavier political price. In Parliament the ex-Minister for education, Charles Trevelyan, and Eleanor Rathbone (one of two MPs for the Combined English Universities), led the ILP rebels in voting against the Bill following what one correspondent described as a debate of ‘uncompromising hostility’ exhibiting the extent of internal dissensions within the Labour Party.<sup>449</sup> In the event, no other female MP went into the lobby with Bondfield.<sup>450</sup> The Women’s Co-Operative Guild expressed considerable disquiet, its Secretary, Eleanor Barton, demanding that married women have insurance benefits “on the same terms as men according to the agreement they entered into”.<sup>451</sup>

More important, though, was Labour’s damaged credibility in the eyes of working class women. Bondfield, though touted as a “fairy god-mother” to organised labour upon her appointment, had already attracted considerable criticism for suggesting that striking female cotton operatives in Lancashire should seek work as domestic servants or canteen waitresses to reduce unemployment, and there were soon demands for her resignation.<sup>452</sup> However, the Minister’s growing unpopularity also tarnished the Women’s Sections, for Phillips and her fellow officers remained supportive of Bondfield’s policies up until the fall of the government in August. For instance, in an editorial for the *Labour Woman* August edition, Phillips described the Anomalies Bill as ‘a small measure and not very important in itself’ which had to be passed to secure assent to a loan of £25 million for Unemployment

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<sup>448</sup> TNA, CAB 23/90B/6, ‘Unemployment Insurance. Emergency Financial Measures. Memorandum by the Minister of Labour’, 04/02/1931, p. 29.

<sup>449</sup> The final vote on a third reading was 221 votes to 20 in favour, and the opposition included such prominent figures as Ellen Wilkinson, Cynthia Mosley, Aneurin Bevan, and Eleanor Rathbone. See *The Manchester Guardian*, 23 July 1931, pp. 4 & 9.

<sup>450</sup> P. Hollis, *Jennie Lee: A Life*, Oxford, 1997, p. 54.

<sup>451</sup> E. Barton cited in *The Manchester Guardian*, June 6 1931, p. 13.

<sup>452</sup> *The Labour Woman*, February 1931. Also, *Cotton Factory Times*, 30 January 1931 and letters cited in n. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, pp. 78, 96.

Insurance. As she saw it, the ILP's attack on the Bill utilised 'every possible weapon of misrepresentation' and ignored abuses that were 'publicly proved', whereas the spectacle of internal opposition was 'a humiliating and unforgettable experience' which the movement 'cannot readily allow to be repeated by members sitting on our own benches'.<sup>453</sup> Of course, when the government eventually fell Phillips turned towards condemning the 'Tory Policy of reactionary economies', whereas Labour accused the National Government's initial cuts to wages and unemployment insurance of reducing the income of working class household and betraying the housewife.<sup>454</sup> Yet the volte-face was arguably too late, for the damage had been done. As those Labour MPs defeated in 1931 admitted, the working-class woman voter's mistrust of Labour left them vulnerable to allegations that if elected, the party would raid Post-Office savings to pay for expenses. To cite William Bennett, failed candidate for South Battersea in 1931 was "a woman's election" - though meetings were crowded with record numbers of Labour men, '...the wives and daughters of our own members voted against us'.<sup>455</sup>

### **Women's Sections and the challenge of reconstruction in the South-East, 1931-1939**

Thus, Labour faced considerable obstacles in rebounding from the politico-ideological bankruptcy of its second term in office, not least being the defection or disillusionment of its supporters among working-class women. Though the party only made a vague commitment to applying the principle of "equal treatment for men and women" in its 1929 election manifesto, its 'Appeal to the Women' had promised immediate action to reduce maternal mortality, not to mention increased public expenditure on education and health to tackle unemployment, 'low wages', or 'bad housing'.<sup>456</sup> Accordingly, the 1929 General Election

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<sup>453</sup> *The Labour Woman*, Vol. XIX, August 1931, pp. 114-19.

<sup>454</sup> *The Labour Woman*, Vol. XIX, No. 9, September 1931, p. 130 & Henderson's comments in *The Labour Woman*, Vol. XIX, No. 10, October 1931, p. 152.

<sup>455</sup> *The London News*, December 1931, p. 5.

<sup>456</sup> 1929 Labour Party General Election Manifesto, Accessed at: <http://labourmanifesto.com/1929/1929-labour-manifesto.shtml> Accessed. 01:54 25/08/17.

witnessed a remarkable national turnout for the Labour party among the newly expanded female electorate, which the former Liberal MP and observer, Philip Wilson, described at the time as “little short of a miracle”.<sup>457</sup> Labour’s appeal to the female electorate as ‘equal citizens’ was well received – suggestions by Liberal or Conservative critics that young, working-class women were disinclined ‘to take the slightest interest in matters political’ were more prejudice than fact, as were claims that only 20 per cent of this cohort would turn up to vote.<sup>458</sup> Thus the lessons of 1929 and 1931 are clear: the three main parties ignored the women’s vote at their own peril and, at least in Labour’s case (and perhaps for the Liberals too), could not take for granted what support they did acquire.

### **ILP Women go their Own Way – London and the Loss of the ‘Shrieking Sisterhood’**

Yet apart from the attrition of the party’s female vote, the Women’s Sections were also confronted with substantial ideological and strategic divisions stemming from the unfulfilled promises (or compromises) of the second Labour government. The former government’s support for the Anomalies Act (1931) widened an already considerable divide between the Women’s Sections officers and ILP women, the former subjecting the latter to regular accusations of ‘divisiveness’ within official party organs such as *The Labour Woman*. The ILP’s response was best articulated by Dorothy Jewson (Labour MP for Norwich in 1924):

Such statements...constitute a grossly unfair attack on an organisation that is affiliated to the Labour Party. Does Dr. Phillips forget that the I.L.P. was largely responsible for the formation of the Labour Party and that the I.L.P. women throughout the country have helped and are helping in the work of

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<sup>457</sup> Wilson estimated that many of the constituencies polled 90 per cent of their electors and that the women “turned out en masse”, *New York Times*, June 9, 1929 in N. Greene (ed.), *European Socialism Since World War I*, Chicago, 1971, p. 69.

<sup>458</sup> See G. West, *Lloyd George’s Last Fight*, London, 1930, pp. 79-81.

organising women into the Labour Party? Is it the official intention of the party to make it difficult for us to continue to work together on these lines?<sup>459</sup>

If co-operation between the two women's groups was strained before 1931, it was all but impossible following the seeming ideological bankruptcy of Labour's 'gradualism'. At the National Conference of Labour Women held in Brighton, 14-16 June 1932, the ILP women were alone in criticising Margaret Bondfield for having furnished the National Government with an important 'weapon against the workers' when she introduced the Anomalies legislation, whereas Labour women representatives recapitulated the view that it was the National Government's application of the Act which was solely responsible for its disastrous effects.<sup>460</sup> Similarly, though Susan Lawrence's address to the Conference seemed to agree with the ILP in suggesting that Labour's reconstruction involved teaching people 'the hard lesson' that socialism could only be achieved by 'a bitter struggle for the attainment of power', at the same time she signalled a fundamental continuity of practice when stating that 'in politics, the class division is greater than the sex division'.<sup>461</sup> Thus, as with their male counterparts, a fundamental fault line separated both women's groups in their approach to the task of rebuilding the Labour movement. Where the Women's Sections and their officers sought to reaffirm their loyalty to the organised expression of the working-class (i.e. the trade unions), the ILP women identified this internal discipline as the precise reason for Labour's woes and departed from the organisation rather than submit to Standing-Orders.

Of course, as Pimlott has asserted, when the ILP eventually decided to disaffiliate from the Labour Party in July 1932 this had little direct impact upon the Women's Sections, for the ILP lost two thirds of its membership from 1931-1935, most of which remained inside

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<sup>459</sup>Cf. D. Jewson, letter to the Editor, *The Labour Woman*, June 1 1930, response to article in *The Labour Woman*, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1930, No. 5 Vol. XVIII,

<sup>460</sup> *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, 1932*, p. 61, cited in P. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 189.

<sup>461</sup> *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women (1932)*, pp. 5, 8-9,

the Labour Party as the Socialist League.<sup>462</sup> Yet the impact of the split cannot be evaluated in purely quantitative terms. Harry McShane, a leading organiser of the NUWM alongside Wal Hannington, attests: ‘Nearly all the outstanding women socialists’ he worked alongside at grassroots level ‘were in the ILP’, and though many rejoined Labour through the Socialist League, important organisers and agitators were lost to the party (at least for the next two decades).<sup>463</sup> Most notably, Jennie Lee, elected to the North Larkshire seat in 1929 as the youngest MP (female or otherwise) to ever grace parliament, departed with the ILP ‘disaffiliationists’ thus depriving the Labour left of an experienced women’s organiser. In this Lee was, like many ILPers, a self-professed ‘prisoner of geography’ – her family’s local powerbase within the Scottish trade union movement and the ILP (her grandfather founded the North Lanarkshire ILP with Keir Hardie) ensured that she would side with the disaffiliationists.<sup>464</sup>

However, the ILP split also posed considerable problems for the southern women’s sections. The majority of ‘disaffiliationists’ comprised of London based intellectuals and activists, most notably C.K. Cullen and Jack Gaster’s Poplar-based ‘Revolutionary Policy Committee’ (established in 1931), which formed an active competitor to branches of the Women’s Sections or S.L. in the metropolis. Though the RPC offered regular co-operation to the London S.L. throughout the United Front Period, in 1933 it went further in persuading the ILP to adopt fusion with the Communist Party of Great Britain as official policy and when this failed broke away in November 1935 to join it, carrying over hundreds of members as well as the Poplar, Wood Green and Harrow branches of the ILP.<sup>465</sup> Among the converts

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<sup>462</sup> At the time of disaffiliation the ILP numbered some 17,000, by 1935 it had 4,000 members, B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left In The 1930s*, London, 1986, pp. 44-6.

<sup>463</sup> H. McShane & J. Smith, *Harry McShane – No Mean Fighter*; London, 1978, p. 34.

<sup>464</sup> P. Hollis, *Jennie Lee: A Life*, Oxford, 1997, pp. 21, 62-5.

<sup>465</sup> G. Stevenson, ‘Dr C.K. Cullen’, *Compendium of Communist Biography*, accessed at: [http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1450:cullen-dr-c-k-&catid=3:c&Itemid=99](http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1450:cullen-dr-c-k-&catid=3:c&Itemid=99), accessed on 28/08/17, 00:37 am.

were notable campaigners such as Noreen Branson and Hilda Vernon, the former an aristocratic-born member of the Women's Co-Operative Guild in London's East End, the latter a feminist campaigner among London's female teachers and former leader of the Labour group on Marylebone Council. Both women were later crucial to the CPGB's work within the Spanish Medical Aid Committee or the NUWM, and in losing such activists to a 'proscribed' organisation the Labour Party squandered a crucial line of communication with the extra-parliamentary left.<sup>466</sup>

Naturally, this was not how Labour's women officers (or NEC for that matter) appraised the split at the time. On the matter of the ILP's attitude to PLP standing orders, George Lansbury spoke for many when declaring that there was no place for 'a Party within a Party' and the rest of the NEC were more willing to see the ILP disaffiliate than compromise on internal discipline, or Labour's support for progress achievable through peaceful, parliamentary politics.<sup>467</sup> Others were glad to see the back of what they saw as a politically-embarrassing nuisance - Hugh Dalton, a leading member of the NEC's Policy sub-committee, viewed the ILP disaffiliationists as an impotent 'rump' which would, with any luck, soon be joined in exile by the 'irritating' intellectuals within the Socialist League.<sup>468</sup> For women 'affiliationists' like Barbara Betts (later Castle) or Ellen Wilkinson the ILP seemed to be purchasing theoretical purity at the expense of practical obscurity, and a left-wing organisation within the party such as the S.L. seemed to have far better prospects of guiding the movement towards a fundamental transformation of the socio-economic system.<sup>469</sup> Indeed, reappraising the ignominious political record of the ILP post-disaffiliation, Pimlott has gone so far as to suggest that this split actually benefited both Labour men and women;

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<sup>466</sup> Cf. G. Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party From Disaffiliation to World War II*, London, 2007, p. 83 & K. Morgan, G. Cohen & A. Flynn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991*, Chicago, 2007, p. 170.

<sup>467</sup> Cf. F. Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow-The Autobiography of Fenner Brockway*, London, 1977, pp. 108-9.

<sup>468</sup> H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945*, London, 1957, pp. 22-5.

<sup>469</sup> A. Perkins, *Red Queen - The Authorized Biography of Barbara Castle*, London, 2003, p. 31.

the ILP's revolutionary rhetoric or 'shrieking sisterhood' were more likely to alarm the suburban electorate than rouse a passive working class.<sup>470</sup> This is a plausible assessment - the Conservative slogan of 'Safety First' rested upon a familialist appeal to the Englishman's (emphasis on *man*) 'love of home', as Baldwin termed it, the privacy of which guaranteed male individuality and participation in the public sphere.<sup>471</sup> In this rhetoric of quintessential 'Englishness' one of the main charges against the 'alien plants' of Communism or Fascism was precisely that, in seeking to abolish the household, both aimed at establishing a 'community of women', and feminists within the ILP were hardly likely to receive popular acclamation.<sup>472</sup> Yet, it must be noted that the withdrawal of the more radical female ILPers did little to wash away the 'anti-family' stigma (absurd as it was) that clung to Labour. The British Social Attitudes Survey conducted from 2000-2002 found that female respondents born between 1925-1944 were still at least 2-4 per cent more likely to identify with the Conservatives than their male counterparts, the highest of any age cohort for the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>473</sup>

Thus, it is hard to escape the impression that the exodus of ILP radicals damaged the work of the Labour Women's Sections without tangibly benefiting the party's image as a 'respectable' movement of communal welfare. Whatever its faults, the ILP had provided a crucial training ground for women socialists that was hard to replace, and which leading activists like Ellen Wilkinson remembered in glowing terms:

To stand on a platform of the Free Trade Hall, to be able to sway a great crowd...to be able to make people work to make life better, to remove slums

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<sup>470</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour and The Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 195.

<sup>471</sup> See S. Baldwin, 'Our National Character', A Broadcast address delivered in London, September 25, 1933 in *The Torch Of Freedom – Speeches and Addresses*, London, 1935, pp. 13, 23.

<sup>472</sup> C. Collette, *For Labour and for Women: The Women's Labour League 1906-1918*, Manchester, 1989, p 62.

<sup>473</sup> Figure 5.1. in R. Campbell, *Gender and the Vote in Britain – Beyond the Gender Gap*, Essex, 2013, p. 91.

and underfeeding and misery just because one came and spoke to them about it – that seemed the highest destiny any woman could ever hope for.<sup>474</sup>

As with her fellow leftists Wilkinson wished to see Labour women continue this autodidactic, activist tradition by taking a ‘a full share’ in organising the ‘planned thinking’ of discussion circles or conferences on socialist strategy, which required much greater representation for women in the selection of parliamentary candidates.<sup>475</sup> This sentiment was shared by the southern women’s Sections which increasingly organised educational summer-schools for officers and organisers, typically arranged by the London Labour party or regional advisory councils, as well as campaigns for promoting the domestic workers’ charter or affordable housing. Thus, in June 1931 the Women’s Advisory Committee of the London Labour Party hosted a summer school on the “Administration of Justice” under the directorship of Grace Colman, which attempted to grasp the everyday ‘legal matters’ confronting ‘working-people’ so that a Labour government may in future contribute to the ‘simplification of legal procedure’.<sup>476</sup> At the Summer School held the following year, those women attending discussed the more expansive subject of “Next Steps in Socialism”, featuring discussions on “Socialist principles and methods” under the next Labour government, not to mention “control of the banks”, the “revival of agriculture”, foreign trade, transport, electricity, and unemployment benefits.<sup>477</sup> The second week’s Summer School of that year, held at Digswell Park Conference House, Welwyn from 17-23 September 1932, again discussed ‘The Law in Everyday Life’, this time in relation to public health and maternity services, landlordism, trade union rights, or the potential for social improvements by Act of Parliament.<sup>478</sup> Apart

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<sup>474</sup> E. Wilkinson in *The Clarion*, 7 June 1935, cited in B. D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson – 1891-1947*, London, 1982, p 20.

<sup>475</sup> Cf. Wilkinson cited in *The Labour Woman*, January 1932, Vol. xx, No. 1, p. 9. Also, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, 1932, p. 30.

<sup>476</sup> *The London News*, July 1931, No. 81, p. 4.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid*, August 1932, No. 82, p. 4.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid*, September 1932, No. 83, pp. 5-6.

from London Labour, the smaller regional advisory councils in southern England also regularly hosted educational and organisational events. In 1932 the Reigate Divisional Women's Committee arranged their third one-day school at Dorking on 'Public Speaking for Beginners', whereas the Sussex and North Surrey Advisory Councils held conferences in East Grinstead and Kingston respectively dealing with unemployment in the former case, 'Divorce Law Reform' in the latter.<sup>479</sup>

Consequently, it would be unfair to suggest that the southern women's sections were 'atheoretical' or hostile to socialist proselytism in the ILP tradition; organisers as well as rank-and-file were well aware of the need to project a concrete utopia which could animate the wider electorate. It was in this sense that delegates to the Women's Conference of 1932 warned against Labour's returning to office merely as 'a piece of driftwood' riding a tide of disillusionment with the National Government (to cite Susan Lawrence).<sup>480</sup> Rather, were the party to succeed it was necessary to offer a positive vision of socialism which was linked to a concrete, macro-economic strategy and social policy. The main plank in this alternative was a vigorous defence of married women from victimisation through trade depression. Thus delegates to the 1932 Conference supported a report condemning the Anomalies legislation which stripped married women with 'many years' industrial experience before and after marriage' of benefits, as well as stipulations that claimants had to seek industrial employment 'in the district in which she lives'.<sup>481</sup> The latter residence qualification was particularly abhorrent to London based activists, for female applicants signing on at Edgware Road typically lived in Marylebone, Kilburn and North Kensington, areas without factory employment, and usually worked in Acton, Willesden or Harlesden.<sup>482</sup> Apart from the campaign for adequate work or maintenance, representatives for North St. Pancras and Forest

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<sup>479</sup> *The Labour Woman*, June 1932, p. 86.

<sup>480</sup> *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, 1932, p. 8.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

Gate complained that Labour heretofore ‘had no policy on finance at all’, and called for a firm position on internal war debt and the financing of social services, as this would ‘give help when canvassing’. To paraphrase Mrs. Brown of Forest Gate, women canvassers were unsure of whether the debt would be financed through a Capital Levy or tariffs, a confusion which hardly bred confidence among an electorate fearful of economic ruin.<sup>483</sup> For Monica Whateley, representative for St. Albans Women’s Section, it was also essential that Labour clarify its position on India and the national independence movement there. Indeed, the second Labour government had fomented considerable ill-will among the rank-and-file for its heavy-handed treatment of the Indian National Congress (INC) when in office and Whateley spoke for many women delegates in demanding a collective commitment to democratic institutions and free speech abroad as well as at home. In her words it was up to the British workers ‘to back them up’ and do everything ‘to create public opinion on the matter’, a resounding appeal which carried a unanimous vote of support from conference.<sup>484</sup>

### **The Fall of Sections - London and South East Buck the Trend**

In critiquing the errors of 1931, the Women’s Sections responded in a strategically constructive, pragmatic manner and were well aware of Labour’s need to recapture the support of the working-class housewife. However, surviving membership records suggest that this political re-branding had mixed success in rebuilding the women’s organisation. Indeed, from 1931 to 1932 the total number of Sections nationally decreased from 1,824 to 1,704, and by 1936 had fallen to 1,610. There was some improvement in the apparatus of regional Women’s Advisory Councils, which consistently rose from 61 in 1931 to 67 by 1936, but the number of Councils remained constant in the London and south-eastern region

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<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

(18 in total), expansion being concentrated in the Midlands and North East.<sup>485</sup> This does not necessarily suggest that membership of the south-eastern sections was stagnant. To the contrary, Annie Somers, Chief Organiser of the London women, claimed that local membership and interest in the party had grown so much that there was a growing demand for Women's Sections 'on a ward basis' within the metropolis. In the Greater London region, Ward Sections were formed in Battersea South, Hackney Central, Lewisham East, St. Pancras South-East and St. Pancras South-West, whereas the Deptford branch began to attract at least five hundred women at its weekly meetings.<sup>486</sup> Outside the metropolis, new Sections were formed in the Dartford and Mitcham Divisions of the Home-Counties, and encouraging rallies attended by hundreds were held by the West Middlesex, West Kent, and East Kent Advisory Councils.<sup>487</sup>

So it would seem that the leftward turn of the Women's Sections greatly benefited the movement at a grass-roots level within the south-east. As Mary Sutherland reported to the Women's Conference held in West Hartlepool, 23-25 June 1933, female members had maintained their organising and educational activities 'more successfully than many of the local parties themselves', and it was necessary to remind the men just how much they owed the Women's Sections.<sup>488</sup> These comments were more than the typical lip-service of recognition. The American political scientist Dean McHenry, personally present during the campaigning of the 1935 General Election, observed that Labour housewives constituted 'a tremendous source of strength' for the party by providing an essential daytime service during special and election campaigns. Apart from disseminating election literature, the women

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<sup>485</sup> Cf. *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women* (1931), p. 11, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women* (1932), p. 11, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, May 23-25, 1933, pp. 13-14, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, June 20-22, 1934, p. 11, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, May 15, 1935, pp. 10-1, *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women* May 19, 1936, pp. 10-1.

<sup>486</sup> *The London News*, March 1935, p. 4.

<sup>487</sup> *The Labour Woman*, July 1932, p. 106.

<sup>488</sup> *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, 1933, pp. 23-4.

made a crucial contribution to the party's funds and social intercourse through organising bazaars, whist-drives and dances: from 1933-1934 the Reading women for example raised between £300 to £558 per annum from this source.<sup>489</sup> They were also of pivotal importance to Labour's 'Million Members' campaign of 1932, in many cases shouldering responsibility 'for all the canvassing' (to cite Ms. Ayrton-Gould), as well as establishing branches of the new Labour League of Youth.<sup>490</sup> Yet important as these activities were, they were hardly likely to capture the imagination of a younger generation of women discontented with the traditional mothering and socialising activities of the housewife. As Sue Goss has put it, by the 1930s Labour addressed women 'almost solely as housewives and mothers' and as such overlooked a crucial source of potential support among discontented women clerks or teachers in the south-east.<sup>491</sup> Thus, over the course of the 1930s the vast majority of education committees on Labour controlled Councils continued to operate (and in some cases even introduced) marriage bars for women teachers, and even the Labour controlled LCC from 1934 (nominally committed to abolishing the bar) only ended the practice in 1935 when pressured into doing so.<sup>492</sup> In fairness, Labour did officially commit to the abolition of the marriage bar within Civil Service employment, a practice that they ended in 1946 after taking office.<sup>493</sup> But the Women's Sections were themselves divided on whether married women should work. The *Labour Woman* featured a highly emotive debate from the Brighton Women's Conference of 1932 where Sections delegates were frustrated by the lack of time

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<sup>489</sup> D. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition 1931-1938*, London, 1938, pp. 103-4.

<sup>490</sup> Cf. *Report of the National Conference of Labour Women*, 1932, p. 11 & *The London News*, No. 83, November 1931, p. 2.

<sup>491</sup> S. Goss, *Local Labour and Local Government: A Study of Changing Interests, Politics and Policy in Southwark from 1919 to 1982*, Edinburgh, 1988, p. 22.

<sup>492</sup> Agnes Dawson, Chair of the LCC Finance and General Purposes Committee, and leading member of the National Union of Women Teachers, threatened Morrison with her resignation in 1934 if the bar was not abolished. See A. Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-39*, Manchester, 1996, pp. 169-170.

<sup>493</sup> C. Colette, *The Newer Eve – Women Feminists and the Labour Party*, London, 2009, p. 115. The marriage bar prohibited married women from joining the civil service and required women civil servants to resign when they became married (unless granted a waiver). It was not abolished until October 1946 for the Home Civil Service and 1973 for the Foreign Service.

allotted to a discussion on the resolution to exclude married women from paid work on the staff of the Party.<sup>494</sup>

This hesitancy on Labour's part to commit to the principle of married-women's access to paid-employment, as supported by campaigns such as the 'Open Door' Movement, is intelligible once we consider how entrenched the sexual division of Labour was even in the south-east of England. The Chinese national Chiang Yee, who lived in London from 1938-1939, was shocked at how English women had 'not been esteemed highly by men in the fundamental sense', with women teachers in particular scorned as 'embittered, sexless or homosexual hoydens' attempting to mould the girls 'into their own pattern'.<sup>495</sup> This widespread disdain for educated, professional, or 'leisured' women's political involvement is exemplified by one newspaper's description of the middle-class woman activist from the period:

She arrives before the office is open, she refuses to leave for meals ... Her privations would indeed matter little to herself or anyone else for so hurried an election did they not arouse others to fury. To discourage her, however, is very difficult; to sympathise with her fatal. The only tactics are to set her to work where her asceticism will be little observed, and in extreme cases to suggest very tactfully that it is her looks rather than her health which suffer.<sup>496</sup>

Of course, the article goes on to contrast such nuisances with the 'sensible women' who 'extend to political work the sanity and attention to detail' which rules in their own homes.<sup>497</sup> In light of such views it is easy to understand how the temptation of electoral gain would persuade Labour women to focus upon maternal issues and household budgeting. After all, the papers were generally approving of what they termed Labour's 'housewife politics', as were leading trade-unionists such as Ernest Bevin who viewed the task of the unions as

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<sup>494</sup> 'Brighton' *The Labour Woman*, July 1932, p. 105, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

<sup>495</sup> Chiang-Yee, *The Silent Traveller in London*, Norwich, 1938, p. 229.

<sup>496</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 20 October 1931, p. 6.

<sup>497</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 20 October 1931, p. 6.

ensuring that the household was ‘made brighter’ or ‘easier’ for the mother and children.<sup>498</sup>

For instance, the National Union of Women Teachers, though formed as a break-away from the male dominated National Union of Teachers, was forced to argue that the married woman offered ‘fresh experience and more human understanding’ than the single woman when asking the Labour LCC to abolish its marriage bar.<sup>499</sup> Yet this was undoubtedly a regressive move in the long-term. The development of the light industries in the south-east and the Midlands over the inter-war period ensured that the female work-force increased by 650,000 from 1921 to 1938, the employment of younger, single women rising especially rapidly.<sup>500</sup>

At the same time, the expansion of the services sector led to the total number of female clerks trebling from 60,000 in 1921 to 180,000 by 1931, the vast majority of whom were aged between 15 and 25 years of age. Though pay in these clerical occupations was generally quite poor for young women, trade union organisation here was ‘almost non-existent’ (to cite John Gollan), apart from the postal workers, railway clerks, insurance officials, or National Union of Clerks.<sup>501</sup> There were those who, perceiving the need, attempted to organise the white-collar female workforce. Here Ellen Wilkinson’s National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers and the Shop Assistants’ Union were exemplary: able to secure equal job rates for men and women, both unions had 54,000 and 39,000 women members respectively.<sup>502</sup> More crucially, both NUDAW and the Shop Assistants retained a consistent presence at the Annual Conference of Labour Women throughout the 1930s, representing an important gain in support for the sections. However, these organisational efforts were not reinforced by the National Labour Party, which avoided discussing the provision of birth control or the equal pay issue at successive conferences in this decade.<sup>503</sup> In industrial and political terms, the

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<sup>498</sup> Cf: *The Manchester Guardian*, April 30, 1938, p. 14 & *The Labour Woman*, January 1932, pp. 8-9.

<sup>499</sup> A. Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900-39*, Manchester, 1996, p. 171.

<sup>500</sup> A. Miles & M. Savage, *The Remaking of the British Working Class 1840-1940*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 50-1.

<sup>501</sup> J. Gollan, *Youth in British Industry*, London, 1937, pp. 144-8.

<sup>502</sup> N. C. Soldon, *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976*, Dublin, 1978, p. 142.

<sup>503</sup> C. Collette, *The Newer Eve – Women, Feminists and the Labour Party*, London, 2009, pp. 75-76

national Labour Party was too hidebound to realise that a potential new support base had been squandered and the party's organisation paid the price.

## Conclusion

Reappraising the legacy of the women's movement from the vantage point of 1945 the Labour MP Ernest Thurtle observed that the advent of women voters and MPs had made little difference to British politics, the 'distinctive feminine sex point of view' (if it existed) failing to disrupt bonds of class solidarity.<sup>504</sup> Though underestimating the extent of 'Sex-Antagonism' within working-class communities, Thurtle offers an accurate rendering of the limited space available to a distinct 'women's interest' within the sphere of inter-war politics. The increased public prominence of women abroad and at home during the Great War did not usher in any lasting feminization of British society – within industry ex-service organisations, trade union representatives and successive ministers joined hands to secure the male wage-earner against female competition, whilst the three main political parties (though appealing to the new woman voter) offered few roles for women beyond those of the club-organiser or fund-raiser.<sup>505</sup> As we have seen, the perception that the public sphere belonged to a male-citizenry uniquely capable of rational discourse remained deeply entrenched; at a time when politicians and media were attempting to de-legitimise the 'macho', violent face of mass politics, feminists and women activists were also ironically condemned as the 'shrieking sisterhood'.<sup>506</sup> The Labour Party, for all its commitment to equal rights or the female suffrage, participated in this endeavour to contain and harness the woman voter. Those responsible for the party's 1918 reorganisation were adamant that 'middle class' feminists not be permitted to divide the movement and to this end the women's organisation from the individual section up to the National Advisory Council was allotted purely advisory powers.

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<sup>504</sup> E. Thurtle, *Time's Winged Chariot*, London, 1945, pp. 166-7.

<sup>505</sup> Cf. F. Beckett, *The Rebel Who Lost His Cause: The Tragedy of John Beckett, MP*, London, 1999, pp. 23-5.

<sup>506</sup> On attempts to eliminate violence in British politics see J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 191.

When Labour did actively appeal to the female electorate, it was in the traditional stock terms of a plea to the ‘domestic chancellor of the exchequer’ and her daily household needs as a consumer, or as ‘the nation’s custodians for the welfare of the young’.<sup>507</sup>

Thus, within the framework of the Labour party women activists were permitted equality neither in full integration nor in separate independence, the gendered division of labour within the party reflecting that which underpinned the wider public-private divide of British society. Flawed as this settlement may have been, it did at least appeal to working-class women desirous of supporting relatives, or even just getting out of the house for several hours each day. Apart from a momentary dip in membership from January 1930 to November 1931, the Sections continued to expand throughout the 1930s and officers claimed that the organisation had increased in efficiency by shedding ‘defunct’ or ‘inactive’ branches.<sup>508</sup> Moreover, reports from the Summer Schools, demonstrations against cuts to public sector wages, or observers present for the election campaigns all attest to the increased agitation and practical organisation of the Sections. In London women formed the backbone of local branch life, provided expert advice to local government on municipal asylums or maternity care and were at the forefront of the campaign for a universal education system. Yet no matter how impressive this was, the Party still lagged behind the Conservatives when it came to its female membership or securing the housewife’s vote, as was demonstrated by the sobering election result of 1931. The emergence of a young, single, female workforce within the clerical and services industries of the south-east did offer Labour a potential opportunity for overturning the Conservative hegemony among women. Here Todd argues that young women’s expanding employment and earning opportunities, the extension of the franchise, coupled with the discourse of the ‘Peoples’ War’ increased both young women workers’

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<sup>507</sup> See for instance ‘Women Electors: An Appeal From Labour Women’ (1922), 36/L41/1/4, Warwick Digital Collections accessed at, [https://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/singleitem/collection/tav/id/1735/rec/1\\_01:05](https://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/singleitem/collection/tav/id/1735/rec/1_01:05) am 16/09/17.

<sup>508</sup> *Report of the Labour Party Conference* (1932), pp. 5.

awareness of their unequal political and social status and their recognition that they could wield political influence in the workplace.<sup>509</sup> As Ferdinand Zweig noted in 1952, outside of those working women married to trade unionists or politically-minded men it was the women who went out to work regularly, especially factory or shop workers (and to a lesser extent clerical employees), who were more likely to acquire a wider political or social outlook.<sup>510</sup> That Labour stood to benefit from this socio-spatial shift in the division of labour was confirmed by George Shepherd, the party's national Agent, who later admitted that it was precisely among 'the younger people' that Labour's renewed socialist propaganda was most effective.<sup>511</sup> Yet the crucial moment was inadequately exploited – outside of NUDAW or the Clerical Workers Union the women workers with their interest in birth control, the marriage bar, or equal pay were given little attention at Labour Party Conference or within the NEC's policy sub-committee. If the Conservative's interwar hegemony was rooted among working and middle-class women, then this was in no small part due to the inflexible and ensconced political practice of the Labour party. Having explored these issues in national and regional terms, the next chapter offers a detailed case study of gender politics in a south eastern branch and considers the extent to which local socio-cultural factors aided or inhibited Labour's appeal to women.

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<sup>509</sup> S. Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918-1950*, Oxford, 2005, p. 170.

<sup>510</sup> F. Zweig, *Women's Life and Labour*, London, 1952, pp. 122, 124.

<sup>511</sup> G. Shepherd, *Labour's Early Days*, Tillicoultry, 1946, p. 36.

## Chapter V

### Labour Women – A South Eastern Glimpse

#### Willesden West Labour Women's Section 1930-1945

As we have seen in the previous chapter, there are conflicting views as to whether Labour's Women's Sections comprised a legitimate part of the inter war Feminist movement. For whereas the women of the smaller parties, such as the ILP and the CP, deemed the separating out of gender roles as all but reinforcing wider inequalities, Labour women held with the principle of 'equal but different'.<sup>512</sup> Indeed, both Executives of Labour and the Cooperative Union feared and resisted women acting as a distinct group on grounds of disunity and 'sex antagonism'. It has been argued that up until the late 1920s it was not too hollow a boast for Labour to describe itself as the 'women's party' where the earliest Women's Sections held with a vibrancy around issues such as birth control and family allowances.<sup>513</sup> Yet it has also been claimed that by the 1930s women and women's issues were increasingly established as peripheral to Labour's main goals.

In this Chapter I have looked to the records of the Labour Party's Willesden West Women's Section circa 1930-1945 in the hope that a local, south east study might shed some light on Graves' claim that a ground up examination belies the depiction of Labour Women's Sections as 'ghettoes' confined to domesticity.<sup>514</sup> Here I have found many of the local Labour records a 'Cinderella Archive' in that although the Brent Archive have been very thorough in maintaining much of its very rich industrial Labour heritage, many of the Labour records are still hand-written and difficult to decipher. It seems strange that the Willesden

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<sup>512</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women – Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 156. See S. Bruley, *Feminism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920-1939*, London, 2012, p. 226: Bruley points out that the CP disbanded its Women's Department in 1931 through fears of ghettoising Communist women and acting as a contradiction in terms.

<sup>513</sup> M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain Since 1914*, London, 2015, p. 131.

<sup>514</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women – Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 162.

West Women's minutes remained hand-written up until the latter part of the 1930s. Was this an indication of the Sections not being taken seriously or, alternatively, evidence of the women being so over-worked with fund raising responsibilities for the constituency that the record keeping was rushed? Did this also denote a middle-class membership unlikely to have been typists within the offices of the local light industries?

In 1918 legislation created a new Parliamentary borough of Willesden and divided it into two constituencies, Willesden West and Willesden East. The most important influence on the growth of Willesden was the Metropolitan Railway, which opened Willesden Green Station in 1879, together with the opening of the North Circular Road in 1922-23.<sup>515</sup> This station played an important part in the development of Cricklewood, an area of inter-war suburban growth and the rise of light industries, such as Smiths. The population of Willesden soared from 18,500 in 1875 to 140,000 in 1906. Wealthy city merchants began building their houses at Willesden Green and Brondesbury Park and local farms were bought up and laid out as housing estates. Willesden became an urban district in 1894 and then the Municipal Borough of Willesden in 1933. Areas such as Neasden became a by-word for inter-war middle-class suburbia and light industry. The Great Central Railway also established Works there. By the 1930s the constituencies of Willesden and Wembley (which now form Brent) were highly populated areas, with a combined population of approximately 238,000. Willesden was heavily bombed during the second World War and experienced over 1,000 Air Raid warnings between 1939-1945. Indeed, by October 1940 a greater tonnage of bombs fell on Willesden than on East Ham.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> *A Brief History of the London Borough of Brent*, Brent Museum & Archive Occasional Publications, No. 5, 2007, p. 9, Brent Archive.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

Willesden West comprised six Wards; Church End, Harlesden, Roundwood, Stonebridge and Willesden Green and Kensal Rise. Interestingly, following the post MacDonald rout of 1931 Willesden West elected a notable Tory women's rights advocate, Mavis Tate, whose election addresses nevertheless promoted patriotism as opposed to the cause of women, appealing to local voters for 'the sake of the country and the Empire'.<sup>517</sup> The seat then went back to Labour's Samuel Viant (a local JP) in 1935 and then remained a Labour stronghold up until 1959 when the constituency was abolished and formed into Brent South (now Brent Central). In 1965 the old boroughs of Willesden and Wembley joined to become what is known now as the London Borough of Brent. Through the local history sources, we gain a picture of Willesden West as being the more industrial out of the two constituencies, with pockets of poverty intermingled with wealthier suburbia, whilst Willesden East contained the more affluent areas of Brondesbury and Kensal Rose, together with Circlewood, Mid Kilburn, Kilburn North and Kilburn South. Willesden East was seen more of a Labour marginal. The father of prominent British Psychotherapist, Suzie Orbach, stood as the Labour East Willesden Parliamentary candidate for the 1935 General Election. Although he lost, the *Daily Herald* reported that the local Tories and Liberals had been 'shaken' by the levels of enthusiasm for his candidature: -

'Waiting hours for Labour meetings to begin ... but are refusing to go home when the speeches are finished. Instead, they call for Mr. Orbach'.<sup>518</sup>

Willesden East also had their own Women's Section but their records are not in the Brent Archive and appear to have been mislaid. This is a great shame in that a comparison between the two would have been useful. Yet apart from the Labour Women's Section, the women of Willesden had gendered political representation from the Willesden Conservative

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<sup>517</sup> 'Conservative Reception – Mrs. Tate at Memorial Hall – Six Hundred Present', *Kensington Post*, 9 October 1931.

<sup>518</sup> 'Voters Will Not Leave Meetings', *Daily Herald*, 7 November 1935.

Women's Association and the Willesden Women's Citizen Association, so denoting active pockets of middle-class affluence. Here one prospective Tory male candidate for Willesden West as early as 1928, Malcolm McCorquodale, felt it 'ridiculous' that the district should be represented by Labour, adding, 'there were no slums in Willesden West' and that its rate of unemployment was better than in any other place in the country, stating: 'In fact Willesden was in a very prosperous condition'.<sup>519</sup>

### **Southern Sections Fulfilling a Communitarian as Well as Political Role**

In her recent study of the inter-war workings of Labour Women's Sections, Stephanie Ward devotes her research to the working-class women of central and northern Sections. She maintains that for working-class Labour women the Sections not only acted as an outlet for political activism but also performed an inter-personal role in the formation of sisterly camaraderie and emotional fulfilment.<sup>520</sup> She suggests that the Sections were an expression of the way in which working-class women negotiated a political self which was both part of, but separate from, domestic and maternal identities. She argues that whilst working-class family life and neighbourhoods created potential obstacles, they also provided a mechanism of supportive networks akin to an informal welfare-state, where close social bonds, friendships, and neighbourly networks were formed.

Yet the south eastern women's Sections differed by way of a large, middle-class contingent, one not readily able to boast a long lineage with industrial labour and less likely able to fall back on the political education of the Cooperative Guild (an organisation with an avowed working-class antecedence). Instead, the political baptism of the south east women would have come from pressure group politics such as the League of Nations Union (LNU)

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<sup>519</sup> 'Prosperous West Willesden – Why Should it be Socialist', *Kensington Post*, 4 May 1928.

<sup>520</sup> C. Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 30, No. 1, 2019, pp. 29-52, p. 1.

who organised the Peace Ballot in 1935. For instance, Labour activist on Spain and one time M.P., Leah Manning, had commented that although she felt the LNU were clutching at straws, she nevertheless threw all her energies into supporting it, even though it was led by aristocratic cult figure, Lord Cecil.<sup>521</sup> Such associations claimed to be non-partisan with an emphasis upon citizenship and secular in nature. The LNU became the largest association in the inter-war period and comprised an individual membership of 400,000 in the early 1930s, to which the Labour and Liberals parties pledged their support.<sup>522</sup> The local press tells us that there was both a vibrant LNU and Women's Citizens Association in Willesden in the mid to late 1930s.<sup>523</sup> South eastern women were also more likely to have links with the newer, professional unions and local government employment, though like their northern sisters they too would have been subject to the marriage bar. Indeed, McCarthy argues that such associations as the Women's Institute (WI) were often used as springboards by women for entry into local government. For as found in our examination of two south east constituency parties, the middle-class, south east women were also more likely to promote international politics as opposed to that of local domestic variety. McCarthy is of the view that these broad-based voluntary associations subsequently became integral to the political culture of Britain's 'nascent' mass democracy and she rejects McKibbin's claim that they posed a negative force against organised Labour.<sup>524</sup> However, by virtue of their class alone, one would assume that the middle-class, south east Sections women were more

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<sup>521</sup> L. Manning, *A Life for Education - An Autobiography*, London, 1970, p. 141. Leah Manning was a Labour politician in the 1930s (on the Left of the party). She was twice a member of Parliament, both in the Labour government of 1929-31 and again from 1945-1950. She had also been a prominent activist in the NUT and served as their President and post politics continued working as a Teacher.

<sup>522</sup> *LNU Yearbook*, London League of Nations Union, 1 January 1933.

<sup>523</sup> 'Unemployment an International Problem - Willesden Women Citizen's Association', *Kensington Post*, 4 June 1937.

<sup>524</sup> H. McCarthy, 'Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, December 2007, Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 891-912, p. 912. See R. McKibbin, *Classes & Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998. McKibbin argues that the apolitical sociability found in such associations fostered within the expanding associational networks of suburban England fostered a middle-class in opposition to the political aspirations of organised Labour.

individualistic in their thinking as opposed to their collectivist-minded northern, working-class sisters. However, on examination of the minutes for the Willesden West Section we can glean collectivist sentiments which begs the question whether their gender then transcended class?

For instance, minutes from the Willesden West Section suggests that southern, middle-class Labour women also saw the moral economy of the home as a basis for political action. For what might at first appear as tedium in the recording of personal events reveals genuine affective gestures of warmth and kindness not restricted to northern working-class hospitality. For they too collected for 'thank you' gifts and birthday presents, as in the case of organising a birthday party in August 1930 and paying Mrs. Carne 2/3d to purchase some perfume.<sup>525</sup> They further contributed £2 2/- towards a fund for members in poor health.<sup>526</sup> Sections would also pay visits to sick members, something rarely seen in the male dominated general constituency branches. It was also not uncommon for Section members to mark the death of members' loved ones, as in the case of the minutes of February 1938 marking the death of Mrs. Sutherland's husband where it was recorded, 'the meeting stood for a period in silence as respect and a letter of condolence had already been sent by Secretary'.<sup>527</sup>

Willesden West Women's Section also showed their appreciation to guest speakers as in the case of buying a floral token for the daughter of Ramsay MacDonald, Ishbel MacDonald, after she spoke at the Section's public meeting on 9 February 1931 on the theme of education.<sup>528</sup> Interestingly, unlike her Father she did not join the National Government (as

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<sup>525</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting Minutes, held at Hamilton Hall, 9 August 1930, Brent Archive.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 14 April 1930, Brent Archive.

<sup>527</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting Minutes, held at the Labour & Trades Hall, 21 February 1938, Brent Archive.

<sup>528</sup> 'Miss Ishbel MacDonald. At Willesden', *Kensington Post*, 13 February 1931. In 1929 she was elected to the London County Council as Labour Member for Poplar. In 1931 Ishbel was elected to the London County Council as Labour Party Member for Bow and Bromley.

her Father had done in August 1931) yet could not escape the backlash in that the Whip was removed from her on the LCC. The women had done all the hard work for this meeting, such as the practicalities of raising funds for posters and pre-meeting refreshments, but a man from the general constituency, Mr. Nunn, took charge and another man, then future M.P. and J.P. Mr. S. P. Viant, as opposed to, say, the Sections' Secretary or Chair, shared the platform. Again, the Section Committee Meeting of 9 November 1931 recorded organising a social event for the presentation of an *attache* case to outgoing President, Mrs. Carne, yet at the same time asking Mr. Viant from the general constituency branch, to make the presentation as opposed to a sister from the Section.<sup>529</sup> The question remains as to why they did not ask a leading figure from the National Labour Women's Section to officiate at such events?

### **Reading Between the Lines – A Political Self**

Graves argues that though the social activities of all the Sections were invariably allied to political fund-raising this did not detract from their seriousness of purpose.<sup>530</sup> This is reflected in the pages of the Labour women's national newspaper (a monthly), *The Labour Woman*, where its general content vied between domesticity in the form of dress patterns and debates on key welfare issues and policy. For example, in the letters page of the November 1932 edition one respondent answers the question, 'How I spend My Leisure Times' as follows: -

'I am one of those whose true hours of leisure are few, but I cannot help feeling very grateful for them when I think of others....suffering the enforced leisure of unemployment....I am also fortunate in that I am a convinced socialist living in a constituency where there is still much to be done in that great cause. Having two young children, I am unable to spend much time away from home, but our Women's section claims my one "evening out"'.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting Minutes, Hamilton Hall, 9 November 1931, Brent Archive.

<sup>530</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women – Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 205.

<sup>531</sup> Letter from Mrs. E.M. Bell, *The Labour Woman*, November 1932, p. 171.

Indeed, the marrying up of politics with social fund-raising and rituals with food was a common facet of many Sections and not specific to region, what Ward refers to as the cementing of bonds between women.<sup>532</sup> For example, when looking to the south, the north Greenwich Labour Women's Section in January 1937 discussed the Annual Report of the Standing Joint Industrial Women's Organisation and planned future programmes, together with International Women's Week, as well as announcing the date of the next Whist Drive to be held at the Cooperative Hall.<sup>533</sup> Similarly, the Heston (Middlesex) Women's Section of 18 May 1939 attended a talk in the village hall on health given by Dr. Mary Ferguson, tempered with the announcement of a Whist Drive.<sup>534</sup> Again, the South Ward Women's Section of the Ealing Labour Party's meeting of 16 May 1938 commenced with the rendition of 'England Arise', followed by a sit down tea and then an address by Councillor, Mrs. Davies of Greenford, who gave a short address in which she stressed the importance of women in urban affairs and encouraged her audience to become more interested in council work.<sup>535</sup>

In the case of the Willesden West Section there was certainly an abundance of reference to social events throughout the 1930s and war years, but as Ward cautions, such interactions should be read as expressions of the political self and were perhaps consciously recorded in a particular way by women operating within what was deemed an 'unfeminine' environment. Indeed, neighbourly gossip could still persist within Sections whereby women still felt they had to conform to a domestic stereotype. Women within Sections (north and south) have been recorded as feeling uncomfortable and lacking in confidence with speaking at joint constituency meetings and of also feeling equally uncomfortable with holding their

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<sup>532</sup> S. Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working Class Women's Politics', *Twentieth Century British History* Vol. 30, No. 1, 2019, pp. 29-52, p. 45.

<sup>533</sup> 'Greenford Labour Party – Women's Activities in North Section', *West Middlesex Gazette*, 30 January 1937.

<sup>534</sup> 'Labour Women's Section', *Middlesex Chronicle*, Saturday 20 May 1939.

<sup>535</sup> 'Labour Women's "At Home"', *West Middlesex Gazette*, Saturday 20 May 1938.

Sections' gatherings in venues associated with male dominance. However, in the case of the Willesden West Section this did not appear to be the case in that they only met at the President, Mrs. Williams', home on one occasion on 14 August 1931 and it was not clear whether this was a pre-meeting to organise refreshment arrangements for a social planned for 7<sup>th</sup> September. All other Section Meetings were either held at Hamilton Hall or the Willesden Labour & Trades Hall.<sup>536</sup>

Yet the Willesden West Section also had a coexisting political identity. For instance, they made reference to Oswald Mosley's new party in the minutes of 16 February 1931 and agreed that as a Section they send a letter upholding actions, but it is then not stated what the actions are, for Mosley was expelled by the National Labour Party on 10 March 1931.<sup>537</sup> At the meeting of 14 September 1931 the Secretary was asked to write to Gandhi to invite him to an open meeting (Gandhi had been in the UK for 3 months to attend the Round Table Conference).<sup>538</sup> On 7 February 1938 Mrs. Aldridge is noted as having spoken about local government purchasing land and then leaving it or selling it on instead of retaining it or at least attempting to nationalise such land.<sup>539</sup> This was then followed up at the next meeting of 14 February 1938 where we are informed that the Land Nationalisation Society was sending a speaker to clarify the points on compulsory powers.<sup>540</sup> Mr. Viant (the constituency M.P.) is noted in the minutes of 7 March in the same year as arranging to take a deputation of the Section's members on a visit to the House of Commons. At another meeting of 4 April 1938 the Section expressed their anger at suggestions from certain Magistrates that young boy

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<sup>536</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, held at the home of President, Mrs. Williams, 24 August 1931, The Brent Archive.

<sup>537</sup> 'Sir Oswald Mosley Expelled by Labour Party', *Western Daily Press*, Wednesday 11 March 1931.

<sup>538</sup> 'Gandhi's Hope for Round Table – No Revival of Civil Disobedience' *Daily Herald*, Thursday 12 November 1931. Gandhi visited the UK between September to December 1931 with the aim of attending the London Round Table discussions held at St. James Palace with the objective of finding a peaceful resolution to the crisis in South Asia.

<sup>539</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, held at Hamilton Hall 7 February 1938, Brent Archive.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid*, 14 February 1938.

offenders be given the choice of going to prison or serving in the Army. Their protest was sent via the constituency M.P., Mr. Viant, and sent to the Home Office. As with my previous comparison of two Constituency Parties, the Willesden West Section's minutes also changed and adopted a more overtly political flavour in the latter 1930s, particularly towards that of international affairs. This could have been attributable to a new minute taker, or as in the case of the Hendon, was symptomatic of the middle-class make-up of the Section.

For on 14 March 1938 Mrs. Scudder reports on a conference at the Co-op Hall as being well attended but rather flat until enlivened by a discussion on the crisis of the attempted Nazi coups in Vienna which culminated in the German Anschluss of Austria in March.<sup>541</sup> This depth of political commitment of the south east Section's members is also borne out in interviews conducted by the Labour Oral History Project with women such as West London former members, Doris Ashby and Marianne Elliot. Both recall their mothers being very committed to the Party and acting as successful subs collectors in the new light industry areas of Perivale and Greenford. Both followed their mother's footsteps into the Labour Party, Marianne in 1937 at the age of 18 when she became a Branch Secretary and Doris after retiring from nursing. Marianne specifically recalls the Women's Section as being 'very active in Acton'.<sup>542</sup> Interestingly, both women talk of their 'real' political training as coming from the Co-operative Guild (where dual membership often overlapped between the Guilds and the Section). They imply that if left to the male dominated wider Party structure that training would never have happened, intimating that it was often used as a means to stop them from progressing, despite the fact that the majority of fund raising was undertaken by women members.

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Labour Oral History Project, C609/17 Interview with Marianne Elliot conducted by Barbara Humphries 1994; C609/20 Interview with Doris Ashby conducted by Barbara Humphries, 1994, British Sound Archive.

## Bringing the Moral Economy of the Home into Politics

The Willesden West women also became concerned with familiar, gendered themes as recorded in other Sections, ones relating to welfare, education, rights for domestic workers, peace, Spain and Manchuria, something Stephanie Ward sees as transposing the moral economy of the home into ‘.. a basis for political action’.<sup>543</sup> For instance, the topic of Manor House Hospital was consistently raised throughout the years by the Willesden women. The Hospital was based in Golders Green NW11 and founded by the Benevolent Fund of the Industrial Orthopaedic Society with the aim of treating industrial injuries (on a non-profit making basis). By 1931 Manor House had been transformed from wooden huts into a modern, serviceable hospital with surgical expertise. It was literally physically built by its patients and sustained through trade union subscriptions and could be accessed by trades union membership. It was obviously of great value to the Willesden women pre-Beveridge, National Insurance and the NHS.<sup>544</sup> Here it has been argued that the inter-war middle-classes, as epitomised by the West Willesden women, revealed a self-interest as opposed to humanitarianism around health in that they had much to gain in the ending of private, costly health insurance and access to universal benefits formerly means-tested.<sup>545</sup>

The earliest of minutes from 9 December 1929 recorded a discussion about Manor House Hospital and the organisation of dances and socials as a means of raising funds.<sup>546</sup> At the next Section meeting of 30 January 1930 it was agreed that the Manor House Organiser, Mr. Pollard, be written to and invited to speak at a Monday afternoon Section gathering and advised to come prepared to answer questions from the members. The Section had a

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<sup>543</sup> S. Ward, ‘Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working Class Women’s Politics’, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 30, No. 2019, pp. 29-52, p. 45.

<sup>544</sup> S. J. Woodall, *Manor House Hospital: A Personal Record*, Oxford, 1966, p 7.

<sup>545</sup> P. Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875-1975*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>546</sup> Willesden West Women’s Section Committee Meeting, Hamilton Hall, 9 December 1929, Brent Archive.

collection box for Manor House which was regularly emptied and replenished.<sup>547</sup> Again, at the meeting of 13 April 1931, the Section was promoting a pamphlet entitled, ‘ Reports of Hospitals and the Patient & the Domestic Workers Charter’.<sup>548</sup> It might seem strange that the poor working conditions of the domestic worker were still present on the Section’s agenda in the early 1930s in that the inter-war period is noted for a sharp decline in women going into domestic service.

However, in the early 1930s domestic training was often the only work offered to women in ‘dole’ schools and it was official government policy to encourage unemployed women into domestic service. Also, domestic service was an uninsured occupation and those employed in that way would not qualify for unemployment benefit. Therefore, the more people classified as domestic servants the smaller the number eligible to claim the dole. For although the 1931 Census revealed a 15% increase in the number of female indoor domestic servants this was a temporary glitch, for by the next enumeration twenty years on the number of those going into domestic service had shrunk by three quarters of a million. Findings from *The New Survey of London Life & Labour 1930-1935* singled out the lure of factory employment as the main cause of the scarcity of young servants in London.<sup>549</sup> Yet the matter arises again as late as 1938 in the Section minutes of 31 January when members were informed that TUC General Secretary, Walter Citrine, was offering a free pamphlet for distribution among domestic workers, though we’re not told of the topic.<sup>550</sup>

Nevertheless, the entire collection of Section minutes does not reveal concerns for the plight of the young women employed within the local, light industries, un-unionised and subject to the employment vagaries of employers such as Smiths Clocks, Cricklewood, who

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid, 13 January 1930.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid, 13 April 1931.

<sup>549</sup> *New Survey of London Life & Labour, 1930-35*, Vol II, p. 429, BLPES, LSE.

<sup>550</sup> Willesden West Women’s Section Committee Meeting, Labour & Trades Hall, 31 January 1938, Brent Archive.

employed a work-force in the borough of Willesden of 8,000 by 1939. By 1929 57 factories were situated at what later became known as Staples Corner, a large, light Industrial Trading Estate which straddled the Edgware Rd. North Circular Road and Cricklewood. Other major firms also moved to the borough, such as Bentley, Rolls Razor, Associated Automation (Dollis Hill Lane) and the GPOs coin operating telephones.<sup>551</sup> It is not clear whether this lack of mention of the young women assemblers working long hours for half the hourly rate of men was as a result of the national Labour Party's, and TUC's, reinforcement of the Marriage Bar and fears of dilution of wages. Could it also in part be as a result of the mostly, married, middle-class women in this south east Section originating either from a white-collar or professional background and not relating to such concerns? Or, alternatively, did the older, working-class women deem the work of the younger factory women as transient and disruptive of the domestic hierarchy at a time of high male unemployment? As Glucksmann highlights, in an era of high unemployment married women who worked were 'vilified' in the media as selfish and greedy.<sup>552</sup> Were the needs of these young, female workers marginalised simply because they were deemed temporary, secondary workers, primarily defined as future wives and mothers? Here Todd maintains that the work-place organisation and militancy of inter-war, young female workers continues to be marginalised as 'frivolous and seen as being '...inspired by short-term self-interest or hedonism, rather than by political commitment'.<sup>553</sup> Section minutes of 11 April 1938 highlighted the way in which such concerns were accorded to non-unionised male labour on the construction of the large municipal estate of Curzon Crescent, Harlesden.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> 'Places in Brent – Cricklewood and Dollis Hill, Grange Museum of Community History & Brent Archive, p. 8. M. Glucksmann, 'In a Class of Their Own? Women Workers in the New Industries in Inter-War Britain', *Feminist Review*, No. 24, Autumn 1986, pp. 7-37, p 31.

<sup>552</sup> M. Glucksmann, *Women Assemble – Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter War Britain*, Oxford, 1990, p. 94.

<sup>553</sup> S. Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950*, Oxford, 2007, p. 168.

<sup>554</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, Labour & Trades Hall, 11 April 1938, Brent Archive.

The fact remained that the location of the new light industries in south east regions and towns with no prior history of industrial employment of women meant that many entered the labour market as ‘green’ labour with all the attendant weaknesses that this involved, including an inability to bargain over conditions or wages. Similarly, with the growth in south east light industries came the exponential numbers of women employed in offices and this too is absent from discussions within the Willesden minutes, despite the National Conference of Labour Women (held at Swansea) 19 May 1936 devoting a whole morning session to the topic, with a discussion moved by Miss Godwin of the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries.<sup>555</sup>

This seeming lack of interest in the plight of the exploited younger women in the local factories was perhaps a sign that the loyalty toward Party came before the cause. For the Feminist movement considered pay to be a gender rather than a wage issue. As Smith argues, they saw sex differentiated pay ‘both as a symbol of female subordination and as a means by which women were kept dependent upon men’.<sup>556</sup> Gendered pay conveyed a powerful message of female inferiority and was part of wider gender relations which Feminists were committed to reforming. However, there seemed to be less ambiguity on the issue at the Women’s Sections national level. For instance, the National Conference of Labour Women (held at Brighton) 14-16 June 1932, debated ‘Women’s Right to Work’ and called for the avoidance of the ‘capitalist trick’ of *sex warfare*<sup>557</sup>:

‘Attempts are being made to see that when there is unemployment the blame for it is put upon the woman worker, and that she is the first “to get the sack”. We ask you to agree with us in saying to the workers that the interests of men

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<sup>555</sup> ‘*Women in Offices*’, Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, held at Swansea, 19 May 1936, pp 21-31, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

<sup>556</sup> H. L. Smith, ‘British Feminism and the Equal Pay Issue in the 1930s’, *Women’s History Review*, Volume 5, No. 1, 1996, pp. 97-110, 98.

<sup>557</sup> National Conference of Labour Women, Brighton, 14, 15 & 16 June 1932, p. 24, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

and women cannot be thus antagonistic. Some women need the job more than some men...'<sup>558</sup>

There was much sociological discussion in the 1930s around fears of young women's moral corruption relating to disposable income and the cinema. For instance, in his 1938 study, 'The Problem of Leisure', Henry Durant wrote about the conditions of factory work in which working-class women were employed as leading to being 'stupefied' where the desire for escapism supposedly led to the erotic behaviour of the factory girl in the display of finery, love of dancing and the cinema, with their 'loud shrieks of laughter in the streets'.<sup>559</sup> Here Glucksman provides insight into the poor working conditions experienced in the inter-war period for those on the Bedaux assembly system by way of her interviews with retired former women workers employed within 5 factories in West London and Middlesex. Nell Williams commented on her work for Peak Freens:

'They even timed you when you had to go to the ladies' room. Say you had 20 minutes for a tray, they'd alter it so you got to do that tray in 15 minutes. You just had to work faster. They all had a moan, "Don't they think we work hard enough", but I don't remember a strike over it.'<sup>560</sup>

'They asked whether I was pregnant. You had to swear you was not pregnant. They even wanted a certificate off the doctor. One girl was pregnant and they came round and gave her cards.'<sup>561</sup>

Continuing with the theme of issues specific to the Sections, Willesden West met on 7 February 1938 and spoke about a 'Cost of Living' meeting held at The Friends House (Quaker Meeting Centre, Euston Rd) asking that more signatures be gathered on a petition to be sent to the Prime Minister. Consistent with general sentiment of many Women's Sections around peace and anti-war protest, the 14 February meeting received a letter from the TUC

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> H. Durant, *The Problem of Leisure*, Oxford, 1938, p. 91.

<sup>560</sup> M. Glucksman, *Women Assemble – Women Workers and The New Industries in Inter-War Britain*, Oxford, 1990, p. 101. Interview with Nell Williams.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

requesting they send protest postcards to the Japanese Embassy criticising the invasion of Manchuria. At the same time the women agreed both to send a letter of congratulation to the Dockers for boycotting Japanese imports and then to send a letter to the *Daily Herald* criticising the Dockers' Union leaders for inaction and a notice to this effect was placed in the *Daily Herald* and signed by Mrs. Huggins.<sup>562</sup>

As with many other regional Sections, the issue of Spain regularly appeared in discussions from 1936 onwards. The local press tells us that feeling ran high on the issue for the Willesden women in that their members (including their female Councillors, Mrs. Huggins and Mrs. Carne) took part in a demonstration held on 18 September 1936 in support of the Spanish Government which took the form of a procession from Hamilton Hall, on through Willesden to King Edwards Park where a large crowd assembled. A resolution was carried unanimously expressing admiration of the self-sacrificing bravery and gallant fight by the democratic sections of Spain in defence of their democratically elected government. The demonstration deplored support given to the rebels by outside powers and by sections of the press to the rebel Spanish Officers who had broken their allegiance to the Republic and organised mercenary troops in an effort to overthrow the Spanish government. The demonstration further appealed to sections of the British Labour movement to organise so that the 'menace of Fascism shall be an impossibility in this country'.<sup>563</sup>

### **Separate and Equal or Ghettoised Puppets?**

Pat Thane has challenged the view that Labour women acted as 'puppets' of male leaders or as traitors to a feminist movement. Instead, she has argued that they had an organisational importance and independence of mind which formed a bona fide part of

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<sup>562</sup> Letter from Mrs. Violet Huggins, *The Daily Herald*, Tuesday 1 March 1938.

<sup>563</sup> 'In Support of the Spanish Government', *Kensington Post*, Friday 18 September 1936.

British Feminism.<sup>564</sup> Graves on the other hand feels there was something of a retreat in Labour women's political zeal by the 1930s, adding: 'The more integrated they became the less visible they were'.<sup>565</sup> However, by the 1930s it could be argued that Labour women's loyalties were tested by the Depression, mass unemployment and growing international concerns. Indeed, many labels have been used to try to capture the distinctiveness of Labour women's views, many in a pejorative sense of criticising an adherence to a narrow social reform agenda where Party loyalty came secondary to the cause. However, Communist women also faced their own struggles, for despite the CP disbanding its Women's Department in 1931 for full integration, complaints reached the General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, from women comrades that the extent and commitment of their husbands' proselytising had in effect made them 'grass widows' who were expected to run the home single-handed, so having led to many broken marriages. Unlike Labour, the issue did reach the higher echelons of the CP and Pollitt raised the matter in a speech at the thirteenth Party Congress:

'I am continually struck that in our Party there is an amazing amount of domestic unhappiness, which becomes a definite retarding feature in the development of the work of our Party members....It is a common thing to hear comrades declare "We are looked upon as wife deserters", "We are never at home" – and the consequences is that squabbles and strife develop and the wives of our own Party members become some of the worst advertising agents for the Communist Party.'<sup>566</sup>

Yet in looking to the Willesden West minutes there is a discernible pattern of less political activity in the early 1930s which then picks up midway through the decade when there was a seemingly paradoxical attempt to marry domestic concerns with internationalism (as evidenced with reference to Spain and Manchuria). The charge that Sections acted as

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<sup>564</sup> P. Thane, 'The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945' in H. L. Smith, *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, Massachusetts, 1990, p. 141.

<sup>565</sup> P. Graves, *Labour Women – Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918-1939*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 78.

<sup>566</sup> S. Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain 1920-1939*, Abingdon, 2012, p. 238.

'ghettoes' is an interesting one, for could it be argued that Labour women in fact had more opportunities of achieving office within the mixed general constituency branches? In the case of the local case studies of Hendon and Faversham, the Divisional and District Ward Parties had women as Executive and Branch Secretaries (often J.P.s in their own right) and in the case of Willesden Mrs. Huggins and Mrs. Carne held sway outside the Section as local Councillors who were often vocal in the local and national press and who took part in political activities of the Constituency Party.

It could be argued that the women were put upon in that they worked tirelessly for what they no doubt felt was the flipped sides of the same coin, that of the cause of Labour and Labour's cause of women. Without the Women's Section it is doubtful that the Willesden Constituency would have functioned in that the women raised almost all the funds, both for election campaigns and the payment of Party agents. For instance, they had collection boxes permanently on the go, one labelled 'Kindly Thoughts', one for the Manor House Hospital, and the other for the payment of the Party agent. They would meet on a Monday afternoon which no doubt added extra stresses of finishing business and then returning home to prepare the family meal, be there for children returning from school and so on. Yet any notions that they could readily be taken for granted was often quickly dispelled. For instance, it was Party policy in the 1930s that Women's Sections should organise and almost 'mother' the development of the Labour League of Youth, whereas the older males from the constituencies adopted a mentoring, paternalistic role.<sup>567</sup> The minute entry for the 10 February 1931 tells us that the Section received a letter from the local Labour League of Youth asking the women for support with their meeting, but this was in the guise of providing refreshments as opposed to advice and political participation. Suffice to say, the

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<sup>567</sup> M. Webb, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour League of Youth*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2007, p. 125.

women resented being taken for granted and reacted with a contemptuous rejection.<sup>568</sup>

Similarly, for all their fund-raising endeavours on behalf of the constituency, the Section had no money of its own to pay for a WEA speaker willing to give them a talk on 4 May 1931.<sup>569</sup>

Evidence from the minutes also suggests that the Section women were marginalised in the way they struggled for political training with public speaking which would have then encouraged women to apply for local Party officer roles. In this way they tried to cobble together what they could. For instance, at the meeting of 12 October 1931 'Speakers Notes' were offered to the Section at 2/6d a hundred and agreed that Secretary send for a set.<sup>570</sup> Again, at the meeting of 14 March 1932 a Newsletter was read out concerning 'A Guide to Standing Orders' written by the Watford Women's Section.<sup>571</sup> On 4 April 1938 a newsletter was read concerning a Guide to Standing Orders.<sup>572</sup> Such difficulties were shared by their northern sisters. However, the northern women had been more readily able to gain training via the Women's Cooperative Guild in that it was a far more prominent organisation in the north with long-standing, historical links and part of a political, industrial heritage.

Yet the Labour woman faced many other barriers, cultural and patriarchal. For instance, with the growth in inter-war suburbia and the shift in production, large numbers of socially isolated, anxious and bored, middle-class women were portrayed as neurotics and defective mothers. Whilst many presented to their G.P.s suffering what we would now recognise as mental health issues, they were variously ridiculed and labelled as suffering from 'Suburban Neurosis'. This was first given medical prominence by an article written by Dr. Stephen Taylor, in *The Lancet* in 1938.<sup>573</sup> He feared matters were left to go too far in the

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<sup>568</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, Hamilton Hall, 10 February 1930, Brent Archive.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid, 13 April 1931.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid, 12 October 1931.

<sup>571</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, Labour & Trades Hall, 14 March 1932, Brent Archive.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid, 4 April 1938.

<sup>573</sup> S. Taylor, 'The Suburban Neurosis', *The Lancet*, 26 March 1938, pp. 759-762, 759.

‘jerry building’, ribbon development where the slum that stunted the body is replaced by a ‘slum which stunts the mind’. He elaborated:

‘But the small, labour saving house, the small family, and the few friends have left the women of the suburbs relatively idle. They have nothing to look forward to, nothing to look up to, and little to live for’.<sup>574</sup>

Similarly, inter-war trends in British psychology from the Tavistock began to centre upon attachment theory, with the mother deemed the essential caregiver. In this way women were readily blamed for poor child development if not devoting their waking hours to their young. This even extended to women fulfilling their war time obligations and engaging in war work. As Rose argues, ‘British women jeopardised their “civic virtue” if they appeared in any way to be neglecting their responsibilities as mothers’.<sup>575</sup> This inter war moral policing of women was further enforced by women’s magazines such as *Woman’s Own*, whose readership mainly appealed to lower and upper middle-class women. For instance, in March 1944 the magazine castigated women for having impure motives for going to work:

‘I do not criticise mothers as a whole I only point out that such mothers exist. Also, I wonder if the war isn’t making things extremely simple for these so called mothers. How will they settle their lives afterwards’.<sup>576</sup>

This thinking extended to ‘pronatalism’ at the close of World War II through fears relating to falling birth rates.<sup>577</sup> Such powerful cultural pressures can be gleaned in the Sections’ gendered concerns for children. For instance, on 6 February 1931 the women helped organise a party for two hundred and ten poor children of the unemployed in the Roundwood Ward by way of a tea and entertainment provided by children of the Willesden

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid, p 761.

<sup>575</sup> S. O. Rose, ‘Women’s Rights, Women’s Obligations: Contradictions of Citizenship in World War II Britain’, *European Review of History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2000, pp. 277-289, 286.

<sup>576</sup> ‘Hand Over the Babies’, *Woman’s Own*, 24 March 1944, p. 7.

<sup>577</sup> Natalism (or pronatalism) is a political ideology which promotes the reproduction of human life or, perhaps more aptly, sees women’s primary role as giving birth in order to boost a country’s native population.

Socialist Sunday School, with each child given a bag of sweets, orange and apple.<sup>578</sup> On 15 June 1931 the Section agreed to assist the NUR (National Union of Railwaymen) with the selling of flowers for their Orphans Day.<sup>579</sup>

The maternal theme was more often than not raised at the National Conference of Labour Women or within the *Labour Woman* newspaper, but nevertheless discussed with a seriousness of purpose. For example, the Willesden West minutes of 4 April 1938 discussed a circular from the 'National Baby Week Council', but any first assumptions of frippery associating this with Baby Contests is put into context by various articles from the *Labour Woman* newspaper reporting that the National Baby Week Council had been running since 1926 with the aim of drawing public attention to issues of maternity and child welfare services. For example, among the issues raised were that local Councils were trying to 'reduce the number of ante-natal sessions', to 'replace a resident doctor at a municipal maternity home by a rota of private practitioners' to 'appoint as Health Visitors for the first time persons who are not legally qualified to hold such appointments'.<sup>580</sup> Similarly, at the Women's Conference held in Brighton between 14-16 June 1932 there were specific discussions related to a 'Children & Young Persons Bill' in which concern was expressed that a forthcoming Government Children's Bill had omitted to regulate controls on the employment of very young children in unregulated hours, allowed to work at 8 years in Scotland and 12 years in England, where School Doctors and Teachers told of the serious effects on health and education of early morning work.<sup>581</sup>

Again, at the same Conference the topic of 'Women as Housewives' appeared and was centred on a discussion about food tariffs, quoting Professor T. E. Gregory of

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<sup>578</sup> 'Roundwood Poor Children', *Kensington Post*, 6 February 1931.

<sup>579</sup> Willesden West Women's Section Committee Meeting, Hamilton Hall, 15 June 1931, Brent Archive.

<sup>580</sup> 'National Baby Week July 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 1932', *The Labour Woman*, July 1932, 98.

<sup>581</sup> National Conference of Labour Women, Brighton, 14, 15 & 16 June 1932, 31, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

Manchester University who highlighted that from March 1932 there had been a 20 per cent increase in the cost of the 17 of the most popular commodities.<sup>582</sup> The same conference also raised the issue of 'Women as Wives' but instead of discussing the idealised notions of domestic duty as found in many women's magazines, the discussion looked at the effects of the means test upon the wife and pointed out that although it was the husband who had to appear before a Public Assistance Committee, his wife had to go with him because he was unable to answer all the questions asked about the most intimate circumstances of their family life. The discussion argued that inquisitions in such circumstances amounted to the 'third degree', with the woman coming out of such an ordeal as 'frightened and nervously exhausted'.<sup>583</sup> Again, in 1936 the National Conference of Labour Women raises the Midwives Bill and a motion that the Conference:

'deplores the proposal to allow local authorities to hand over the responsibility for the new service to voluntary organisations, and demands that in every area the salaried midwives shall be under the direct control of the health authority and part of the paid staff with pension rights.'<sup>584</sup>

Feminists might though still argue that the psychology of the Section women was symptomatic of conforming to the role of a second-class position in patriarchal culture, where women lacked confidence in themselves and felt less than whole or equal. As Eichenbaum and Orbach elaborate, women have been socialised into having to always bear someone else in mind so that 'girls rarely experience encouragement and support for gestures of autonomy'. Instead, they are praised for behaviour that expresses concern for others and are told they are selfish when they direct the same energy towards themselves.<sup>585</sup> This need to always serve was a powerful social construction of women's identities in the inter-war

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<sup>582</sup> National Conference of Labour Women, Brighton, 14, 15 & 16 June 1932, 50, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>584</sup> 'Midwives Bill', Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, held at Swansea, 19 May 1936, 31, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

<sup>585</sup> L. Eichenbaum & S. Orbach, *Understanding Women*, London, 1983, p. 138.

period, as evidenced within the West Willesden Section, where working-class no less than middle class women apprehended a sense of community and sociability through acts of service to others. As Colpus argues, there was a ‘contested relationship between the values of obligation, personality and pleasure’ in understanding women’s personal development in this period.<sup>586</sup> Indeed, socialist ideology in this period was also orientated towards ideas of service and altruism with the implication that this political language had a somewhat gendered effect in that women rather than Labour men were more likely to be pressed into offering this sort of self-sacrificing service. For example, take the example of the Bermondsey pioneering activist, Ada Salter, who deployed the language of, ‘maternal Feminism’ in her LCC campaign of 1934, arguing that women were naturally humanitarian.<sup>587</sup> Interestingly, during the inter-war period the Joint University Council for Social Studies (JUC) identified a swing among young people away from organised personal philanthropy of the sort undertaken by the Charity Organising Society (COS), the Settlements and boys and girls clubs, towards more obviously political or educational work. They found the Labour Party, the Trades Union movement, the Workers Education Association (WEA), government departments and local administrations were increasingly popular choices for giving and serving.<sup>588</sup>

### **The Study of a South East Section Post War 1945-1950 – Had Things Changed?**

It is very useful to examine a rare but interesting insight into the workings of a south east Women’s Section post 1945 to gauge if by that time the role of a Section had changed and whether the position of Labour women within it had improved. Looking at Nigel Todd’s

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<sup>586</sup> E. Colpus, ‘Women, Service and Self Actualisation in Inter-War Britain’, *Past & Present*, No. 238, Feb 2018, pp. 197-232, p 199.

<sup>587</sup> G. Taylor, *Ada Salter – Pioneer of Ethical Socialism*, London, 2016, p. 237. Ada Salter was a pioneer of ethical socialism. She and her husband, Alfred, became synonymous with the pioneering Bermondsey Council in the inter-war period. She had also been an activist in the women’s movement (Women’s Labour League) and an ILPer. She won a seat on the LCC in 1934.

<sup>588</sup> M.D.S., ‘Social Work as a Career’, *Woman’s Leader*, 3 October 1924, p. 288.

research into the Labour Women's Section of Bexley, Kent, we learn that it is situated within a dormitory South London suburb whose wider constituency membership comprised lower middle-class local government workers, civil servants, trades union officials and skilled artisans. One of the local party election candidates was a Radiographer.

Todd highlights the way in which things had not really changed in that the Bexley Sections' women, like the Willesden West Sections in the 1930s, were still undertaking all the fund raising, with the Constituency Chair writing in *Bexley News* in May 1948:

'It may not be generally known that there is already a fairly substantial sum in the party building fund thanks chiefly to the sterling efforts of the women members over the years'.<sup>589</sup>

Once again, as in line with Sections from the 1930s, Todd shows that the women of the six Bexley Sections were heavily involved in the organisation of social activities, but as previously argued this could be interpreted as women acting in a communitarian vein where the Sections took on a greater role than solely that of politics. Todd acknowledges this and describes the fortnightly Sections meetings as 'a place to go for enjoyment, to exchange gossip and to make or meet friends' but also notes their more serious commitments such as the Woolwich Employment Committee, Infantile Paralysis Fellowship, the Fuel Economy Campaign and the campaign for Parent/Teacher Associations in all schools.<sup>590</sup> The Bexley Sections, akin to their West Willesden sisters, would celebrate birthdays and also held their meetings in the afternoons.<sup>591</sup>

Yet we are given a somewhat contradictory picture of, on the one hand, a more self-assured, middle-class Labour woman, one less in need of the confidence building reported in

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<sup>589</sup> *Bexley News*, February, October 1947.

<sup>590</sup> N. Todd, Brampton Minutes of Women's Section of Bexley Heath Labour Party 21 April 1949 in 'Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-1950', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 1973, pp. 159-173, p. 163.

<sup>591</sup> *Bexley News*, September 1947.

Ward's Sheffield Section, whilst on the other evidence revealing a persistence of patriarchal barriers. It could be argued that the Bexley women's seeming confidence was to be expected by 1945 at a time when women had played a significant role in the war effort and by nature were more assertive and less deferential. As Summerfield has shown, the conscription of women into industry from 1941-1945 complicated the sexual division of labour and this persisted into the post war era.<sup>592</sup> Yet it is not clear whether reports of this confidence was exaggerated by a disgruntled male comrade from the constituency when claiming the Section women exerted some 'considerable influence' in the selection of candidates for elections. It is not clear whether Mr. J. Cronin, interviewed in 1969, spoke of the power of the women as reputed to have unseated two Labour Councillors with a degree of pique:

'If a man wanted to stand as a Labour candidate for the council it was most important to get a nomination from a women's section. If one did not get a nomination from a section or a women's co-op Guild, then there was always the chance that the women would not vote for one at a candidate selection meeting'.<sup>593</sup>

Todd's study reveals the Bexley Section's women being forced to kick back and take a stand on numerous issues and that old, die-hard attitudes still prevailed. For instance, we learn from an interview with Mrs. Sheppard that the Women's Sections Divisional Committee had intervened with the Labour Group on the Borough Council to insist that an Alderman vacancy should be filled by a woman.<sup>594</sup> Similarly, the Falconwood Women's Section raised a demand at the local Labour Party that the women's organisation be invited to make nominations when appointments to public committees arose (national assistance

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<sup>592</sup> P. Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict*, Oxford, 1984.

<sup>593</sup> Interview with J. Cronin 5 May 1969 as cited in N. Todd, 'Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-50', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 April 1973, pp. 159-173, 162.

<sup>594</sup> Interview with Mrs. E. Sheppard, 5 May 1969 as cited in N. Todd 'Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-50', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 April 1973, pp. 159-173, p. 162. Mrs. Sheppard was active on party committees and in the women's organisation of the Bexley Labour Party from 1946.

committees, school management bodies etc).<sup>595</sup> Todd goes on to summarise that the relationship between the women and the rest of the Bexley Party as being one of ‘tension’, which more often than not arose in relation to control of Party Officer roles by men. One female member, Mrs. Niemar, said ‘there was prejudice amongst the men about women taking office’.<sup>596</sup> Suffice to say that by 1950 a Directory of Party Officials showed that all positions in the Bexley Labour Party (except that of Women’s Organiser) were held by men.<sup>597</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that it is an over-simplification to marginalise the inter-war contribution of Labour women and the Labour Women’s Sections to that of ‘ghettoes’ within the wider Party structure. It is also somewhat unfair to charge them with holding a slavish adherence to Party loyalty and class over the rights or cause of women. For evidence suggests that though they often campaigned on gendered political issues such as housing, health, infant or maternal welfare, they did so with a seriousness of purpose within what could be deemed a ‘new’ or ‘practical’ feminism, despite the national Party’s attempts at containment. The Labour Sections attempted to reconcile the distinctive social role of women as wives and mothers with the feminist ideal of equality of opportunity with a humanitarianism and altruistic approach to politics.

As we have seen with respect to the Willesden West Section, the south east women also constructed a political self, together with gestures of warmth and affection toward one another in much the same way as their northern sisters. However, unlike the northern Labour women who could call upon the rich, institutional fabric of their working-class communities,

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<sup>595</sup> N. Todd, ‘Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-50’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 April 1975, pp. 159-173, 163.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.

<sup>597</sup> *Bexley Citizen*, August 1950.

the southern Labour women were compelled to adopt a more active role within voluntary organisations and local government, such as the Peace Pledge Union, the Campaign for Birth Control and League of Nations Union. Indeed, there was a Willesden Women's Citizens Association who worked closely with the League of Nations Union as was the case at the NUWCA Annual General Meeting held at St. George's Hall, Willesden Lane on 31 May 1936 where they wished for a system that might solve unemployment throughout the world.<sup>598</sup> Here McCarthy argues that such associations met with 'remarkable success' as alternate, non-partisan forms of activism and organised sociability which invested in a discourse of active citizenship as evinced by the success of the Peace Ballot in 1935.<sup>599</sup> For middle-class women this notion of the need to serve was very much captured by inter-war Feminist writers such as Winifred Holtby, who argued that 'the social and economic inequalities which checked the development of a woman's personality prevented her from making that contribution to the common good'.<sup>600</sup>

The role of the Section was far more than that of mundane trivia, as in the case with concerns around child exploitation, youth offenders, Manchuria, India and Spain. We also learn the curious way in which they married up what would at first appear as the irreconcilable domestic and international agendas. In the case of the Willesden Section concerns for international affairs was symptomatic of a middle-class membership who tended to ignore local issues such as the plight of the women workers in the new, local light industries. However, Section women operated in a new public space, one culturally deemed unfeminine. I agree with Ward when she maintains that reading performances of selfhood

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<sup>598</sup> 'Willesden Women's Citizen Association', *Kensington Post*, Friday 4 June 1936.

<sup>599</sup> H. McCarthy, 'Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *The Historical Journal*, Dec. 2007, No. 4, pp. 891, 912, 892.

<sup>600</sup> P. Berry & A. Bishop, *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, London, 1985, p. 48.

enables the tension between domestic and political identities ‘and the emotional spaces of women’s politics’ to be more fully considered.<sup>601</sup>

Yet there is little doubt that the women’s Party loyalty was sorely tested in that they were relied upon by constituencies for fund-raising. But whether they objectively perceived themselves in this way is debateable, since the Section appeared to serve much more than a role of political camaraderie in the way they supported one another emotionally and practically at times of bereavements and ill-health. They brought the moral economy of the home into the Party on a myriad of issues. The Labour women of the 1930s were bound up with the ‘politics of consumption’ in that they also organised as consumers in order to achieve political goals, as in their concerns about rising food prices and later, profiteering.<sup>602</sup>

Here I disagree with Black and Brooke who feel that the Women’s Conferences were ‘restricted’ not only by external indifference but also by the women’s own sense of loyalty to the Party.<sup>603</sup> The Women’s National Conference Reports from the inter-war years make for an enjoyable read and are far less procedurally stilted than that of the National Party Conference, though critics might interpret this informality as a sign of lack of status within the national party. Yet the seriousness of purpose was ever present. For example, in 1936 the Women’s Conference devoted a half-day Session to ‘Women in Offices’, led by the Association of Women’s Clerks and Secretaries, as pertinent to women of the south east.<sup>604</sup>

Lastly, what is surprising is that by the 1945 victory Todd’s study of Bexley reveals that little had changed in the battle against patriarchy, for despite the Bexley middle-class

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<sup>601</sup> S. Ward, ‘Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working-Class Women’s Politics’, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2019, pp. 29-52, 33.

<sup>602</sup> K. Hunt, ‘Negotiating the Boundaries of the Domestic British Socialist Women and the Politics of Consumption’, *Women’s History Review*, Volume 9, Number, 2, 2000, pp. 389-410, 390.

<sup>603</sup> A. Black & S. Brooke, ‘The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender 1951-1966’, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 36, No. 4, October 1997, pp. 419-452, 433.

<sup>604</sup> ‘Women in Offices’, Report of the National Conference of Labour Women, held at Swansea, 19 May 1936, pp. 21-31, Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

women being far less deferential and more confident, by 1950 there is only one female official in the Bexley Constituency and that is the Women's Officer! Todd's summation was that the Bexley women acted politically as a social group, rather than in the traditional left-right divisions of the Party. He found that, like the Willesden West women, the Bexley Section made no attempt to alter their social role as wives and mothers and that the entire organisation of the Section was built on the acceptance of this position. He describes their concept of 'advance' as being 'typically Labour reformist' and that they acted more in the traditions of the Suffragettes in completing unfinished work rather than the more revolutionary strain of the modern women's liberation movement.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> N. Todd, 'Labour Women: A Study of Women in the Bexley Branch of the British Labour Party 1945-1951', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 April 1975, pp. 159-173, 173.

## Chapter VI

### ‘Loyal Grouzers’?

#### Labour Party intellectuals in the South-East c. 1931-1939

Commenting upon the role of the socialist intellectuals in his *Political Parties* (1911), Robert Michels famously asserted that a political labour movement without deserters from the bourgeoisie was ‘historically as inconceivable as would be such a movement without a class-conscious proletariat’.<sup>606</sup> As the history of the British Labour Party uniquely demonstrates, this was not for want of trying. Established in 1900 as the Parliamentary extension of trade unionism, the young Labour Party (then known as the Labour Representation Committee) was little more than an organised lobbying force in which socialism and socialists were, at best, a junior (if not unwelcome) partner. This anti-intellectual character was recognized by Labour’s European counterparts; in 1907 it was accepted as a member of the Second International under the contrived formula that, although it did not officially recognize the class struggle or the cause of socialism, Labour furthered both by its independence vi-a-vis the bourgeois parties.<sup>607</sup> Though it finally acquired both an individual membership and vague commitment to securing ‘for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry’ during its constitutional reorganisation in 1918, older working-class leaders such as Arthur Henderson still thought it best to confine the intellectuals to the production of memoranda which would keep them ‘...quiet for a time’.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Abingdon, 1999, p. 200.

<sup>607</sup> S. Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats*, Oxford, 1994, p. 236.

<sup>608</sup> A. Henderson to H. Dalton, cited in N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929-1931*, Manchester, 1999, p. 29.

Consequently, historians such as Marquand have drawn the conclusion that Labour was from birth an intrinsically anti-intellectual party, incapable of accommodating those (overwhelmingly Liberal) ‘gadflies’ essential to its recasting as a viable government-in-waiting.<sup>609</sup> Yet Left critics of British ‘Labourism’ such as Nairn have suggested that the movement did not lack for intellectuals and that it was rather the ‘nullity of native intellectual traditions’ such as Fabianism which proved to be ‘the most serious of obstacles to socialism’.<sup>610</sup> By contrast, sociologists such as Shils have argued that Labour intellectuals were too well integrated into the Capitalist system to offer a convincing socialist alternative, finding ready employment within ideological state apparatuses such as academe, the civil service, the commercial press and the BBC.<sup>611</sup>

In this chapter I will reappraise such debates through re-examining the 1930s, a period of considerable intellectual ferment for the Labour Party and examine the main Party intellectuals active in the south-east, those who produced an evolving cross-section of what may be called ‘Labourism’, that area of shared attitudes, norms and practices which held the Labour Party together through the faction fighting of the 1930s (and beyond). The first section of the chapter re-examines the political and strategic response to the National Government debacle through comparing the commentary of Cripps, Laski, Cole, Tawney, Dalton, and Durbin. It argues that, far from rejecting the Parliamentary system, the Labour Left emerged from the 1931 crisis convinced that drastic measures were required to save parliamentary democracy and civil rights. In this respect their dispute with the Party’s Right-wing was a matter of emphasis and tactics. The second section reappraises the intellectuals’ response to the United and Popular Fronts, with emphasis upon relations with the Communist Party from 1934-1939. Here it is suggested that the inherent anti-Communism of the

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<sup>609</sup> D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Kinnock*, London, 1991, p ix.

<sup>610</sup> T. Nairn, ‘The Nature of the Labour Party - Part I’, *New Left Review*, I/27, September 1964, p. 44.

<sup>611</sup> E. Shils, *The Intellectuals and the Powers, and Other Essays*, Chicago, 1972, p. vii.

intellectuals (coupled with their characteristic prudence) prevented them from fully seizing the opportunity offered to construct a populist, anti-appeasement bloc. Finally, the third section offers a case study of Popular Front politics within the city of Oxford. Here I have cross-referenced interviews from the Labour Oral History Project, Party press, and autobiographical accounts from former Oxbridge students in order to assess the relationship between theorists and rank-and-file in the south-east.

The 1930s were a period of considerable intellectual ferment for Labour and a voluminous literature has already covered the ideological shift in Labour's thinking away from ethics and towards politico-economic strategy by the end of the decade. In his history of Labour's political thought Foote emphasised that for all their divisions over workers' control of industry, the questions of rearmament or cooperation with the Communists within the United and Popular Fronts, both the Party's Left and Right were united in their commitment to Parliamentary institutions and 'corporatism' as the means to achieving socialism.<sup>612</sup> By contrast, Jackson and Nuttall have emphasised the persistence of the ethical strain within the 'bureaucratic' and 'Keynesian' turn in Labour's socialism.<sup>613</sup> Thus, a social-democracy founded upon the redistributive principles of social justice and equality emerged from the 1930s reinvigorated, coexisting uneasily with the critique of power offered by Laski and Strachey's humanist Marxism. In retrospect, the 1930s was neither the age of Cole nor Laski – faced with the prospect of being expelled for advocating the Popular Front in 1937, they (like other thinkers) absconded from the political field and left decision-making to the practical men of affairs.

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<sup>612</sup> G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought. A History*, London, 1985, p. 144.

<sup>613</sup> B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought 1900-64*, Manchester, 2007, p. 20 & J. Nuttall, 'Psychological Socialist'; 'Militant Moderate': Evan Durbin and The Politics of Synthesis', *Labour History Review*, August 2003, Vol. 68, 2, pp. 235-52, 245.

## A 'Left-Wing Society'? Labour and the intellectuals 1918-1931

Before examining their contribution to the political culture of Labour, it is first necessary that we establish and defend our usage of the concept 'intellectuals', for it has been argued that this abstraction lacks both critical and sociological meaning within an English context. Thus, Judt has argued that a British "Intelligentsia", defined negatively in opposition towards the status-quo "was quite absent in London", whereas Nettl has claimed that though English society has produced many personalities who "act, write, and think as intellectuals", they have "lacked the social role" as such, at least since Bernard Shaw and the Fabians before 1914.<sup>614</sup> This historiographical caricature of the emaciated English intellectual draws on a long tradition of both foreign and native cultural criticism. In 1872 the Frenchman, Hippolyte Taine, argued that the Englishman's head could be compared "...to a Murray's Guide: a great many facts, but few ideas", whilst in 1916 the irreverent Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, contrasted the respect Russians accorded their intelligentsia with the manner in which intellectuals were 'despised' or 'mistrusted' in England.<sup>615</sup> Native critics have echoed these sentiments, some considering this 'unintellectualism' to be a positive quality of English character. Though separated by a century and a half, both Edmund Burke and George Orwell agreed in suggesting that the English 'genius' consisted in the 'common peoples' abhorrence of the abstractions and 'power-worship' which afflicted the English Intellectual.<sup>616</sup> The Conservative politician, Stanley Baldwin, even went so far as to anchor

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<sup>614</sup> Cf. T. Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*, New York, 2011, p. 249 and J.P. Nettl cited in S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, 2006, p. 184.

<sup>615</sup> H. Taine, *Notes on England*, London, 1995, p. 242 and G. Bernard Shaw, "The Case against Chesterton", *New Statesman*, 13 May 1916, p. 133, cited in T.W. Heyck, 'Myths and Meanings of Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century British National Identity', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, April 1998, p. 193. Also, G.B. Shaw, 'H.G. Wells on the rest of us', from *The Christian Commonwealth*, 19 May 1909, in *Pen Portraits and Reviews* by Bernard Shaw, London, 1932, p. 282.

<sup>616</sup> Cf. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, London, 1969, p. 152 & G. Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, London, 2012, pp. 41, 44-5.

his brand of liberal-conservatism within this alleged English preference for ‘humour, rather than wit’.<sup>617</sup>

Yet to cite Collini, it is not so much the absence or marginalisation of philosophers, scientists, or litterateurs that has marked British public life so much as the seemingly paradoxical ‘anti-intellectualism of the intellectual’.<sup>618</sup> To elaborate, many British writers on this subject have suffered from what Collini terms ‘Dreyfus envy’. Depressed by the absence of a ‘properly’ oppositional intelligentsia in the mould of the Russian or French, they have denied that British society featured an effective, self-conscious cohort devoted to the social function of producing and organising ‘hegemony’.<sup>619</sup> However this view of the intellectual as a ‘natural dissenter’ is a mystification produced by the greater visibility of critical thinkers during revolutionary periods, and conceals the role of professors, jurists, journalists and novelists in legitimising the norms and institutions of capitalist society.<sup>620</sup> Moreover, within a British context this vulgarized image distorts the contingent nature of the intellectuals’ political loyalties: in fact it is impossible to understand their troubled relationship to working class politics and the Labour Party without considering this point, which we shall return to.

### **South Eastern Cultural Centre**

If we adopt a looser definition of the intellectuals as that social cohort (or category) which actively influenced public opinion, or organized cultural hegemony in Gramscian terms, a different picture emerges of English intellectual culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>621</sup> Here Annan’s thesis of an ‘intellectual aristocracy’, if exaggerating the ideological unity of this category, retains much of its descriptive utility. For a small, inter-married coterie of

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<sup>617</sup> S. Baldwin, *This Torch of Freedom: Speeches and Addresses*, London, 1935, pp. 13-4.

<sup>618</sup> S. Collini, ‘With Friends like These: John Carey and Noel Annan’, in *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture*, Oxford, 1999, p. 289.

<sup>619</sup> S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, 2006, p. 5.

<sup>620</sup> This important point is made by R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, London, 1980, pp. 232-2.

<sup>621</sup> On this definition of intellectuals see R. Debray, *Teachers, Writers and Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, London, 1979, pp. 21-4.

upper-middle class families monopolised English public institutions by the early twentieth century, with the Bosanquets, Macaulays, Trevelyan, Wedgwoods, Darwins, Stephens, and Stracheys later joined by the Huxleys, Keynes, Spenders, and Jays but to name a few.<sup>622</sup> Besides the familial ties of these leading luminaries, enduring channels of recruitment bound the centre of education and cultural production for the upper middle-class (the Oxbridge establishment) to Parliament, the Civil Service, and the Anglican Church. In his cross-party prosopographical examination of 75 Cabinet Ministers appointed from 1918-1955, Buck found that 52 per cent had received both a public-school and university education, and half of these in turn had studied at either Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>623</sup> Another study found that, of those successful few who had passed the Civil Service examination from 1904-1956, roughly 78-82 per cent (on average) had been educated at Oxford or Cambridge.<sup>624</sup>

In monopolising public office this Oxbridge network was crucial in promoting a social reformist current within the late Victorian and Edwardian polity. From the 1860s through to the 1920s the cohort of British Idealist thinkers who centred around the Oxford academic and Liberal Councillor, T.H. Green, were instrumental in reshaping the social policy and political framework of Britain.<sup>625</sup> Thus, Green's neo-Hegelian acquaintance, Bernard Bosanquet, made crucial contributions to developing the paternalistic creed of the Charity Organising Society, whereas like-minded associates such as Arnold Toynbee and William Temple provided the impetus for the poor-settlements which provided a formative context for so many of Labour's future middle class activists.<sup>626</sup> Of course, the idealist

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<sup>622</sup> N. Annan, "The Intellectual Aristocracy," in G. M. Trevelyan (ed.), *Studies in Social History*, Cardiff, 1955, pp 255-283.

<sup>623</sup> An examination of 75 of the 88 Cabinet Ministers who held office from 1918-1955 presented by Table 32 in P.W. Buck, *Amateurs And Professionals In British Politics 1918-59*, Chicago, 1963, pp. 60-1, 121.

<sup>624</sup> R.G.S. Brown, *The Administrative Process in Britain*, London, 1970, p. 44.

<sup>625</sup> C. Tyler, *Common Good Politics: British Idealism and Social Justice in the Contemporary World*, Hull, 2017, p. 20.

<sup>626</sup> G. Stedman Jones, 'Marching into History', in J. Curran (ed.), *The Future of the Left*, London, 1984, pp. 12-13.

philosophy of the state was far from hegemonic, and this intellectual aristocracy of professional reformers was divided by competing currents of political and social thought. Against the Idealists' emphasis on voluntary action as the means to secure individual flourishing, 'Collectivists' such as the Fabians sought to further expand state provision of public education, abolish the punitive aspects of the Poor Law, tax 'unearned' incomes, and nationalise public services and productive assets in what critics disparagingly termed 'gas and water socialism'.<sup>627</sup>

### **Labour Intellectuals**

By the inter-war period British public life was dominated by a closed nexus comprising the ideological 'apparatuses' of church, university and state, as well as informal shapers of opinion such as the southern Bloomsbury Group and Cliveden Set.<sup>628</sup> The emergence of this increasingly integrated, culturally homogeneous 'elite' poses considerable problems for our understanding of Labour's historically troubled relationship with the intelligentsia. For it was precisely during these two decades that, against the grain of social trends, there emerged what Guttsman has entitled a 'Left-Wing Society' within Labour ranks, a network of middle class intellectuals which congregated around party summer schools, newspapers and informal discussion groups held in both central London flats and weekend cottages in the home counties.<sup>629</sup> In particular, Fabianism was crucial to the formation of Labour's early social and political strategy, for the Webbs' contribution to *The Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission* (1909) and the party's 1918 constitution established Labour's ostensible commitment to both socialism and the welfare state.<sup>630</sup> In this case, the

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<sup>627</sup> Quote cited in I. Britain, *Fabianism and Culture: A Study in British Socialism and the Arts 1884-1918*, Cambridge, 2005, p. 158.

<sup>628</sup> L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in S. Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology*, New York, 2012, pp. 109-13.

<sup>629</sup> W.L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite*, London, 1963, pp. 250-2.

<sup>630</sup> R. Desai, *Intellectuals and Socialism: 'Social Democrats' and the British Labour Party*, London, 1994, pp. 67, 71.

‘inverted snobbery’ of trade union leaders was contradicted by a grudging respect for the intellectual’s talent as propagandist or researcher. The principal architect of the new constitution, Arthur Henderson, was determined to improve Labour’s standing as a ‘party of government’ precisely by encouraging the post-war influx of pacifistic ex-Liberals and professional reformers, secured through the new constitution’s commitment to socialism (Clause Four) and openness to individual membership.<sup>631</sup>

Liberal defectors such as Christopher Addison, Noel Buxton, J.A. Hobson, Bertrand Russell, John Strachey and H.G. Wells brought with them the collectivist heritage of ‘New Liberalism’, and were crucial in reinforcing the interventionist and internationalist tendencies within Labour thought.<sup>632</sup> In particular, Addison’s writings on *Practical Socialism* (1926) and his innovative tenure as Minister of Agriculture (1930-31) helped legitimize state control of industry, health services and the nationalization of land. Similarly, in his capacity as Chairman of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Finance and Trade policy (in the early 1920s), Hobson’s under-consumptionist analysis of unemployment and support for redistribution through progressive taxation made a crucial contribution to Labour’s economic approach (strategy would have been a rather strong word at this point). Thus, far from being impotent gadflies, the post-1918 cohort of progressive reformers and Liberal intellectuals introduced an important element of ideological consistency and principle into the political culture of Labourism, elevating the party’s outlook beyond the momentary demands of industrial disputes and collective bargaining. For whether in the form of Labour’s early proposal for a ‘capital levy’ to fund social services, international disarmament, or the later

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<sup>631</sup> This important point is made by R. Desai, *Intellectuals and Socialism: ‘Social Democrats’ and the British Labour Party*, London, 1994, p. 51. Also, see F.M. Leventhal, *Arthur Henderson*, Manchester, 1989, p. 102.

<sup>632</sup> Cf. D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, London, 1977, p. 231 & C. A. Cline, *Recruits to Labour: The British Labour Party 1914-1931*, New York, 1963, pp. 149-173.

ILP Living Wage Commission's (1926) proposals for a minimum wage as a means of improving effective demand, the influence of social-liberal collectivism was evident.<sup>633</sup>

Apart from their contribution to Labour's socio-economic policy platform, the post-war generation of Labour intellectuals were also instrumental (perhaps for the worse) in reinforcing the party's strategic commitment to a socialist revolution of 'opinion and not of class'.<sup>634</sup> Typically associated with MacDonald, the personification of Labour politics in the 1920s, socialism was held to embody the 'organic', moral reconciliation of individual with society to be achieved through education of a fundamentally rational electorate in the virtues of 'communitarian and co-operative frames of mind'.<sup>635</sup> This sentiment was echoed by the Webbs in their *Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* (1920) which suggested that 'the spirit of social service' and 'science' would be enough to overcome resistance from those who currently directed the 'productive energies' of the nation.<sup>636</sup> Similarly, Laski's renowned *Grammar of Politics* (1925) averred that the danger of resistance to socialism coming from the propertied classes would be deflected by a Labour Government willing to compromise and appeal to public reason, whereas Tawney was also confident that the "new quality" in England's post-war "moral and intellectual atmosphere" had prepared the country for a "revolution" in the standards by which its industry and social life would be judged.<sup>637</sup> Optimism in Labour's political and social theory was matched by the Party's continuing attachment to the tried-and-tested Victorian institution of economic free-trade.

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<sup>633</sup> N. Thompson, *Political Economy and The Labour Party: The Economics of Democratic Socialism 1884-2005*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 42-3, J. Thompson, 'Political Economy, the Labour Movement and the Minimum Wage, 1880-1914', in E. H. Green & D. M. Tanner (eds.), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 87.

<sup>634</sup> R. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919-1939*, London, 2010, p. 28.

<sup>635</sup> Cf. B. Barker (ed.), *Ramsay MacDonald's Political Writings*, London, 1972, pp. 45, 100, & J. R. MacDonald, *Socialism: Critical and Constructive*, London, 1924, pp. 266-7, 270-1 and G. Lansbury, *These Things Shall Be* 1920, in F. Bealey (ed.), *The Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party*, London, 1970, p. 106.

<sup>636</sup> S. & B. Webb, *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*, London, 1975, pp. 349-350.

<sup>637</sup> H.J. Laski, *A Grammar of Politics*, London, 1928, pp. 534-5; R. H. Tawney, 'The Conditions of Economic Liberty', in *The Radical Tradition*, London, 1964, pp. 101-2.

Even the most unorthodox among Labour's economists of the 1920s, John Hobson (who joined the ILP in 1919), held that the establishment of peace, progress of the European working-class and liberation of colonial subjects lay in free-trade internationalism of the 'Cobdenite' mould.<sup>638</sup>

So, in reviewing the politico-economic stance of its leading intellectuals before 1931, it would be accurate to suggest that, apart from a brief flirtation with Syndicalism and the Guilds movement, or the ILP left's increasing engagement with Marxist theory from the mid '20s, Labour's political strategists remained wedded to a radical enlightenment belief in the power of education and public debate to democratise the main institutions of power. To paraphrase Richard Price, 'making Socialists' was considered an ethical enterprise of 'growing enlightenment' by both workers as well as the bourgeoisie and from the beginning, therefore, British socialists '...envisaged a politics that was national rather than class based'.<sup>639</sup> It was precisely this contradiction which underlay the political crisis of late 1931. Faced with a sterling crisis, a Labour government schooled in the ethic of financial propriety was committed to achieving socialism through capitalist prosperity. It vacillated on whether to 'balance the books' and when no agreement was possible the 'National' defectors accepted that they would (in Schumpeter's words) have to "administer capitalism" according to its own logic.<sup>640</sup>

However, regardless of whether alternatives were truly available to a progressive Cabinet in 1931, this failure was bound to antagonise the Party's intellectuals in that many had pinned considerable hopes upon the second Labour Government. The Party's 'Appeal to

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<sup>638</sup> Hobson cited in P.J. Cain, *Variations on a Famous Theme: Hobson, International Trade and imperialism, 1902-1938*, Oxford, 2003. M. Freedman (ed.) *Reappraising J.A. Hobson: Humanism and Welfare*, Oxford, 1990, p. 39.

<sup>639</sup> R. Price, 'Britain', in M. Van Der Linden, & J. Rojahn (eds.), *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870-1914: An International Perspective*, Leiden, 1990, p. 18.

<sup>640</sup> J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, 2010, pp. 324-30.

the Nation' (1929), though reaffirming a respectable commitment to 'ordered progress' and 'democratic methods', was by all accounts a radical document and its pledge to combat unemployment through housing and slum clearance, the re-organisation of Transport, stimulation of purchasing power, increases in unemployment benefits and the raising of the school age to fifteen were taken seriously by socialists.<sup>641</sup> MacDonald was reportedly angry with R.H. Tawney (author of the 'Appeal') precisely for having propounded 'such advanced ideas' as raising the school-leaving age; though Tawney and C.P. Trevelyan pressed for this measure, the PLP leadership was reluctant to endorse anything which would alienate the Catholic faith schools and constituencies.<sup>642</sup> The Party's pledge to 'conquer unemployment' also had the effect of building expectations among their economists. For G.D.H. Cole writing in March 1929, Labour was 'far more powerful and far more Socialist' than in 1924 and, consequently, well-placed to carry out the fundamental economic reorganisation necessary to combat structural unemployment, whereas the Webbs and Hobson put forward extensive public works schemes.<sup>643</sup> Consequently, it is injudicious to memorialise 1931 as the year in which a chimerical 'MacDonaldism' was tried and found wanting. Rather the economic crisis of that year was the moment of truth for a not-insignificant cohort of intellectuals who, in their commitment to expert rule within Parliament and Civil-Service and a complacent belief in British national character and Parliamentary tradition, demonstrated their incapacity to grapple with the real obstacles confronting a minority Labour Government.

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<sup>641</sup> 'General Election Manifesto 1929', in I. Dale (ed.), *Labour Party General Election Manifestos, 1900-1997*, Oxford, 2007, pp. 32-4, 36, 38.

<sup>642</sup> Contemporary Reports cited in L. Goldman, *The Life of R.H. Tawney: Socialism and History*, London, 2013, p. 206

<sup>643</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *The Next Ten Years in British Social And Economic Policy*, London, 1929, pp. viii, and R. Desai, *Intellectuals and Socialism: 'Social Democrats' and the British Labour Party*, London, 1994, pp. 52-3.

## **An Autopsy of ‘MacDonaldism’ or Fabian Autocritique? Labour Intellectuals 1931-1936**

Commenting upon the historical development of social and political theory, the American pragmatist philosopher, John Dewey, observed that men ‘...think when forced to do so by trouble... to find some way out not provided by habit and inclination’.<sup>644</sup> Dewey’s judgement neatly captures the dilemma which confronted Labour’s intellectuals throughout the 1930s. For the demise of MacDonald’s government in August 1931, bereft of positive economic proposals and mired in legislative backlog, compelled a prolonged self-interrogation of the relationship between socialist intellectuals and the Labour Party. This was no easy feat, for as we have seen many of MacDonald’s chief intellectual critics in 1931 had, in fact, been closely implicated in Labour’s policy and strategy formation from 1917 onwards. Thus, in his autopsy of the late Labour Government, Fabian patriarch, Sidney Webb, concluded that its failings were due to the personal defects of MacDonald and Snowden, in particular their failure to heed the warning of expert advisers. In Webb’s view the financial crisis of July 1931 was a ‘purely domestic and parliamentary crisis’ which ‘might have been surmounted by some ingenuity, as others had been’, and had rather been compounded by Snowden and MacDonald’s studied indifference to the advice of those economic experts, such as Cole and Keynes, who sat on the late Economic Advisory Committee.<sup>645</sup> Webb’s reappraisal of events was echoed by that of his fellow ex-Cabinet member, and Fabian, Arthur Henderson, who blamed the downfall of Labour on the ‘power of bankers and financiers’ which was used to ‘dictate’ to a popularly elected Government ‘an abrupt reversal of the policy placed before the electors’.<sup>646</sup>

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<sup>644</sup>J. Dewey, ‘Lectures in Social & Political Philosophy’, *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VII-2, December 2015, pp. 1-3.

<sup>645</sup> S. Webb, *What Happened in 1931: A Record*, London, 1931, pp. 6-7.

<sup>646</sup> A. Henderson’s 1931 Election address, cited in R. Spalding, *Narratives of Delusion in The Political Practice of The Labour Left 1931-1945*, Cambridge, 2018, p. 17.

Yet for other socialist intellectuals this autocritique represented a case of the Fabian fly blaming the maggots of practical compromise and betrayal. One of the most damning indictments of the late Government was offered by Tawney's article entitled, 'The Choice Before the Labour Party' (1932), in which he opined that 'not merely two years of a Labour Cabinet, but a decade of Labour politics' had been 'tried and found wanting'.<sup>647</sup> In his view, the rapid development of the Labour Party since 1918 had not only concealed the movement's flaws, but also deepened them: in particular the party's 'lack of creed' whereby it was 'hesitant in action because divided in mind' and its interrelated 'timidity' when in office.<sup>648</sup> To summarise, for Tawney Labour would not become a Socialist movement of 'Peaceful Revolution' until it recognised that the 1918 Constitution had not established a mass Socialist party.<sup>649</sup> In similar terms, G. D. H. Cole, the Fabians' prodigal son, concluded that 1931 had discredited 'gradualism' in the sense of 'working at once to make Capitalism successful and to dose it with very small instalments of socialism', for nothing could be done to build socialism 'without undermining capitalist confidence, or so eating into capitalist profits as to check investment and enterprise'.<sup>650</sup> Cole had earlier expressed his dissatisfaction with Labour policy and strategy by establishing the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda in the early Autumn of 1930, an organisation consisting of 'Loyal Grouser' formed with the intention of writing 'a new programme for the party'.<sup>651</sup> Initially convening at the Countess of Warwick's estate of Easton Lodge, and thereafter the Coles' Hampstead house, the chief recruits were, to cite Margaret Cole, 'young Oxford Socialists, who came in practically *en bloc*', Raymond Postgate, Francis Meynell, C.R. Attlee, and

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<sup>647</sup> R. H. Tawney, 'The Choice Before the Labour Party' (1932), *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 42, Issue 5, July 1932, pp. 93-111, 326.

<sup>648</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 328-31.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>650</sup> G.D.H. Cole, 'Some Essentials of Socialist Propaganda: A Tract for The Times', Fabian Tract No. 238, London 1932, pp. 7-8.

<sup>651</sup> M. Cole, *The Life of G.D.H. Cole*, London, 1971, pp. 175-6.

Stafford Cripps. All of these figures were important in recasting Labour's political practice from 1931 and the emergence of this network demonstrates the manner in which political initiative had already passed from the Labour NEC by 1930.

The SSIP group formed the crucial nucleus around which ILP 'affiliationists', those who opposed the ILP's decision to disaffiliate in 1932, later gravitated and provided the backbone to the Socialist League, formed in late 1932. The great mover among the affiliationists, E.F. Wise, was first Chairman of the Socialist League (1932-1934) and one of the most vociferous and active critics of 'moderate' Lib-Labism before his death in 1934. As Wise commented in his reflection on the 1931 'bankers' ramp', the circumstances of 1931 brought to Labour the realisation that 'the days of gradual evolutionary adjustment were past' and that 'change, much more revolutionary in its speed' had to animate the party's future policy proposals.<sup>652</sup> Here Stafford Cripps agreed that the futility of the great 'Lib-Lab' progressive alliance had been exposed – in 1933 he wrote that 'Democracy' was 'not an end in itself' and that another 'temporary alliance' of democratic forces, similar to the 1929-31 Labour government, would only succeed in 'deepening the crisis of capitalism' through its internal divisions and impotence.<sup>653</sup> In this respect the diagnosis of the crisis offered by Left-intellectuals within the Party closely resembled that offered by socialists or 'fellow travellers' excluded from Labour circles, in particular John Strachey's suggestion that the Fabians' emphasis upon national productive 'efficiency' and hostility to the 'class struggle' had disarmed the workers in 1931.<sup>654</sup> Thus, Party intellectuals divided along clear lines in their assessment of Labour's woes. For those of the centre and right wing, it was either the personal betrayal of MacDonald's coterie, or the muddle-headedness of Labour theory and

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<sup>652</sup> E.F. Wise, 'The Socialisation of Banking', *Political Quarterly*, 1933, pp. 4, 169.

<sup>653</sup> S. Cripps, 'The Choice for Britain', "Capitalism in Crisis" Forum Series, No.4, London 1933, pp. 5-6.

<sup>654</sup> J. Strachey, *What Are We To Do?*, London, 1938, pp 141-4.

policy which had paralysed the former government, whereas for Left critics it was rather the entire edifice of Fabian political economy which was to blame.

The most thoroughgoing Left intellectual critique of Labour's 'gradualism' was offered by the Independent Labour Party which decided to disaffiliate in July 1932 rather than continue to accept Labour Party policy and discipline. As Fenner Brockway put it in his Chairman's address to the ILP's 1932 Conference, 'Parliamentary Revolutionism' was not enough and 'In a sentence, our policy must become revolutionary instead of reformist'.<sup>655</sup> In this respect the ILP leadership was attempting to co-opt the revolutionary rhetoric of the London Division's self-styled 'Revolutionary Policy Committee', which spearheaded the movement for disaffiliation. Led by Jack Gaster, a young Solicitor (son of Rabbi Moses Gaster), and Dr C.K. Cullen, an East End Medical Officer, the RPC argued that the collapse of capitalism was imminent, for the adoption of Soviet-esque Workers' Councils in place of parliamentarism as the method of transition and for unification with the CPGB and affiliation to the Comintern. This Marxist 'ultra-Leftist' tendency was dominant within the ILP southern and eastern divisions – at the ILP's ninth Divisional Conference held in early 1931, Gidon Cohen note that three divisions voted for disaffiliation, London and East Anglia where the RPC was strongest, and the south-west where the decision to disaffiliate resulted from a compromise between RPC and traditional ILP elements.<sup>656</sup>

Opposition to the RPC was concentrated in those divisions with the highest concentration of trade unionists and working-class activists, Lancashire, the North-East, Yorkshire and Wales, all of which supported continuing affiliation to Labour and political action through Parliament and trade unions.<sup>657</sup> Though a rupture with the Labour Party later

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<sup>655</sup> Speech delivered at Annual Conference of ILP held in Blackpool 1932, cited in F. Brockway, *Inside the Left*, London, 1947, p 240.

<sup>656</sup> G. Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party From Disaffiliation To World War II*, London, 2007, pp. 20, 22-3, 111.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

that year was made inevitable by the latter's refusal to negotiate on Parliamentary Standing Orders or discipline, the Party's 'stupid and disastrous error' was compounded by theoretical and strategic divisions.<sup>658</sup> The leading opponents of disaffiliation, E.F. Wise and Pat Dollan, re-joined the Labour Party, whereas a large section of the Lancashire leadership broke away out of hostility to the Marxist RPC and a 'United Front' (a census of branch opinion revealed that two thirds of the party were cooperating 'uneasily' with the Communists).<sup>659</sup> Thus, the ILP's strategists fell afoul of the main dilemma confronting Labour intellectuals post 1931 – to cite J.T. Murphy, in announcing a centrist position the Party was '...ineffective in winning Communists to its ranks and equally ineffective in influencing or winning forces from the Labour Party'.<sup>660</sup>

However, the slow decline of the radicalised ILP, in spite of the wider labour movement's ostensible repudiation of so-called 'gradualism', also indicates that there was little enthusiasm for vanguardism, even among those intellectuals operating outside of the Communist movement in the south-east. Many of the ILPers who disaffiliated from Labour in 1932 did so out of organizational loyalties rather than a fundamental ideological or strategic repudiation. For instance, Jennie Lee made no secret of her hopes that the Left inside the Labour Party would '...gain sufficient ground to make it possible before too long for all of us to be in the one party again'.<sup>661</sup> The fate of Mosley's abortive 'New Party', formed in 1930 to press for a new economic policy '...more drastic and determined than any policy yet formulated by any government in the House of Commons' was no doubt fresh in the minds of those questioning their place within the Labour Party.<sup>662</sup> Demanding that Parliament vest '...wide powers to deal with the present economic crisis' in 'an emergency

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<sup>658</sup> F. Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow*, New York, 1977, p. 107.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

<sup>660</sup> J. T. Murphy, *Preparing for Power*, London, 1934, p. 272.

<sup>661</sup> J. Lee, *My Life with Nye*, London, 1968, p. 96.

<sup>662</sup> Extract from the *Mosley Manifesto* printed in the *Daily Telegraph*, 8 Dec 1930, cited in O. Mosley, *My Life*, London, 1970, p. 280.

Cabinet of not more than five Ministers’, the purpose of which would be to establish an insulated economy resting on the mutual development of Britain and the Dominions, the Mosley Manifesto was signed by sixteen Labour MPs including Aneurin Bevan, W.J. Brown, Secretary of the Civil Service Clerical Association, Oliver Baldwin, John Strachey, and Arthur Cook of the Miners’ Federation.<sup>663</sup> Yet though the New Party’s ‘unorthodox’ economic programme attracted the support of Party ‘rebels’ such as Bevan, a young Harold Macmillan and John Maynard Keynes each in turn believed that their cause would best be served by remaining within the ranks of the three main parties and Harold Nicholson noted that by June of 1931 the Party ‘had petered out’, with John Strachey and Allan Young defecting due to the increasingly Fascistic nature of the movement.<sup>664</sup> In the event, the New Party barely survived into 1932 polling a feeble 0.2 per cent (or 36,377 votes) at the General Election held in October 1931 and the organization was disbanded in April 1932 before being rebranded as the British Union of Fascists in October 1932.<sup>665</sup>

Thus, the main lessons of 1931 for the Labour intellectual seemed to be that, to cite Kavanagh, there were ‘...limits, to the extent to which the innovator can remain ‘outside’ and still be called to office in Britain’ and that those who rejected the political formula and institutions upheld by society could only come to power ‘by a breakdown’ of said norms and/or institutions’.<sup>666</sup> Manifestly, the latter situation of political crisis did not occur in the thirties. In the elections of 1931 and 1935 roughly 97% of the electorate expressed support for the Parliamentary Labour Party or those parties comprising the National Government.<sup>667</sup> This harsh reality was grasped by the majority of Labour’s intellectuals who were determined to avoid the political isolation and marginalisation which had befallen the young Communist

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid, pp. 280-1.

<sup>664</sup> See the diary entries for 29 April 1931, 30 May 1931, 25 June 1931, and 23 July 1931, in H. Nicholson, *Diaries and Letters 1930-1964*, London, 2004, pp. 24, 26, 27-8.

<sup>665</sup> On Election results see M. Worley, *Oswald Mosley and the New Party*, London, 2010, pp. 10-1.

<sup>666</sup> D. Kavanagh, *Politics and Personalities*, London, 1990, p. 157.

<sup>667</sup> See General Election results in D. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, London, 1963, pp. 123-4.

Party during the 1920s. Just as the ex-Liberal reformers of organisations such as the UDC or No-Conscription Fellowship had joined Labour after 1918 to retain and expand their practical influence upon the politics of reform (Desai). For post 1931 Left intellectuals such as Cripps, Murphy and Laski argued that the most effective means of furthering socialism would be the formation of a Left ‘ginger group’ within Labour. However, their continuing attachment to Labour was not merely strategic – for all the subsequent mythology of radicalism surrounding men such as Cripps and Laski, these theorists remained attached to the Parliamentary road to Socialism, even if they were more pessimistic and circumspect than before.

### **Silver Spires and Red Shirts: Labour Intellectuals and Oxford Politics, 1931-1940**

Those strategic and cultural difficulties which confronted intellectuals operating within the Labour fold were exemplified by the stormy course of Oxford politics in the 1930s, where an increasingly militant Oxford CLP membership walked a fine line between co-operation with the local Communist Party and obeisance to the decisions of an anti-Communist NEC. The question of the political relationship between social democracy and Communism was particularly urgent for Oxford intellectuals, for it was from within their institutional base at the university that the so-called ‘Auden Generation’ of Communist aesthetes and cultural critics launched their call-to-arms for political action.<sup>668</sup> United in a shared belief that the old social order of parliament, church, and school-master was doomed, poets such as W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender looked to a cataclysmic revolution as the main hope for the social regeneration of a decaying industrial civilization.<sup>669</sup> In this respect this cohort drew upon the tone and tenor of T.S.

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<sup>668</sup> The term ‘Auden Generation’ was coined by S. Hymes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, Toronto, 1976, pp. 10-1.

<sup>669</sup> See N. Branson, & M. Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, St Albans, 1973, pp. 294-5.

Eliot's poem *The Waste land* (1922) - coming to maturity in the late '20s and early '30s, at a time when the devastation of one war seemed to be giving way to the maturation of another, these poets shared with the earlier writers and veterans of the 'Front Generation' a concern with discovering a new moral creed which could overcome the social divisions of the post-war world, though they were more millenarian in their vision.<sup>670</sup> The Cambridge Poet and contemporary, Julian Bell, captured the mentality of this group in a letter he addressed to *The New Statesman and Nation* in 1933;

As far as an interest in literature continues it has very largely changed its character, and become an ally of Communism under the influence of Mr Auden's Oxford Group. Indeed, it might, with some plausibility, be argued that Communism in England is at present very largely a literary phenomenon – an attempt of a second "post-war generation" to escape from the Waste Land.<sup>671</sup>

In observing this cohort, Orwell was less charitable and argued that if Auden spoke for a generation it was now because he was equally credulous, for the 'tragedy' of this generation was not that it had too little faith, but too much.<sup>672</sup> Though he underestimated the weight and seriousness of the political choices and commitments which confronted these writers, Orwell was correct in that the 'Auden Generation' was merely part of a wider cultural radicalisation which shook ancient universities in the 1930s. In particular, Oxford hosted the emergence of a self-consciously Marxist cadre in the early part of the decade, led by the October Club, founded in January 1932 by an American student, Frank Meyer and his friend, Dick Freeman. The October Club had more than 300 members at the end of its first year and was affiliated to the Students Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain,

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<sup>670</sup> Cf. D.S. White, *Lost Comrades: Socialists of the Front Generation 1918-194*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 4-5 and Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, pp. 20-1.

<sup>671</sup> J. Bell, letter addressed to *The New Statesman and Nation*, December 9, 1933, pp. 731-2 cited in P. Stansky and W. Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier, Julian Bell and John Cornford: their lives and the 1930s*, London, 1966, pp. 108-9.

<sup>672</sup> G. Orwell, cited in S. Smith, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 6.

though this still paled by comparison to the total number of active Cambridge Communists.<sup>673</sup> Interesting testimony concerning the extent of Communist activity at Oxford was provided by Meyer, who converted to Catholicism after 1945 and appeared before an inquiry in America concerning subversive activities;

Mr. Meyer. By the time I left England, about 1934, I would say that we had from 400 to 500 Communist Party members, disciplined Communist Party members, in the British Universities, which is a more significant figure than in America, because there are only about 50,000 or 60,000 university students altogether...At Oxford, I remember distinctly that there was a disciplined group of 70.<sup>674</sup>

The emergence of this activist group posed considerable problems for the Oxford Labour Club, which was only just recovering from an outflow of members following the political crisis of 1931. It is therefore illustrative to consider the notable radicalisation of Oxford student politics from 1931 onwards, in particular the undergraduates' increasingly contemptuous treatment of those symbols of nation, crown, and empire prized by their fathers' generation. A sign of the times was provided by the infamous 'Oxford Oath' or 'Pledge'. In a debate held on the 9 February 1933 at the Oxford Union Society, assembled students voted in favour of the motion 'This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country', by 275 votes to 153 against. As Shiela Grant Duff, one of the few female undergraduates, wrote in November that year:

'Oxford is very exciting politically these days. The October Club has been banned and meets secretly in public houses. It arose out of a fuss about the Officer Training Corps and the Anti-War Association – the Proctors objected to it being called the Oxford University A-WA and banned its meetings ... Everyone went in the back door because the proctors banned the front door ... and then everyone passed a resolution against the proctors, and broke out

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<sup>673</sup> N. Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, London, 1959, pp. 51-2.

<sup>674</sup> *Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States*, February 5, 1957, p. 3579, accessed at [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=X8FBAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA3578&dq=oxford+university+communist+october+club&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjE8oPB4q\\_sAhUVhlwKHQ1hAd0Q6AEwAXoECAMQA#v=onepage&q=oxford%20university%20communist%20october%20club&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=X8FBAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA3578&dq=oxford+university+communist+october+club&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjE8oPB4q_sAhUVhlwKHQ1hAd0Q6AEwAXoECAMQA#v=onepage&q=oxford%20university%20communist%20october%20club&f=false).

in a mass into the street – In spite of a great many bulldogs, most people escaped.<sup>675</sup>

As Duncan Bowie has noted in his research, Oxford offers a useful case study of the interaction between university-based intellectuals and working-class activists, for in contrast with Cambridge, Oxford was not just a University town, but also one of the few British cities with a buoyant industry by the beginning of the 1930s.<sup>676</sup> Indeed, in the short period spanning from 1927 to 1939 the total registered workforce employed by Morris Motors increased from 19,260 to 34,450 (roughly 40% of the working population), this compared with the 800 workers at the University Press and 520 at the Iron Works recorded in 1938.<sup>677</sup> The growth in population and influx of internal migration (largely from South Wales) also changed the social fabric of Oxford, as new private estates were built in Florence Park and Headley Way, whilst Council housing was constructed in Rose Hill, South Park, Gypsy Lane and Cutteslowe in North Oxford.<sup>678</sup> These socio-economic dislocations elicited the attention of local reformers and social administrators who viewed conditions in Oxford as symptomatic of the similar changes taking place in many other parts of southern England. Thus, from 1935 to 1938 Barnett House, an independent institution established in 1914 to commemorate Canon Barnett, founder of Toynbee Hall, carried out a survey of local social services with the aim of establishing the best way to plan and run the infrastructure needed for a modern industrial city such as Oxford.<sup>679</sup> The local survey, which was published in three parts as *Social Services in the Oxford District* (1938) was diametrically opposed to Mass-

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<sup>675</sup> Letter from Shiela Grant Duff to Adam von Trott zu Solz, 11 November 1933, printed in K. von Klemperer (ed.), *A Noble Combat: The Letters Of Shiela Grant Duff And Adam von Trott zu Solz 1932-1939*, London, 1988, pp. 25-6.

<sup>676</sup> D. Bowie, *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires: Radical, Socialist and Communist Politics in the City of Oxford 1830-1980*, London, 2018, p. vi.

<sup>677</sup> L. Francis Salzman, *The Victoria History of the County of Oxford : Volume One*, Victoria County History, London, 1970, p. 218.

<sup>678</sup> See Bowie, *Reform and Revolt*, p. 140.

<sup>679</sup> E. Peretz, 'The Forgotten Survey: Social Services in the Oxford District: 1935-40', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 22, No. 1, 2011, p. 107.

Observation's examination of 'Work Town' in Bolton, an archetypal 'distressed area', for where the Mass-Observers sought to produce an 'anthropology of ourselves' the latter had the explicit policy objective of studying,

...the social and administrative changes now in progress in one small district... changes similar to those which are taking place in and around Oxford can be observed in many parts of southern England. In studying the Oxford district we are drawing attention to problems which are widespread in different parts of the south of England, and are possibly more acute at Oxford than elsewhere.<sup>680</sup>

Thus, idealistic young undergraduates were brought into contact with the working class like never before. If this was not enough to encourage an involvement in contemporary political and social debate, the student body was also confronted with the highly publicised unemployed marches of the period as well as street battles between Black Shirts and 'red shirt' wearing anti-fascists. As Wal Hannington, organiser for the NUWM notes, a 1933 demonstration of the University Fascist Club gave rise to considerable physical violence among students, whereas 'militant University Graduates' attended to the injuries suffered by protesters during the local unemployed marches.<sup>681</sup>

It is possible to overstate the novelty of this engagement with the working class and the implied insularity of the (overwhelmingly middle class) student body. After all, Oxford had been one of the first Universities to pioneer the systematic extra-mural education of adults from the 1880s onwards, whereas the Workers' Education Association (WEA) had long ago recognised that (to cite Albert Mansbridge) 'the mass of ordinary men and women' needed a 'humane education' as much as the successful minority.<sup>682</sup> Labour and reforming Liberal intellectuals had long been involved with the WEA; T.H. Green, Arnold Toynbee, Tawney,

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<sup>680</sup> A.C. Bourdillon (ed.), *Social Services in the Oxford District*, Vol. 1, London, 1938, pp. 1-2, cited in Peretz, 'The Forgotten Survey: Social Services in the Oxford District : 1935-1940', *20<sup>th</sup> Century British History*, 01 January 2011, 22(1), pp 103-113, p. 104.

<sup>681</sup> W. Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles, 1919-1936*, London, 1936, p. 198.

<sup>682</sup> Albert Mansbridge cited in R.H. Tawney, *The Radical Tradition*, London, 1964, p. 89.

G.D.H. Cole, and William Temple had cut their teeth on the face-to-face confrontations with working men within the tutorial format of the association.<sup>683</sup> However, like the poor settlements which the University established in the East End of London, these institutions were afflicted by a strong vein of paternalistic reform. As William Crank, one of the founders of the Central Labour College (a Left breakaway from Ruskin College) later commented, the WEA's emphasis on 'impartial' and 'non-political' education was subject to considerable criticism in that the Oxbridge Dons' conception of 'workers' education' was quite different from that of activists:

'The difference between what we thought of working-class education and what they thought it should be, had its source precisely in the difference between *how* we thought and *how* they thought ... arriving at mistaken judgements, in this case about working-class education.'<sup>684</sup>

Invariably, the CLC's conception of 'working class education' was that of a Marxist-oriented curriculum opposed to the norms and institutions of capitalism, as well as the 'social integration' of the working class which the WEA sought after. Yet the criticism was unfair in the sense that it was rare before 1931 to find a significant body of Oxford academics and students sympathetic to the working-class, let alone socialism. Even into the 1930s, the majority of registered undergraduates were of a politically (and socially) conservative orientation and in 1926 Oxford students had infamously forsaken their studies for the purposes of strike-breaking activities, including the driving of buses and trains.<sup>685</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at the Labour intellectuals in the 1930s in terms of their association and development through south east political and educational institutions,

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<sup>683</sup> See L. Goldman, *Dons and Workers 1900-1914*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 56-7.

<sup>684</sup> W.W. Crank, *Central Labour College: A Chapter in the History of Adult Working Class*, London, 1964, p. 121.

<sup>685</sup> K. O. Morgan, 'The Twentieth Century 1914-2000', in K. O. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford History of Britain*, Oxford, 2010, p. 603.

together with their influences and failings. Indeed, it has been variously contested that Britain had no great intellectuals nor an intelligentsia on a par with Russia or France. An equally emotive debate exists as to whether the Labour Party was devoid of intellectuals and, in effect, was an un-intellectual or perhaps more accurately, an un-theoretical Party? Yet within Labour's inter-war period there comprised a middle-class network of intellectuals which congregated around Party summer schools, newspapers and informal discussion groups held in both central London flats and weekend cottages in the Home Counties.<sup>686</sup> It is perhaps even more surprising that they were able to evolve within a Party that 'grew out of the bowels' of an Edwardian Trades Union Movement (to cite Bevin), one that had always maintained a cautious if not hostile relationship to both socialist theory and middle-class Socialists.<sup>687</sup>

Yet Labour's notable thinkers (influential in the 1930s) grew and evolved out of southern institutions, such as Oxbridge and the LSE: R. H. Tawney, G. D. H. Cole, the Webbs, Dalton, Durbin, Hobson, Cripps, Strachey etcetera. For after the economic crisis and demise of the second Labour Government such thinkers were pivotal in the re-building of the Party and its future direction. Indeed, the 1930s represented a critical phase of British history in which the institutional foundations of the Victorian inheritance – the self-regulating market, liberal Parliamentary consensus and 'Night Watchman' State were undermined by the members of the class traditionally charged with its defence.<sup>688</sup>

Nonetheless, Party intellectuals were divided along clear fault lines in their assessment of Labour's woes. For those on the Centre to Right, it was either the personal betrayal of Macdonald's coterie or the muddled-headedness of Labour's theory and policy

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<sup>686</sup> W. L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite*, London, 1964, pp. 250-252.

<sup>687</sup> E. Bevin speaking at Conference, Annual Conference Report 1935, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

<sup>688</sup> See K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, London, 1957, pp. 3-10.

which had paralysed the former government, whereas for Left critics it was rather the entire edifice of Fabian political economy which was to blame. Yet for all the radical mythology around Cripps and Laski these theorists remained firmly wedded to the Parliamentary road to socialism, even if they were more pessimistic and circumspect than before.

## Chapter VII

### A Slight Inconvenience?

#### Spain and the Constituency Parties Movement, c. 1936-9

Though a considerable historiography has already examined the role of intellectuals and activists (overwhelmingly Communist) in framing the narrative of the Spanish Civil War, it is only in the last three decades that historians have begun to consider the response to the conflict from within the faceless rank-and-file of the so-called ‘official’ Labour movement.<sup>689</sup> This oversight has been perpetuated by the recollections of Labour leaders and Party apparatchiks of the time who branded and dismissed the grassroots ‘Aid Spain’ campaign as part of an ‘attempt by the Communist Party to get into the Labour movement by devious methods’, defeated by the good sense of ‘the majority of the Party’.<sup>690</sup> In his officially sanctioned history of Labour entitled *Fifty Years March* (1949), Francis Williams devoted but a single paragraph to the Spanish conflict and the ‘sense of frustration’ within local parties occasioned by Labour’s initial support for the National Government’s non-intervention. Similarly, Labour figures such as Walter Citrine elected to omit such uncomfortable debates from his memoirs.<sup>691</sup>

In this chapter I will examine the development of the Home Counties Labour Association (HCLA) and its creation of the Labour Spain Committee (LSC) in 1937. The HCLA evolved as a response to grass roots frustration with the dominance of the trade union bloc vote within conference and the decision-making on the NEC. Similarly, the LSC was in turn formed by the HCLA in 1937 through membership vexation at Labour’s inept response

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<sup>689</sup> S. Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, London, 1976.

<sup>690</sup> See for instance C.R. Attlee, *As It Happened*, Berkshire, 1954, pp. 94-5.

<sup>691</sup> F. Williams, *Fifty Years March: The Rise of The Labour Party*, London, 1950, pp. 353-4 & W. Citrine, *Men & Work: An Autobiography*, London, 1964.

to the Spanish Civil War. However, as with other dissenters, both were held in suspicion and, in the case of the LSC, marginalised by the setting up of an ‘official’ NEC rival body.

In this research I have employed the often-overlooked J.C. Pole and C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, housed at Churchill College, Cambridge and the British Library of Political and Economic Science (BLPES), LSE respectively. To cite a cliché, Labour was a ‘broad church’ and there is a danger in generalising based on isolated cases. To date, only Mates has considered the grass-roots regional variation in response to the Spanish conflict within the Labour movement and his examination of the ‘politically moderate’ north-east found that in reality there was ‘very little evidence’ of widespread public Catholic opposition to trade unions and CLPs supporting the Republic.<sup>692</sup>

Though later judged a failed enterprise by its Secretary, J.C. Pole, the LSC at its height attracted considerable support from among the south-eastern constituencies.<sup>693</sup> At its inaugural conference in March 1937, almost eighty CLPs expressed their dissatisfaction with Labour’s support for non-intervention and a resolution implored the Committee’s Executive to organise a nationwide campaign in favour of the Spanish Republic’s right to buy arms.<sup>694</sup> In spite of its attempts to ignore the LSC, the NEC was so embarrassed that it later constituted an official ‘Spain Campaign Committee’ with the ostensible purpose of compelling the government to ‘abandon the Non-Intervention Agreement’.<sup>695</sup> Yet, in spite of the influence (if negative) which it exerted upon the Labour leadership, the LSC has received little attention from Labour historians examining the Spanish conflict. Apart from Fleay and

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<sup>692</sup> L. H. Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left: Political Activism and the Popular Front*, London, 2007, pp. 92-3.

<sup>693</sup> Labour Spain Committee papers, LSPC/1/1, J.C. Pole, brief historical note to the papers of the Labour Spain Committee, Churchill College, Cambridge.

<sup>694</sup> LSPC, Report of Conference of Constituency Labour Parties, 13 March 1937.

<sup>695</sup> TUC Archive, 292/c/946/3/9, Labour Party Spain Campaign Committee 1937-1938, Draft Circular, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

Saunders' article on the subject, or Pimlott's examination of the HCLA thirty years ago, the LSC has been consigned to the footnotes or references of most overviews.

Commenting upon the public response to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in August 1936, a young Isaiah Berlin wrote that in Britain the 'Spanish issue' was 'the best Farbekenner in the world', for one only needed to ask what others thought and 'no further questions about their politics are ever necessary'.<sup>696</sup> Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter VI, to the 'Auden Generation' of left-wing writers and propagandists the Civil War epitomised the seemingly apocalyptic struggle for the future of civilization being waged throughout Europe. For commentators as diverse as Storm Jameson, Stephen Spender, Pearl Binder and Douglas Garman, Franco and Fascism represented the 'dark forces' against which 'democracy' and 'freedom' were contending and young intellectuals had an obligation to descend from the 'ivory tower' and enter the fray in defence of 'civilization'.<sup>697</sup>

Yet, as recent research has found, the Spanish conflict was equally, if not more important, to a significant minority of working-class socialists and trade unionists. As MI5 records from the period indicate, of the 4,000 or so Britons who volunteered to serve in defence of the Spanish Republic (whether in the International Brigades or Medical and Transport Corps), the overwhelming majority were drawn from the working class, specifically London and the industrial regions of Britain.<sup>698</sup> To cite the recollections of one contemporary, the only 'ideals' on offer at the time were Christianity and Communism 'which had not yet been classified as mutually exclusive'; a mixture of the two drove

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<sup>696</sup> 'Farbekenner' translates as 'colour distinguisher' or Litmus test, see Isaiah Berlin letter dated 10 August 1936, in H. Hardy (ed.), *Flourishing: Letters 1928-1946*, London, 2004, pp. 188-9.

<sup>697</sup> *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*. Answers to a questionnaire issued by Aragon, L. and others for the *Left Review*, London, 1937, accessed at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/authors-take-sides-on-the-spanish-war> on 31 Dec 2019.

<sup>698</sup> T. Buchanan, 'The Secret History of Britain's Spanish Civil War Volunteers', 28 Jun 2011, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/28/mi5-spanish-civil-war-britain>.

numerous young men, both bourgeois and proletarian, to join the International Brigades in defence of the Spanish Republic.<sup>699</sup>

In looking to this material it will be argued that the LSC represented a significant cross-section of south-eastern Labour members, and that it helped to unify the primarily procedural emphasis of the HCLA campaign for the democratisation of national party structures, with a politicised critique of what Buchanan has termed the Labour NEC's 'Bureaucratic Internationalism'.<sup>700</sup> The first section of the chapter provides an essential contextualisation of the LSC's formation within south-eastern members' movement for reform of Labour's trade-union dominated NEC and its top-down control of even constituency level political practice. It is argued that LSC represented the most radical wing of the south-eastern constituencies movement, in particular that supportive of the 'Popular Front'. It soon came into conflict with those HCLA figures like Ben Greene who wished to avoid discrediting their demands for reform through cooperation with the Communist Party. The second section deploys excerpts from the Pole Papers to explore the multifarious forms of support lent to the LSC by CLPs in the south-east, as well as its growing estrangement from the HCLA Executive's desire to preserve the unity of the Labour Party following reform of the NEC in late 1937. The birth and death of the LSC can stand as an epitaph for that of the Labour Left in the south-east; caught between loyalty to party or fidelity to the cause of proletarian internationalism. The rank-and-file ultimately preferred to press their cause within the confines of an increasingly bureaucratised Party structure, though the seeming 'betrayal' of Spain left a legacy of ill-feeling in the constituencies which re-emerged during the war-time era of the 'political truce'.

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<sup>699</sup> C. H. Rolph, *Living Twice: An Autobiography*, London, 1974, p. 126.

<sup>700</sup> T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991, p. viii.

## **From Hemel Hempstead to Transport House: The Home Counties Labour Association 1935-1937**

Before examining the LSC, it is essential that we reappraise the formation and practice of its parent organisation, the Home Counties Labour Association (HCLA), for grassroots discontent over Labour policy on Spain was part and parcel of a long-running struggle by constituency parties for greater representation on national policy-making bodies. Though Labour's 1918 Constitution placed emphasis on the democratic sovereignty of Conference, by 1934 a growing cross-section of southern CLPs had become disenchanted with their lack of influence vis a vis the NEC and Union leadership.<sup>701</sup> In September 1932 Ben Greene, an active Labour member of Hertfordshire County Council and Berkhamsted Urban District Council, captured this feeling in an article entitled, 'Local Labour Parties', which argued that local parties could only overcome their lack of influence at national level by forming a national organisation capable of formulating policy and opposing the union bloc vote at Conference.<sup>702</sup> In June 1933, together with Lieut. Col. L'Estrange Malone, Hector Hughes KC, and the former minister C.G. Amman, Greene launched this 'Association of Labour Parties' in order to obtain for the non-trade union element 'a greater voice in the councils of the party'.<sup>703</sup> Though both Malone and Greene stressed that there was 'no question of opposition' to Party leaders and 'no sort of contest with industrial elements', the Labour NEC did not agree and instead opposed the Association's formation, ensuring that it did not survive long enough to press its case at Labour's Hastings Conference in October 1933.<sup>704</sup> Even if the Association had been able to attend it is unlikely to have met with

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<sup>701</sup> Labour Party Constitution and Standing Orders 1918, Clause 3 (c) cited in L. Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference: A Study in the Politics of Intra-Party Democracy*, Manchester, 1980, p. 9. Also, C. R. Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective*, London, 1937, p. 22 and H. Dalton, *Practical Socialism for Britain*, London, 1936, p. 17.

<sup>702</sup> J. Lewis., *Shades of Greene: One Generation of An English Family*, London, 2010, p. 204.

<sup>703</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left In the 1930s*, London, 1986, p. 117.

<sup>704</sup> Greene and Malone cited in B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, London, 1986, pp. 117-8.

success. For despite remonstrations from CLP delegates, the question of amending local Party representation to Conference and on the NEC was remitted for consideration by the latter body and when its Report was submitted to the Stockport Conference in 1934, the constituency demands for a larger vote share were rejected.<sup>705</sup>

Thus, as we have seen, by 1934 considerable frustration had built up within the rank and file towards the national Party's constitutional arrangements, for they felt the Party machinery had deprived them of any effective say in policy formation and political education. The American political scientist, Dean McHenry, who frequented Labour circles from 1935-6, provides an apt summary of the CLPs' grievances over that period;

Local Labour Parties present the bulk of resolutions, motions, and amendments to the Conference, constituting eighty-five to ninety-five per cent. of the total on the *Final Agenda* between 1932 and 1937. Around ten per cent. of these reaches the floor of the Conference and about three per cent. is passed. The reason for the large number of matters raised by local Parties is not difficult to find: the local Labour Parties have lacked an adequate central organization or conference through which they may coordinate their policy.<sup>706</sup>

As a result, the NEC's proposed resolutions were only defeated ten times at the six Conferences from 1932-1937. Of those important concessions forced upon the Executive, none were related to internal constitutional reform of the Party.<sup>707</sup> Naturally, going by the leadership of the abortive 'Association of Labour Parties', it may be possible to dismiss this campaign as the work of political gadflies or crackpots. For over the course of his brief political career, Lieut. Col. Malone had, for instance, moved from the Anti-Socialist Union, to the Communist Party, before moving to Labour in the late 1920s, whereas Greene later

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<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> D. E. McHenry, *The Labour Party in Transition 1931-1938*, London, 1938, pp. 31-2

<sup>707</sup> Ibid, pp. 29-30.

combined (ironically) a Quaker pacifism and democratic critique of Labour Party structures with a muted admiration for the ‘constructive enterprise’ of Hitler’s Germany.<sup>708</sup>

Yet as Pimlott has rightly noted, the failure of Greene’s ‘association’ was more a result of mistaken tactics, namely his narrow top-down focus upon Westminster orientated minor politicians than the absence of grass-roots support.<sup>709</sup> When he adopted a grass roots up approach, namely by obtaining the political and financial support of the Surrey Labour Federation, the results were more than reassuring. On 8 December 1934 the Surrey Federation circulated a letter to the Secretaries of each CLP in the south-east inviting them to attend a conference to be held on 16 February 1935 with the purposes of establishing a ‘Home and Southern Counties Labour Association’ – in response over 200 delegates were received from all parts of the south-eastern area.<sup>710</sup> The conference was eventually held in the Clayton Hall, Walworth Road on 16 February 1935, at which the vast majority of delegates passed the following resolution:

This conference of Labour Parties in the Southern and Home Counties area expresses its appreciation to the Surrey Federation for their initiative in calling the conference. It requests the Surrey Federation to draw up a constitution and standing orders for a Home and Southern Counties Association in conjunction with those Parties supporting this object. It further requests the Surrey Federation to make the necessary arrangements for calling another conference for the purpose of amending, passing and generally implementing such a constitution.<sup>711</sup>

In tandem with these preparations a leaflet entitled, ‘The Home Counties Labour Association: What It is and What it Stands for’ was issued to summarise the origins and

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<sup>708</sup> On Malone, see I. Adams & R. Wilson, *Special Branch: A History: 1883-2006*, London, 2015, and on Greene see his quote from a 1936 tour of Germany cited in J. Lewis, *Shades of Greene: One Generation of an English Family*, London, 2010, p. 157 and B. Pimlott, ‘Ben Greene’, *Society for the Study of Labour History*, 15.

<sup>709</sup> B. Pimlott, *Labour and The Left in the 1930s*, London, 1986, p. 118.

<sup>710</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 1., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, Surrey Labour Federation Circular, 6 February 1935.

<sup>711</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, The Southern and Home Counties Association of Labour Parties. Report of the Provisional Executive Committee to The First Annual General Assembly to be Held on 16 November 1935 In The Friars’ Hall, BlackFriars Road.

rationale of the Association. For all the bitterness which it expressed concerning the ‘Sixteen Years’ Futile Agitation’ of local Parties with the NEC, this document framed the aims and objects of the HCLA in studiously procedural terms. Consequently, the most important objects of the Association were to secure such alterations in the Labour Party’s constitution and method of election of the NEC ‘as may be necessary to provide satisfactory representation’ to constituency Parties. It was also to provide said Parties with a medium for preliminary consideration of resolutions intended for inclusion in the Agenda of the Party Conference.<sup>712</sup> The Provisional Executive of the HCLA was itself reluctant to adopt a firm political programme as it was feared that this would provide ammunition for its critics within the Labour leadership. In their words, the Association’s role was to facilitate free debate and discussion of Labour policy ‘inside the party on a wider basis than the present Party machinery allows for’ and as such could not ‘under any circumstances become identified with any particular policy’.<sup>713</sup> Instead, the Executive Committee confined itself to debate of formal procedural, i.e. constitutional matters within the Labour Party such as the Labour NEC’s ‘stage management of the Annual Conference at Brighton’ in 1935, or their expulsion of the Putney Ward of the Putney D.L.P. for acts of ‘disloyalty’, for which no ‘full and proper explanation’ had been given to Conference.<sup>714</sup>

It was precisely this issue of party ‘loyalty’ which would come to haunt the HCLA. There was an unworkable contradiction in the HCLA’s simultaneous desire to ‘strengthen Labour and Socialist views’ through facilitating a rank-and-file debate on Party policy, whilst

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<sup>712</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, ‘The Home Counties Labour Association: What It Is and What It Stands For, With Constitution as Adopted by The Friars Hall Conference, 29 June 1935’, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>713</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, The Southern and Home Counties Association of Labour Parties. Report of the Provisional Executive Committee to The First Annual General Assembly to Be Held on 16 November.

<sup>714</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, The Southern and Home Counties Association of Labour Parties. Report of the Provisional Executive Committee to The First Annual General Assembly to Be Held on 16 November.

avoiding commitment to a policy programme rivalling that of the national Party.<sup>715</sup> Critical discussion of Party policy eventually entailed some form of value-judgement on its merits and practical action pursuant to its implementation. For in spite of the protestations of Greene and E.R. Simmons (Surrey Federation Secretary) that they had no intention of challenging the national Party, the Labour NEC refused to recognise the HCLA and accused Greene of fomenting damaging divisions. In a letter to Simmons dated 24 Jan 1935, National Agent George Shepherd, writing on behalf of the Labour NEC's organisation sub-committee, affirmed that the committee did not approve of the Association and that the Surrey Federation's alleged failure to provide the NEC prior notice 'vitiates the expressed desire of your Federation to act loyally within the Party'.<sup>716</sup> In a following letter dated 28 February 1935 Shepherd again emphasised on behalf of the NEC that such an Association could 'only succeed in dividing the movement into sections'.<sup>717</sup> Simmons responded that the 9 March Conference had expressed its 'loyalty to the Labour Party and also its regret that the National Executive decided to oppose the calling of the Conference' which was intended to strengthen the movement.<sup>718</sup> As Simmons had put it in an earlier letter, the Surrey Federation believed that any association of local parties would be of 'considerable assistance to the National Executive in its work', and that 'this would not be out of harmony with the spirit of the Labour movement' considering that for over a decade 'County Federations had been in existence as unofficial bodies in the party'.<sup>719</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, 'The Home Counties Labour Association: What It Is And What It Stands For, With Constitution as Adopted By The Friars Hall Conference, June 29 1935', 6.

<sup>716</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 1., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, G.R. Shepherd to E.R. Simmons, 14 January 1935.

<sup>717</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 1., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, G.R. Shepherd to E.R. Simmons, 28 February 1935.

<sup>718</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 1., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, E.R. Simmons to G.R. Shepherd, 10 March 1935.

<sup>719</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 1., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, E.R. Simmons to G.R. Shepherd, 14 January 1935, 2.

Yet neither Simmons nor the provisional Executive of the Surrey Federation or HCLA appreciated the extent of suspicion towards the project harboured by the NEC. At a time when the Party leadership's programme was under concurrent assault from the left-wing Socialist League, Party apparatchiks were liable to view any grassroots body as potentially subversive and disloyal. This paranoia was best summarised by the Party's Secretary Jim Middleton, who wrote to E.R. Simmons on behalf of the NEC on 14 January 1935:

'The National Executive Committee does not believe that any organisation within the party should be created without responsibility for some electoral function. The Party's resources, both nationally and locally, are far too limited to spend on machinery which has no reference to elections to some Public Authority...but until there is some form of regional government in this country with elections thereto, money spent on the establishment of regional organisations with regional activities is likely to be wasted. There is not a Constituency or a County Federation in the Home and Southern Counties so happy in its resources that, after having adequately dealt with its own immediate problems, it can afford to spend money on other areas.'<sup>720</sup>

Middleton summed up the NEC's standpoint by urging Surrey CLPs not to embark on organisational activities which 'cannot help but very easily hinder the efficient development of the Party'.<sup>721</sup> But it was precisely because of southern CLPs' dissatisfaction with Labour's organisational machinery and political education that they supported the HCLA in such numbers. For example, the Agenda for the First Annual General Assembly of the HCLA carried a resolution from East Grinstead D.L.P. calling for the organisation of propaganda in rural areas of the Home Counties '...to take the form of annual demonstrations', whilst Mid-Bucks D.L.P. cited party leaflets as 'totally unsuitable' for circulation in the 'rural and backwards areas' and asked the HCLA to pressure the national Labour Party into

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<sup>720</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 4., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, Copy of Communication as Sent Out by National Executive Committee of The Labour Party (The Proposed Association of Constituency Labour Parties, 2.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid.

providing ‘far greater financial support’ for said locales.<sup>722</sup> The Association took this to heart, and in 1937 the Executive’s propaganda sub-committee enlisted the aid of activists to organise outdoor meetings and the distribution of literature, or to connect with cycling groups or rambling clubs in these areas.<sup>723</sup> Interestingly, south eastern grass roots support for the HCLA continued, with the Reigate AGM of March 1939 having eagerly elected delegates to the Surrey Labour Federation and HCLA.<sup>724</sup> Even at the start of war in December 1940 Dover members discussed feedback from the delegates sent to the HCLA conference.<sup>725</sup>

Though modest as it may have been in its initial objectives, the HCLA chose an unfortunate time to open its campaign, as it was in a sense operating against the grain of an increasingly disciplinarian centralisation of authority within the Labour Party. To cite James Jupp’s apt commentary, Transport House was busy ‘eliminating organized minorities’, and by 1940 ‘...the political wing of Labour was no longer federal in the sense of containing organized minorities with their own machinery, leaders and policy’.<sup>726</sup> Moreover, the HCLA’s contradictory denial of politics and factionalism prevented it from advancing its own policy programme beyond discussion of constitutional reform. The explication of official Labour policy could not and did not survive contact with the increasingly fraught international context of latter 1930s. In particular, the eruption of the Spanish Civil War in June 1936 and the Labour leadership’s reluctance to champion grass-roots and extra-parliamentary support for the Spanish Republic posed a dilemma for the HCLA in that the question of institutional reform was now intrinsically bound to political debate over the

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<sup>722</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, Home Counties Labour Association, Agenda of The First Annual General Assembly, 1934.

<sup>723</sup> BLPES, GB 97 COLL MISC 0540 Folder 2., C.J. Garnsworthy Papers, ‘Home Counties Labour Association: Winning Rural England For Socialism, A Practical Appeal for 1937’, 2.

<sup>724</sup> ‘Annual Meeting at Reigate’, *Surrey Mirror*, Friday 3 March 1939,

<sup>725</sup> *Dover Express*, Friday 13 December 1940.

<sup>726</sup> J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain 1931-1941*, London, 2005, p. 189.

merits of non-intervention, parliamentary tactics and the United Front.<sup>727</sup> Did home counties Labour rise to the challenge?

### **The Labour Spain Committee, 1937-1939**

In the last twenty to thirty years several historians have made important contributions towards reappraising British Labour's response to the Spanish Civil War. Here Buchanan has suggested that the Labour leadership, in particular trade union leaders such as Citrine and Bevin, prioritised their Party's 'institutional interests' and unity over the cause of the Republic. This has spawned a vigorous debate.<sup>728</sup> In particular, Fyrth has disputed Buchanan's suggestion that Labour's refusal to countenance a 'United Front' was primarily influenced by concerns over preserving 'official channels' or the support of working-class Catholics; rather men like Citrine and Bevin were driven by a fierce anti-Communism and anxiety about pressures for a People's Front.<sup>729</sup> In considering this debate it is essential that we turn to the emergence of the LSC, for as Fleay and Saunders have rightly argued the history of the Committee illuminated the internal divisions of the Labour Party during the period 1936-9, as well as helping to explain why an impressive expression of discontent from the Labour movement as a whole was effectively suppressed by the policy makers of the Labour Party.<sup>730</sup>

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 brought immediate pledges of support from Clement Attlee, the Leader of the Labour Party, for the Spanish Republican government against the Nationalist uprising. On 2 August Leon Blum, leader of the Popular Front Government of France, proposed a non-intervention agreement which prohibited sale of

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<sup>727</sup> T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 44, 223.

<sup>728</sup> Ibid, pp. xiii, 221-3; T. Buchanan, *The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain: War, Loss and Memory*, Sussex, 2006, pp. 12-3.

<sup>729</sup> J. Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39', *History Workshop*, No. 35, Spring, 1993, pp. 158-9.

<sup>730</sup> C. Fleay & M. Saunders, 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War', *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197.

arms to either side in the war. Such a policy was welcomed by the National Government in Britain, which had helped initiate the proposal. Labour's National Executive accepted these developments and at the annual Party Conference in Edinburgh in October 1936 what Arthur Greenwood described as 'a very, very bad second best' received cautious approval from a Conference afraid of instigating a wider European war.<sup>731</sup> However, this approval was not uniform and a considerable gulf separated the Party leaders from the rank and file membership in the south-east. Their dissatisfaction found an expression through the HCLA, whose secretary, Ben Greene, helped to organize the Provisional Committee of constituency Labour Parties at the Edinburgh Conference.<sup>732</sup> That this Committee adopted an adversarial stance towards the Party leadership can be observed from the fact that Stafford Cripps, leading member of the S.L. and bete noire of Transport House, was appointed its first Chairman.<sup>733</sup>

The HCLA sought to challenge the dominance of the trade unions on the National Executive by mounting a national campaign to increase constituency representation whilst limiting the influence of the trade union bloc vote in selecting candidates. Yet Labour's policy towards the Spanish conflict ineluctably became the focus for the campaign, resulting in the formation of the LSC at a Conference summoned by the Executive Committee of the HCLA held at the Conway Hall in London on 13 March 1937.<sup>734</sup> This was a significant act in several respects; the HCLA had already established a subcommittee on Spain to conduct a campaign of support throughout the home counties for the Spanish government. The LSC comprised of Charles James Garnsworthy (also chair of the HCLA), its Secretary J.C. Pole,

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<sup>731</sup> Greenwood cited in P. Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s*, London, 2006, p. 104.

<sup>732</sup> Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Pole Papers, Labour Spain Committee, 51, William Taylor to Ben Green, 10 April 1937.

<sup>733</sup> See C. Fleay & M. Sanders, 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War', *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197, 188.

<sup>734</sup> Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Pole Papers, Labour Spain Committee, 70, Labour Spain Committee Statement.

Treasurer Austen Albu, Mollie Millar and Sybil Wingate, and was directed to work with the sub-committee in the pursuit of three main objectives. First, urging the NEC to call a conference of the whole Labour movement to reassess the Spanish situation and receive fresh instructions; secondly, to initiate a nationwide campaign to compel the national government to restore the rights of the Spanish Government to buy arms; and thirdly, to co-ordinate all anti-Fascist groups working to help Republican Spain into a single movement.<sup>735</sup> The overriding sentiment of the Conway Hall conference of March was that the leadership had misrepresented the vast majority of members in accepting non-intervention, calling for the rank-and-file to take the initiative.

Yet the LSC was immediately disadvantaged by the opposition of the NEC to any constituency organisations or association with the Popular Frontists. In a vigorous back and forth correspondence with Ben Greene, the Labour Party National Agent, George Shepherd, and its Secretary, Jim Middleton, both refused to extend any recognition to ‘secret’ or ‘unofficial’ bodies. The fact that Cripps was so highly placed within the constituencies movement, or the HCLA, no doubt antagonised Party officials. The situation was made more awkward for the LSC when H.N. Brailsford succeeded Garnsworthy as its Chairman soon after its formation. As an active proponent of the Popular Front, Brailsford antagonised the Labour NEC by condemning their ‘record of timidity’ with regards to the Spanish crisis.<sup>736</sup> In 1938 he was closely linked with the United Peace Alliance, a successor to the Unity campaign which Cripps led in an effort to unite the Labour, Independent Labour and Communist Parties. Brailsford remained a firm supporter of an anti-Fascist United Front until 1939.<sup>737</sup> In this respect the selection of Brailsford was rather representative of feeling

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<sup>735</sup> Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Pole Papers, Labour Spain Committee, 71, Labour Spain Committee Resolution.

<sup>736</sup> Warwick University, Modern Records Centre, Sara Maitland, Hallinan Collection, Pamphlets, 15x/2/463/10, H.N. Brailsford, *Spain's Challenge to Labour* (1936), 10.

<sup>737</sup> See F. M. Leventhal, *The Last Dissenter: H.N. Brailsford and His World*, Oxford, 2000, p. 253.

among members, for in October 1938 the LSC, like Brailsford, was calling for a prohibition on support for all government bills (including rearmament) until the ‘right of the Republic’ was safeguarded.<sup>738</sup>

Nevertheless, members of the LSC were aware that the Popular Front issue could confuse matters and J.C. Pole recognised, as had Ben Greene, that although the Divisional Parties were willing to go to any lengths to support the Republic they were at most doubtful about the Popular Front. This did not stop the Labour Left’s flagship paper, *Tribune*, from regularly publicising the activities of the LSC or condemning the leadership’s policy on Spain – as one header argued: ‘Not charity, but arms: not resolutions, but organised defiance of the British Government’s fascist line...And if the National Council of Labour does not act then others must’.<sup>739</sup> Fleay and Saunders have claimed that this strategic position was untenable, for though Greene and other Labour activists framed their campaign for democratisation of party institutions and foreign policy as a movement of the membership itself rather than a subversive enterprise, so long as the NEC was firmly opposed to both the most effective means of achieving reform was through direct action and cooperation with other left parties.<sup>740</sup> Regardless, the Labour Party leadership did not distinguish between ‘democratisation’ and subversion, and the LSC was viewed by them as a threat to the unity of the Party.

The policy of non-intervention accepted at Edinburgh in October 1936 was ironically justified as a means of supporting and defending the Popular Front government of France. Blum had been warning that a more positive policy of aid towards Republican Spain might provoke civil war in France and with it, the collapse of the socialist government. In addition,

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<sup>738</sup> *Daily Herald*, 27 September 1938, p. 8.

<sup>739</sup> Cf. *Tribune*, 19 March 1937, No. 12, p. 1, and 25 March 1937, p. 7.

<sup>740</sup> C. Fleay. & M. Sanders, ‘The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War’, *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197, p 194 and J. Lewis, *Shades of Greene: One Generation of an English Family*, London, 2010, pp. 204-5.

the Labour Party leadership argued that the British public was not ready for war. Citrine, in the Chair for the meeting of the Labour Socialist International claimed that in Great Britain the position was that no Government would be able to secure public support for any action which the people believed would lead to war.<sup>741</sup> However opinion polls taken at the time tell a different story: in March 1938 a poll asked readers whether they were in favour of ‘retaliation’ against Franco’s ‘piracy’, and of those who expressed an opinion 78 per cent replied ‘yes’.<sup>742</sup> Rather, the Labour leadership was more anxious that the party’s previous opposition to rearmament in Britain had rendered the nation incapable of supporting France or the Spanish Republic in the case of conflict. Though, at least in the case of Citrine, there is also the possibility that a decade of ‘Mondist’ collaboration with government had accustomed union leaders to cooperation with government policy – to cite Hinton, by the end of the decade Citrine ‘...was a regular visitor to the back-door of No 10 Downing Street, preparing the way for TUC collaboration in the construction of a new war economy’.<sup>743</sup>

The Edinburgh Conference of 1936 got on with the debate before the two Spanish delegates could arrive and swing support for intervention. Almost immediately after Edinburgh, the Party leadership began to modify their position. Attlee and Greenwood were sent to London to discuss the Spanish situation with the government and it was agreed at a joint meeting of the National Council, with representatives from the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, PLP and NEC, that a resolution be submitted to the Conference to recommend that if serious breaches of the non-intervention agreement occurred, then the Spanish government should be permitted to buy arms. By the end of Oct 1936, the National

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<sup>741</sup> T. Buchanan, *The Spanish civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 49. Also see TUC Documents 2, 21 December 1936, report of meeting with ‘rank and file’ delegation, p. 11, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>742</sup> G. H. Gallup (ed.), *Gallup International Public Opinion Polls. Great Britain 1937-1975 (Vol 1)*, London, 1976, pp. 25-7.

<sup>743</sup> J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867-1974*, Massachusetts, 1986, p. 150.

Council agreed unanimously that the full commercial right of the Spanish government should be restored. Yet at a meeting of the NEC in Jan 1937, a proposal by Herbert Morrison that the National government should be pressed to agree to the exportation of arms and grant licenses for that purpose was defeated.<sup>744</sup> In effect the Parliamentary party leaders continued to press the government to make non-intervention work.

It was only at the Geneva Conference of the Labour Socialist International and the International Federation of Trade Unions in June 1937 that the British delegation agreed to assist the Spanish government to recover its political and territorial independence, enforce the restoration of its commercial liberty and make an unquestioning commitment of solidarity with the cause of the Republic. This commitment was enforced by the National Council of Labour on 23 June 1937, in effect reversing the decision of the 1936 Edinburgh Conference in favour of non-intervention.

The NEC had ignored Brailsford and the LSC from the very beginning and on 24 March 1937 the NEC decided not to receive a deputation from the HCLA to discuss the Spanish conflict. The NEC also tried to ameliorate discontent through organisational reform and at the annual Conference in Bournemouth (1937) passed a resolution increasing CLP representation upon the NEC from five seats to seven. In 1938 the Party Secretary J.S. Middleton, invited the HCLA to disband and become a propaganda organization under party rules. The proposal was rejected, but the intention was clear.

### **The Party Hierarchy Set Up a Rival Committee, ‘The Spain Campaign Committee’**

At the Bournemouth Conference (1937) Charles Trevelyan welcomed the volte face, but cautioned that more than resolutions were needed to convince the National Government to change its policies. He proposed a declaration of solidarity with Republican Spain and

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<sup>744</sup> B. Donoghue & G. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of A Politician*, Oxford, 2001, p. 269.

called upon the NEC to launch a national campaign to compel the government to abandon its policy. Cripps pursued this at a meeting of the National Executive and suggested that a special committee be created to carry out a campaign to aid Spain. As a result the International Subcommittee was deputed to appoint one.<sup>745</sup> Thus, the Spain Campaign Committee came into being. Though direct evidence is lacking, the Spain Campaign Committee was almost certainly intended as a means of diverting the agitation that bodies such as the Labour Spain Committee were conducting, hence the appointment of well-known left-wingers to the committee.<sup>746</sup> No doubt the party leadership was beginning to feel the pressure of grass-roots discontent – shortly afterwards in December 1937, Attlee in tow with Philip Noel-Baker, Ellen Wilkinson, and John Dugdale arrived in Barcelona and stayed there with Prime Minister Negrin before inspecting the ironically named ‘Major Attlee Company’.<sup>747</sup> Their observations were published in a small pamphlet entitled ‘We Saw In Spain’ (1937), in which Attlee called upon ‘all those who believe in freedom and democracy to bring any pressure they can upon the Government to alter its policy’. Yet, the manner and form in which this pressure would be exerted went unexplained; rather Attlee saw support for food shipments as the main task, as did Ellen Wilkinson who argued that while ‘the soldiers of the Republic are fighting the battle of democracy...It is our task to see that their children are fed’.<sup>748</sup> In the end the Campaign Committee failed to meet even the limited expectations of its critics and the Committee’s work came to pivot on humanitarian relief to Spain. Left critics condemned the Committee’s focus on food aid and called for arms as well. By early

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<sup>745</sup>Warwick University, Modern Records Centre, Labour Party Spain Campaign Committee 1937-38, 292/c/946/3/9.

<sup>746</sup> Ellen Wilkinson, Stafford Cripps, and Sybil Wingate of the LSPC were all initial members of the Spain Campaign Committee. See Warwick University, Modern Records Centre, Labour Party Spain Campaign Committee 1937-38, 292/c/946/3/20/(ii).

<sup>747</sup> Cf. C.R. Attlee, *As It Happened*, Berkshire, 1954, p. 94, & F. Beckett, *Clem Attlee: Labour’s Great Reformer*, London, 2015, p. 185.

<sup>748</sup> Warwick University, Modern Records Centre, Spanish Situation - Pamphlets, Leaflets, etc. 1936-1939, 292/946/18a/69, We saw in Spain (pamphlet) (1937).

1938 Sybil Wingate had resigned, likely frustrated that her memorandum calling for a more active political campaign against the National Government had not been heeded.<sup>749</sup>

The rank-and-file, disillusioned with the ineffectual Campaign Committee, turned to the LSC which called for a national emergency conference on Spain. Indeed, the national Party had rescheduled Conference from Autumn to Whitsun leaving the movement with no national meeting in 1938 at which the Spanish issue could be raised. In April 1938 the LSC organized a conference in London attended by sixty-five divisional Labour Parties and ten Trade Councils, the majority of whom came from the south east. The conference arrived at a number of decisions which included a call for an emergency national conference of the Labour Party and a demand for a positive policy from the National Executive for breaking down the arms embargo. Brailsford wrote to Dallas, then Party Chairman, that if the Executive did not act the rank and file would.<sup>750</sup>

After another LSC meeting of 5 May, the NEC ruled on 22 June that no emergency conference would be called and that this would happen only if the international situation made such a conference necessary. The LSC called a national conference of its own in October 1938 for which it received supportive recognition from the *New Statesman*. But the conference stressed the cause of the Popular Front, a message hardly designed to evoke sympathy from Party leaders who continued to reject the concept, which by the end of 1938 had broadened to include Liberals and dissatisfied Conservatives, in contrast to the Unity Campaign of 1937. The NEC paid little attention to the LSC's 1938 Spain Conference and expelled Cripps soon after for continued advocacy of the Popular Front.

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<sup>749</sup> Spanish Rebellion Documents 1937-1940, 292/946/166/30(ii), Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>750</sup> Spanish Civil War Papers SCW/4/3. Brailsford had written to George Dallas to propose these ideas on 11 April 1938. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

On 9 January 1939 the LSC sent an embittered telegram to the leadership complaining of its silence and the fact that the Campaign Committee had not met for two months at a critical junction of the War. Indeed, only two years after the initial request did the Labour NEC agree to receive a deputation from the LSC. On 27 January 1939 the LSC deputation was received by the Labour NEC. The latter stressed that the Executive was not meeting for a month and that in any case the proposals were impracticable. The whole Executive received the proposals on 22 Feb 1939, at a time when the Chamberlain Government was preparing to recognise Franco as ruler of Spain. After nearly two years of campaigning the LSC gained access to the NEC at the very point of collapse of their supposedly common ally, Republican Spain.<sup>751</sup> Anger spilled over to south east constituencies. For example, the Secretary of the Faversham Divisional Party, J. R. Clancey, resigned his post in an angry letter of 26 January 1939 to Labour's International Officer, William Gillies, writing in the following vein:

‘the few thousand pounds collected by the party will have little or no effect on the result of the Spanish revolt. The main complaint is that the National Executive have not given this question the attention that it deserved. I write in the past tense, because it seems to me that the Spanish Republic is now beyond hope of saving. I am personally so disgusted that I am resigning from the secretaryship of the Faversham Divisional Labour Party at the next annual meeting’.<sup>752</sup>

Interestingly, the Faversham Divisional Minutes, examined at length in chapter III, make no mention of this resignation so implying that local controversies within CLPs concerning Spain were deliberately under-reported by minute takers.

At the 1939 Southport conference divisions came to a boiling point when Sybil Wingate of the LSC accused Ellen Wilkinson of the Campaign Committee of having failed

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<sup>751</sup> C. Fleah & M. L. Saunders, ‘The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War’, *Historical Journal* 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197, p. 197.

<sup>752</sup> William Gilles Papers, WG/SPA 564. Letter from J. R. Clancey to William Gilles, 26 January 1939, The Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

the Spanish people.<sup>753</sup> As a prominent fund-raiser for the food convoys and member of the official campaign committee, Wilkinson had taken the initiative by moving an emergency resolution which charged the British Government with ‘responsibility for the martyrdom of the Spanish People’.<sup>754</sup> In this she was not wrong, for it had been the British government’s refusal to back France against the threat of Germano-Italian aggression and its operation of a non-intervention agreement blatantly favourable to the Francoists which had allowed the rebels to overthrow the Republic.<sup>755</sup> Yet the fact remains that the Labour NEC suspended any effective action or debate on the matter for 18 months at the height of the conflict, when it changed the date of its 1938 conference from Autumn to Whitsun.<sup>756</sup> At the Conference J.C. Pole’s amendment condemning the NEC’s failure to bring effective aid to the Spanish Republic was rejected, ‘marking the final defeat of the Labour Spain Committee’.

By August 1939 it was decided to wind up the activities of the LSC altogether. The Labour leaders believed that they had campaigned hard but simply failed to convince a sufficient proportion of the population. The Party bureaucracy maintained that there was nothing like significant public opinion that would have been willing to risk war against the Fascist powers in Spain, whether in Britain or in France. Sybil Wingate referred with some justice to public opinion polls which demonstrated that a significant majority of those expressing opinion were willing to support direct military action against the Francoists in Spain by late 1938.<sup>757</sup> Fleay and Saunders have argued that ‘There was, indeed, a marked gap between Labour Party rhetoric and its practical achievements’ and they diagnose the failure

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<sup>753</sup> See M. Perry, *‘Red Ellen Wilkinson’: Her Ideas, Movements and World*, Manchester, 2014, p. 336.

<sup>754</sup> See Appendix D., Text of Emergency Resolution moved at 1939 Labour Party Conference by Ellen Wilkinson on behalf of the National Executive Committee, cited in K. W. Watkins, *Britain Divided: The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion*, Oxford, 1963, p. 248.

<sup>755</sup> On the pro fascist sympathies of the British ruling-class see P. Preston, ‘Britain and the Basque Campaign of 1937: The Government, the Royal Navy, the Labour Party and the Press’, *European History Quarterly*, July, 2018, pp. 12, 19.

<sup>756</sup> On this point see P. Corthorn, *In the Shadow of the Dictators: The British Left in the 1930s*, London, 2006, pp. 111-5.

<sup>757</sup> See note 14. In A. Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, Oxford, 2002, p. 252.

as being Labour's inability to use extra-parliamentary effort of any force sufficient to threaten the composure of the Chamberlain Government, stating that 'The Labour Party was committed to parliamentary means to achieve its objects, and when these failed there was nothing more to be done'.<sup>758</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked to the little-known HCLA set up in 1935 in the south east as a vehicle for channelling membership grievances with the hierarchy of the Party. I have also combined this with looking to the LSC set up in 1937, since Fleah & Saunders have highlighted the way in which the Committee was symptomatic of the internal divisions in the Party between 1936-1939.<sup>759</sup> No one subject evoked such passion and discontent among the south eastern middle-class membership than Labour's foot dragging on Spain. It was their cause celebre, as revealed within the grass roots study of Hendon CLP. The Spanish Civil War epitomised the seemingly apocalyptic struggle for the future of civilisation being waged throughout Europe. Indeed, the cause of Spain put the Party leadership to the test and it was found wanting.

As I have argued, the LSC represented the most radical wing of the south eastern constituencies, in particular that 'troublesome' element in support of the Popular Front and, therefore, it was somewhat inevitable that this would send it on a collision course with Labour's NEC, where that all too familiar trope of 'Communist infiltration' was deployed to marginalise their role. Similarly, the HCLA was held in equal suspicion by the Party hierarchy in that they sought to challenge the dominance of the trades unions on the National Executive by mounting a national campaign to increase constituency representation whilst

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<sup>758</sup> C. Fleah & M. Sanders, 'The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party Policy and the Spanish Civil War', *The Historical Journal*, 28, 1, 1985, pp. 187-197, 195-7.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 187-197, 186.

limiting the influence of the trades union block vote in selecting candidates. For the LSC was, after all, formed out of a conference organised by the HCLA held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London on 13 March 1937.<sup>760</sup> Hence, as far as the Party grandees were concerned, ‘guilty as charged’. The contempt in which both organisations and their grass roots support was held was revealed in the way that the NEC took two years in which to agree to meet the LSC and by the time they did the Spanish Civil War had ended, the Republic gone and Franco in power!

To add insult to injury the National Executive set up a rival ‘Spain Campaign Committee’ in 1937 as a sop to the growing disquiet among members in an attempt at dissipating discontent, for the rival Committee’s actions involved non-contentious things such as the welfare of Spanish children as opposed to ending the ban on the sale of arms to the Republic. The Party grandees also organised Attlee’s visit to Spain where it is felt that the naming of the ‘Major Attlee Brigade’ was done with tongue in cheek by the Brigadiers as a means of embarrassing Labour into making a public commitment. At the 1939 Southport Party Conference divisions came to a boiling point when members of the Labour Spain Committee accused Ellen Wilkinson of having failed the Spanish people.<sup>761</sup> The Labour grandees maintained that there was nothing like significant public opinion that would have been willing to risk war against the Fascist powers in Spain. Yet public opinion polls revealed the contrary.<sup>762</sup> In my case studies of local constituencies we see that the issue of Spain pre-occupied the grass roots throughout the 30s.

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<sup>760</sup> Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, J. C. Pole Papers, Labour Spain Committee, 70, Labour Spain Committee Statement.

<sup>761</sup> M. Perry, *Red Ellen Wilkinson, Her Ideas, Movements and World*, Manchester, 2014, p. 336.

<sup>762</sup> A. Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, London, 2002, p. 252.

## Chapter VIII

### ‘Revolution by Consent’?

#### The South-Eastern Constituencies’ Response to War and Reconstruction

This Chapter will focus on the political campaigning of Labour’s south eastern parties in the immediate years leading up to and then during the war. For research reveals a grass roots lack of enthusiasm for an expected general election in 1940 amid feelings of discontent and expulsions. In the immediate years prior to war the south east constituencies had been vocal in support of varied causes which often sent them into direct opposition to official party policy. Their response to Labour entering a war time Coalition with the Conservatives was one of suspicion and deep scepticism that the ‘new Jerusalem’ was to be compromised for ‘high politics’. As Addison points out, the effect of war was to ‘diminish’ for a period of five years, the sovereignty of party over government.<sup>763</sup>

In trying to understand the antagonism between the Labour grass roots and Transport House, Gay and Michels (though providing a somewhat pessimistic summary) suggest such conflict was an inherent facet of the nature of social democratic parties and inevitable. Gay’s analysis suggests that once a socialist party enters the vote catching game, the magic figure of 51% tends to obscure other considerations.<sup>764</sup> Similarly, Michels’ sociological study of the SPD highlighted the way in which a party machine acquires a momentum of its own which becomes increasingly divergent from the ideals which had inspired its formation. He argues that whether a social democratic party gained power or not was irrelevant since the party would have long lost the will to bring about socialism.<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>763</sup> P. Addison, ‘Consensus Revisited’, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1993, pp. 91-4, 92.

<sup>764</sup> P. Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Edward Bernstein’s Challenge to Marx*, London, 1962, p. 102.

<sup>765</sup> R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Ohio, 1962.

## Going into War – Malaise & Expulsions:

During the period leading up to war there seemed some concern at party headquarters that constituency parties were becoming stagnant and unenthusiastic about the looming general election planned for 1940. The Faversham Divisional Party made election preparations as late as July 1939 and selected a Parliamentary Candidate, John Belcher, as well as holding public meetings and street rallies.<sup>766</sup> In this way a young Michael Foot, despite his defeat in Wales in 1935, was informed in 1938 that he had been chosen as the prospective candidate for Devenport in his native Plymouth. However, since that seat had been held in 1935 with a majority of over eleven thousand and 68 per cent by notable National Liberal Cabinet Minister, Lesley Hore-Belisha, his prospects there looked extremely remote.<sup>767</sup>

General constituency pre-war malaise was in large part due to disillusionment among members over the lack of action by the national party on Spain, the expulsion of Cripps and feelings of manipulation by area hierarchies. Evidence also reveals a growing thirst for ideological debate, often side-stepped by local executive committees too eager to steer proceedings into the collection of dues or enforcement of standing orders. This discontent found its way onto the agenda of the Labour party Conference of 1 June 1939 when the delegate for Twickenham, Mr. Thomas, declared: ‘There was a habit in some circles to regard the term, ‘“Transport House” as one of contempt’.<sup>768</sup>

The matter of Spain was ever present at grass roots level, for it offered a cause celebre whereby the class struggle and the defence of liberal civilisation intersected. For activists and thinkers such as A.D. Lindsay and the Woolfs, support for the Republic was part and

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<sup>766</sup> ‘Preparing for the General Election’, *Faversham Times and Mercury and North East Ken Journal*, 1 July 1939.

<sup>767</sup> K. O. Morgan, *Michael Foot – A Life*, London, 2007, p. 65.

<sup>768</sup> ‘Popular Front – Acrobats Not Democrats’, *Daily Herald*, 2 June 1939.

parcel of the defence of western civilisation from the barbarism of Fascism and religious intolerance. As such, cooperation with Popular Front organisations was deemed a duty for good liberals, even attracting figures such as Lloyd George. Leonard Woolf, both as a member of the Labour Party and campaigner within the artistic pressure group, For Intellectual Liberty (FIL), wrote to co-member, Margaret Gardiner, on 1 August 1936 as to his frustrations in trying to make Labour M.P.s see the significance of Franco's rebellion in Spain:

'I spent three hours on Wednesday afternoon with Labour M.P.s discussing what seems to me the fundamentals of what should be the party's international policy.... the only thing they agreed on was a refusal to face what seemed to me the only realities of the situation. Until the hawk actually has his head in their flesh they will not face them.'<sup>769</sup>

At the Hendon DLP Meeting of 6 January 1939 the Childs Hill Ward announced that they had collected £7 outside cinemas showing the film 'Blockade', based on the story of a Spanish farmer who went off to fight for the Republic.<sup>770</sup> On 20 December 1939 the secretary of the Southgate party wrote to the International Solidarity Fund and sent a cheque in support of those International Brigade members still in France and urged close cooperation.<sup>771</sup> West Leyton Division contacted the TUC and national party on 8 September 1942 sending a resolution calling for the release of members of the International Brigade (imprisoned in France) '...to which I trust the earliest possible attention will be given'.<sup>772</sup> Again, Fulham Central wrote to Transport House on 10 September 1936 enclosing a cheque

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<sup>769</sup> D. Bradshaw, 'British Writers and Anti Fascism in the 1930s: Part Two: Under the Hawk's Wings', *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 4, 1998, pp. 41-66, 49. The FIL comprised a membership of approximately 200 notable artists, with such members as Aldus Huxley, the Woolfs, Rose McCauley, Cecil Day Lewis, Rebecca West, Margaret Gardiner and Storm Jameson.

<sup>770</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 771b, 6 January 1939, Barnet Archives.

<sup>771</sup> TUC Archive, 'Spanish Conflict Collection & Administration' Ref. 292/946/32/28 20 December 1940, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

<sup>772</sup> TUC Archive, 'Spanish Rebellion, International Brigade', Ref. 292/946/35/135 8 September 1942, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

for the Spanish Workers Medical Unit.<sup>773</sup> A letter was penned by the South Islington constituency on 20 October 1937, advising that they had been contacted by one of their constituents whose son had volunteered in Spain, James Whelan, reported as missing.<sup>774</sup> Spain also dominated much of the columns within the Reading DLP's own newspaper and it seems that one of the more radical constituencies, the Shop Stewards led Caversham, was disbanded as a result of its support for the CP inspired Peoples Convention.<sup>775</sup> Again, on 8 September 1937 the joint Wards of Willesden (together with Trades Council) issued a declaration via the banner of 'Middlesex Federation of Labour Parties' to all Constituency Parties as follows:<sup>776</sup>

'While applauding the NEC of Labour's relief work for Spain, we deplore the continued failure of the NEC to implement the decision of the 1936 Conference. The NEC and the Parliamentary Party have since Edinburgh applied the EARLIER conference policy of accepting the Non-Intervention Agreement ... they have ignored THE FRESH DECISION TAKEN AFTER THE SPANISH DELEGATES HAD SPOKEN'.<sup>777</sup>

The Labour Oral History Project captures the depth of feeling concerning Spain in various interviews with constituency veterans from the 1930s:

'The Spanish Civil War altered me a lot. I felt really bitter....I really began to feel there was evil in these fascists, and even in these Conservatives who supported arms' (South London).<sup>778</sup>

'We had two garages full of collected goods at one time. We must have had 300 tins of something which could be shipped abroad and endless woolly

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<sup>773</sup> TUC Archive 'Spanish Rebellion Medical Aid 1936-1937' Ref. 292/946/41/156 8 September 1936, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

<sup>774</sup> TUC Archive 'Spanish Rebellion – International Brigade 1937-1942', Ref. 292/946/34/177, 20 October 1937, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

<sup>775</sup> J. Blondel, 'The Conservative Association and the Labour Party in Reading', *Political Studies*, Vol. VI, No. 2, 1958, pp. 101-119, 113.

<sup>776</sup> *Ibid*, p. 118.

<sup>777</sup> TUC Archive 'Spanish Rebellion – International Brigade 1937-1942, Middlesex Federation of Labour Parties', 8 September 1937, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

<sup>778</sup> D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism – Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*, Sutton, 1997, p. 100. Labour Oral History Project interview with Maurita Matthewson. South London.

coats and woolly jackets and thick singlets and shirts and so on (destined for the Basque region) (Finsbury, North London).<sup>779</sup>

‘And we also use to collect money for Spain and then of course, there were big demos that we use to have. “Arms for Spain”. And we use to do a lot of whitewashing on the walls, “Arms for Spain” (Paddington, West London).<sup>780</sup>

‘I remember the Basque refugees came in quite large numbers to England and we had quite a few youngsters in Watford where I lived, so we knew all about the Spanish Civil War at the time’ (Watford, Hertfordshire).<sup>781</sup>

The other prominent pre-war issue at constituency level was that of Cripps. Indeed, in the case of Labour’s south-eastern membership the wartime prominence of luminaries such as Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison, and Stafford Cripps reinforced those enduring elements of personality cult which Drucker has seen as essential to the historical practice of Labour politics.<sup>782</sup> Thus, the rank-and-file held Cripps up as the champion of the Spanish Republic, but following his diplomatic mission to the Soviet Union in early 1941 he acquired a wider, popular following as the man who had brought ‘uncle Joe’ into the war, and at one point was considered a feasible replacement for Churchill as wartime Prime-Minister.<sup>783</sup> In similar fashion Herbert Morrison acquired a reputation as ‘Mr London’, and provided the name for the mass-produced bomb shelters constructed around the capital.

Cripps’ expulsion was moved at the national Conference on 29 May 1939 on a block vote majority of 2,100,000 for and 402,000 against.<sup>784</sup> At a local level the Hendon constituency raised an emergency resolution (lost 16 to 18 votes) 28 January 1939 calling

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<sup>779</sup> Ibid, p 101, interview with John Platts-Mills, Finsbury, North London.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid, p 102, interview with Dot Welsh, Paddington.

<sup>781</sup> Ibid, p 108, interview with Alan Yates, Watford.

<sup>782</sup> H. M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*, London, 1979.

<sup>783</sup> J. Schneer, *Ministers at War – Winston Churchill and his War Cabinet 1940-45*, London, 2016. Schneer cites the views of various journalists in early 1942. With comments such as: ‘Shrewd political observers talk of him as the next P.M.’ and ‘He would return to Westminster with greatly increased prestige as the man who successfully handled our relations with the USSR through a most difficult period’, p. 124.

<sup>784</sup> ‘Vain Pleading by Sir Stafford Cripps. Labour Conference Confirms Expulsion Decision’, *Londonderry Sentinel*, 30 May 1939.

for his reinstatement.<sup>785</sup> The issue then re-appeared on 3 & 25 February 1939 with the powers that be seen as resorting to any means to block the matter. Mill Hill Ward sent a letter of protest over the expulsion and were censured for daring to hold a meeting on the topic.<sup>786</sup> Yet not all south east constituencies were as supportive. For instance, the Bedford divisional party rejected a constituency resolution calling for an immediate conference on the issue, with their prospective election candidate, Norman Mickle, making it quite clear that Cripps and a Popular Front were an obstacle to attracting respectable voters:

‘The Labour Party desires the support of people who have voted Tory and Liberal in the past. Its programme is such that most of these voters could be induced to support it if the members of the Party would devote their energies to converting them instead of supporting such spectacular proposals as the Popular Front’.<sup>787</sup>

The official stance on Cripps and the Popular Front from Transport House was that of a four-page circular entitled, ‘Socialism or Surrender – Labour Rejects the Popular Front’, written in a caustic tone:

‘Yesterday he wanted a “Popular Front” with the Communists. Today he wants a “Popular Front” with the Liberals. Tomorrow....? Who knows?’.<sup>788</sup>

Indeed, with the outbreak of war the expected 1940 General Election was postponed and an electoral truce agreed by parties at both a national and local level. This became a bone of contention among the rank-and-file throughout the war years with many constituency activists loath to campaign for and support a Coalition Tory candidate, instead often choosing to canvass for an independent or the Common Wealth Party. At the Bournemouth Labour

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<sup>785</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 774b, 28 January 1939, Barnet Archives.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid, 785b, 24 February 1939, Barnet Archives.

<sup>787</sup> ‘Bedford Condemns Popular Front’, *Daily Herald*, 17 February 1939.

<sup>788</sup> TUC Archive, Labour Party & TUC C1939 leaflet, ‘Socialism or Surrender: Labour Rejects the Popular Front’, Ref. 126/TG/RES/X/1029C/33, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

Party Conference held on 13 May 1940 over 200 resolutions on the topic occupied the agenda.<sup>789</sup>

In the south east a number of expulsions and disaffiliations took place in the early part of the War. For instance, Bermondsey Labour party was disaffiliated following the Southwark Central By-Election of 1940 at which a Labour ‘Stop the War’ candidate, C. W. Searson, opposed the official Labour nominee for the seat, J. H. Martin.<sup>790</sup> Similarly, West Ham was disaffiliated when many of its members supported the prominent Communist, Harry Pollitt (former General Secretary of the CPGB), in the Silvertown By-Election of February 1940, when he stood against the official Labour candidate, James Hollis (who won the seat).<sup>791</sup> Other expulsions took place in Islington, Hammersmith and Paddington, the latter related to D.N. Pritt’s support of the Soviet invasion of Finland. As Thorpe comments: ‘Indeed, the round of disaffiliations that continued into the spring and summer of 1940 was larger in scale than anything since the purges of the mid 1920s’.<sup>792</sup>

Yet the constituencies had vocal allies on the left within the Parliamentary Party, such as Bevan, Shinwell, and Strauss who, as Toye argues, had not given up on the belief that a Labour Government with a Parliamentary majority could utilise constitutional means to genuinely transform society<sup>793</sup>. Indeed, Bevan and Strauss had been temporarily expelled from the Party in April 1939 for openly sharing platforms with the Communist Party promoting the Popular Front, which was finally ‘killed’ by the Party’s EC at Conference on 1 June 1939 by 2,360,000 to 248,000 votes.<sup>794</sup> Both Bevan and Shinwell were critical of the Coalition throughout the War years and were of the view that Attlee and his Ministers had

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<sup>789</sup> ‘Election Truce is Challenged’, *Daily Herald*, 6 March 1940.

<sup>790</sup> ‘Labour Majority’, *Staffordshire Sentinel*, 12 February 1940.

<sup>791</sup> ‘Labour’s Easy Win at Silvertown’, *Express & Echo*, 23 February 1940.

<sup>792</sup> A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organisation in Second World War Britain*, Oxford, 2009, p. 194.

<sup>793</sup> R. Toye, ‘“Perfectly Parliamentary”? The Labour Party and the House of Commons in the Inter-War Years’, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 25, No. 1, 2014, pp 1-29, p 29.

<sup>794</sup> ‘Acrobats Not Democrats’, *Daily Herald*, 2 June 1939.

failed to extract key policy concessions on issues such as the means test and nationalisation. By the end of 1940 Bevan was reputedly declaring that ‘...It was the liveliest Parliament he had known since 1931’.<sup>795</sup> In November 1940 the Government announced that the Household Means Test for old age pensioners was to be abolished in a Bill soon to be presented to Parliament. In his temporary role as Editor of *Tribune*, Bevan cited a letter he had received from an eighty year old woman who had left London on account of the raids. She went to live with her son-in-law, who was sixty-five, and retired on a State pension. The old lady, who got nineteen shillings and sixpence in relief in London was reduced to twelve shillings and sixpence because she was alleged to be partly kept by her son-in-law.<sup>796</sup>

By the time the Determination of Needs Bill was tabled the following February it became apparent that some form of the old Household Means Test would remain. This only served to reinforce fears from those on the Left that Labour Ministers were willing to accept compromise for the sake of perpetuating the wartime Coalition. Another bone of contention was the nationalisation of the railways, for the Coalition had concluded a leasing agreement with the railway companies for the period of war put forward by the Conservative Minister for War Transport, Lord Leathers. Here, both Attlee and Bevin were at one with their backbenchers in seeing railway nationalisation as pivotal to Labour’s reconstruction plans. Similar discontent emerged over failed promises to push ahead with nationalisation of the mining industry. Bevan’s view was that coal was a test case for Labour’s commitment in that various by-elections indicated that the country was ready for drastic changes. Bevan asserted in *Tribune* that if Labour failed to nationalise coal during the war this chance was lost, as well

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<sup>795</sup> M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, Abridged Edition, London, 1997, p. 157.

<sup>796</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

as any for the future: ‘...how do they expect the country to believe in any large schemes of post war reconstruction’?<sup>797</sup>

Fears of Labour politicians becoming too cosy with the traditional enemy within Coalition also filtered down at a local level. The Hendon constituency minutes of 10 January 1942 highlighted the case of Councillor Pinkney, noted by the constituency as being seen associating with opposition Councillors and not voting with the Labour Group. He had the Whip removed. Burnt Oak members called for his resignation.<sup>798</sup> At the Labour Party Conference of 13 May 1940 the Windsor DLP told its delegates to abstain if a motion were put offering ‘unqualified appreciation of the work of the parliamentary party’ and to oppose ‘Any move of the National Executive to join a government under a Tory leadership’<sup>799</sup> Chelsea and Chislehurst (Surrey) DLPs demanded a socialist government ‘...as the only way of extracting the country from its present disastrous position’.<sup>800</sup>

### **Communitarian Sentiment**

Within many south eastern constituencies there was evidence of communitarian sentiment. Indeed, it could be argued that the predominant middle-class membership in the south east shifted away from valorising individual self-interest to an emphasis on the common good, so accommodating a republican like citizenship to co-exist with liberal values.<sup>801</sup> For instance, in 1941 War Time Nurseries and School Meals were being discussed in Hendon. The following statement was made:

‘It is interesting to recall that the provision of school meals was first introduced in parliament by the Labour Party over 30 years and now that it has become an accomplished fact, it is the bounden duty of all social

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<sup>797</sup> *Tribune*, 29 May 1942.

<sup>798</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 853, 10 January 1942, Barnet Archives.

<sup>799</sup> A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organisation in Second World War Britain*, Oxford, 2009, p. 196.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>801</sup> S. O. Rose, ‘Women’s Rights, Women’s Obligations: Contradictions of Citizenship in World War II Britain’, *European Review of History*, vol, 7, No. 2, 2000, pp. 277-289, 278.

progressive people to see to it that School Meals will in future become a compulsory feature of school life'.<sup>802</sup>

The theme of work-place nurseries was also prominent among a number of North London Mass Observation diarists. One 30 year old married woman from Hampstead wrote in 1942 of being offered a job by her husband's old firm, but when she had gone down to the clinic she was told the nursery wasn't open. Another 25 year old married woman from Kilburn said that she too had been offered work but that 'Well, I'd go if there was anywhere nice to leave baby'.<sup>803</sup> Another 30 year old diarist from Wandsworth wrote of her little boy having to start school at half past nine in the mornings as being an impediment to employers taking her on. Another 30 year old housewife from Peckham (a Policeman's wife) wrote of having her children turned down for evacuation due to their being too young. She would have liked to have worked in the box making factory and added, 'If they want women to do the war work, they should look after the children'.<sup>804</sup> Summerfield suggests that at a generous estimate, only a quarter of all pre-school children of women war workers attended nurseries by 1944 in that the hours were not designed to fit with factory shifts.<sup>805</sup> She highlights regional differences in attitudes to child-minding as more acceptable among northern women. For an inter-war London borough survey revealed that eighty per cent of mothers surveyed were against having their children looked after by neighbours.<sup>806</sup>

Other collectivist themes appeared in the Hendon constituency. In December 1942 they discussed 'Labour's Fight for the Old Folk'.<sup>807</sup> The Beveridge Report first appears on the Hendon agenda in January 1943 with reference to a meeting held to discuss it led by

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<sup>802</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 863, EC Report 1941, Barnet Archives.

<sup>803</sup> D. Sheridan, *Wartime Women – A Mass Observation Anthology*, London, 1990, p. 157.

<sup>804</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

<sup>805</sup> G. Braybon & P. Summersfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experience in Two World Wars*, London, 2013, p. 236.

<sup>806</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

<sup>807</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 875, 8 December 1942, Barnet Archives.

M.P., James Griffith, and despite recent air raids and bad weather it proved a popular subject and 60 attendees turned out, but only £1 taken in collection!<sup>808</sup> Also on the agenda was an invite issued by the Mayor of Hendon to a meeting on 22 March 1943 to discuss ‘Nazi atrocities against the Jews and suggested plans for their rescue’. At the same meeting there were calls for the PLP to continue to pressure the government to increase Service Disability Pensions, a theme also being raised by numerous other constituencies, such as the Canterbury Labour Party. At their May monthly meeting in 1944 a resolution was raised by Mr. Stigger, condemning ‘The meagre increase in soldiers’ pay’ and requesting that the ‘basic pay be increased to 35/- per week’ and described the recent concessions by the government as ‘niggardly’ and not sufficient to ensure the soldier had a decent wage, especially those who were married.<sup>809</sup> Canterbury also passed a second resolution urging the Parliamentary party and the National Executive to protest at the present rates of pensions payable to those disabled in the war and called for an ‘immediate increase of 100 per cent’.<sup>810</sup>

Yet there is a historical debate as to what extent war time collectivist welfarism and reconstruction played its part in the Labour victory of 1945? Some have argued that there had been a noticeable shift in public thinking whereas others are more pessimistic and write of political apathy right up to the vote whereby Gallup Polls revealed a large preference for a post war progressive Coalition as opposed to an outright Labour victory. For example, the circulation of *New Statesman* tripled during the War and its Editor, Kingsley Martin, was consistently critical of the Labour leadership, advocating a coalition of ‘progressive forces’.<sup>811</sup> Other historians cite the importance of the Beveridge Report.

## **The Consensus Debate**

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<sup>808</sup> Ibid, 876 23 January 1943 Barnet Archives.

<sup>809</sup> ‘Canterbury Constituency Labour Party’, *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 6 May 1944.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

<sup>811</sup> ‘The Portent of Skipton’, *New Statesman*, 15 January 1944.

Middlemas posits that the war time consensus and subsequent Labour victory resulted from a corporatist compact between organised labour (in the guise of Bevin and the TGWU) and the British State agreed long before 1939 as part of the professionalising of trades unions, what he terms ‘compromises between oligarchic interest groups’.<sup>812</sup> As he goes on to argue, it was Bevin rather than Attlee who had a pivotal role, for the war emergency made labour (with a small ‘l’) the ultimate resource where manpower finally ranked above finance and production.<sup>813</sup> It could be argued that this corporatist approach was exemplified by Bevin’s handling of the unsanctioned London Busmen’s Strike of May 1937, where, as TGWU representative he negotiated a return to work without securing all of the demands (or jobs) of the busmen. Indeed, strike leaders were victimised by the TGWU leadership for membership of the London Busmen’s Rank & File Movement and were accused of being ‘party to conduct inconsistent with this union’.<sup>814</sup>

### **Fears of the Rise of Socialist Thinking in the South East**

Throughout the War years the Ministry of Information’s Home Intelligence Division conducted its own surveys on such themes as ‘Home Made Socialism’. While we must allow for intelligence paranoia and hyperbole, it is nevertheless useful to learn how war time radicalism was perceived. Its Report of 24 March 1942 comprised a regional appraisal and noted a leftward impetus received from Russian successes, a general agreement that ‘things are going to get better after the war’ and revulsion against ‘vested interests’, ‘privilege’ and what was referred to as, ‘the old gang’. Whereas northern regions were reported as turning from ‘liberty to equality, sceptical of any altruism from their employer’, the Midlands were seen as an area where ‘the relation of socialistic ideals to the Christian ethic’ had become

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<sup>812</sup> K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*, London, 1979, p. 13.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 270-271.

<sup>814</sup> ‘Defence of 7 Busmen’ – File of the London Busmen’s Rank & File Movement Ref. M&S.62/4/1, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

more apparent. The greatest concern was expressed for the London region where it was claimed that in the previous six months ‘a new trend of opinion’ had gained impetus and was said to have been ‘growing like a jungle plant’. It adjudged that socialism within London had developed in the earlier part of the War among people, ‘thrown out of their normal circumstances’ who were more in contact with the ‘poorer classes’. The Report highlighted that socialism had ‘increased considerably’ among black coated workers who were said to be ‘reading and discussing a good deal’. Concerns were also raised that ‘the employer class’ as well as those who formerly always voted Conservative were also ‘turning to this idea’ and went on to judge that many of them appeared to feel that socialism was inevitable and are ‘resigned’ to the prospect that ‘better social opportunities for everyone and improved conditions must come’. Their Report on the wide southern region noted that, ‘their cult for Cripps may be due to a sort of sub-conscious reversion to the Cromwell idea – an austere but democratic dictator’.<sup>815</sup>

Yet confining popular radicalism to the war years overlooks the significance in the 1930s of the rapidly growing Left Book Club, whose guiding aim was that ‘...the people might learn and no longer be deceived’.<sup>816</sup> Other influences would have been the rise of municipal socialism, the promotion of women’s welfare and civic responsibility. McCarthy argues that the 1930s growth in non-party civic associations outside the conventional framework of politics also acted as a conduit for pre-war participation and active citizenship. She claims that such avowedly middle-class groups as the Townswomen’s Guild, the YMCA, Mothers Union, the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, including Rotary Clubs, League of Nations Union and Rate Payers Associations generated a vast output

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<sup>815</sup> NA: INF/1/292, ‘Home Made Socialism’, Report by the Home Intelligence Division, 24 March 1942, National Archive.

<sup>816</sup> Papers of Victor Gollancz, ‘Left Book Club’ Ref. 157/4/LB/2/6 1930s, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

of books, reports, lectures and a focal point for political debate as part of a wider democratic participation.<sup>817</sup> Yet whilst Ross McKibbin views these overwhelmingly middle class organizations as implicated in constructing a broad anti-Socialist coalition, McCarthy perceives such associations as having incubated a new middle-class progressivism.<sup>818</sup> Many south eastern, middle-class Labourites participated in such groups in that unlike their northern, working-class comrades, they often lacked an historic lineage to the wider labour movement.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that voters of suburbia were fundamental to Labour's victory. For instance, take the case of stalwart supporter and Mass Observation diarist, Mary Clayton. Of lower middle-class origin she lived in Battersea in the years before gentrification and had been a committed Labour supporter throughout her life and described herself as a socialist '...by membership and conviction' (in 1934 she came close to being elected a Labour Councillor in Wandsworth).<sup>819</sup> Her political commitments continued in the war years in that she canvassed in the Battersea By-Election of 1940 and delivered leaflets in the 1945 campaign, despite illness due to MS. A great deal of her accounts are couched in patriotism and the wider cause where her voluntary work with the WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) had taken greater importance in her commitment to justice where she and other Labour supporters involved in the WVS branch reached an unwritten truce with Tory members not to discuss partisan politics. Poignantly, her diary returns reveal that she expected a Conservative victory in 1945 but did not envisage this as necessarily being the triumph of 'property and power over social betterment.'<sup>820</sup> Her writings give some weight to

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<sup>817</sup> H. McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal* 50, 4, 2007, pp. 891-912.

<sup>818</sup> R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford, 1998, p 287.

<sup>819</sup> J. Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, Diary Record 10 May 1945, Oxford, 2013, p. 79. In 1934 she stood for Springfield Ward in Wandsworth Borough Council elections and received 2,824 votes, the top scoring of 6 Labour candidates in a Tory Ward.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

Miliband's claims of the effects of the War years themselves in that she believed the War had fostered a public opinion which would 'force progressive action on any government in power.'<sup>821</sup>

### **The Communist Party – New Friend or Still Foe?**

The Labour party experienced a decline in membership around 1942 just at a time when the Communist Party increased theirs. Minutes from local constituencies reveal a Labour hierarchy paranoia about all things related to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). For instance, in 1941 Councillor Richman, from the Ealing Labour Party, West London, was expelled for taking part in a local pressure group called 'The Peoples' Protection Committee', comprising 58 local organisations concerned with Air Raid Precautions. One participant happened to be the Communist Party and this was enough to lead to Richman's expulsion. A supporter of the Councillor stated: 'It is painfully obvious that the Communist bogey is now trotted out in any and every occasion'.<sup>822</sup> As Thorpe points out: 'People such as Attlee himself, Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin had settled firmly into anti Communist views two decades or more previously'.<sup>823</sup> For example, minutes from Hendon reveal animosity from the Executive to any suggestions of collaboration or joint working with local Communists at any level, both before and during the war. This hostility is observed on the issue of Spain and requests for joint collaboration for a Popular Front prior to the war. For example, the Nazi-Soviet neutrality pact of August 1939 gave the EC the false impression that this would mark the end of talk concerning Communist cooperation, yet many members continued to support the Soviet position in opposing Britain's involvement in an 'imperialist' war.

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<sup>821</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

<sup>822</sup> *Middlesex County Times*, 29 March 1941.

<sup>823</sup> A. Thorpe. 'Locking Out the Communists: The Labour Party and the Communist Party, 1939-1946', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2014, pp. 221-250, 222.

For following Operation Barbarossa and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union June 1941 constituencies were faced with calls for Soviet fund-raising, joint work with comrades in the Communist Party and a lifting on the ban of the *Daily Worker* and support for CP affiliation. The Bermondsey West District Labour Party paper called for ‘Peace by Negotiation Now!!!’ and was endorsed by the Labour controlled Borough Council.<sup>824</sup> Indeed, Britain’s alliance with the Soviets from 1941 onwards brought reflected glory on the CPGB. For instance, the Hendon minutes reveal a steady flow of members resigning to join the CPGB: 25 August 1939 the Golders Green Ward Secretary and Miss Joan Bull (Childs Hill) resigned and joined the CP, no further comment was added.<sup>825</sup> On 26 June 1940 one member, Miss Ley from Childs Hill Ward, reported with a great deal of pique that former members who had joined the CPGB were seen out canvassing and taking their support!<sup>826</sup> Even following the Soviet entry into the War the 23 July 1941 minutes reported that Councillor Lewis of Kingsbury was expelled from membership of the Wembley Labour Party owing to his association with ‘The Peoples Convention’ (a Communist inspired organisation).<sup>827</sup>

By December 1942 Harry Pollitt was making open overtures to Labour for the Communist Party to be accepted as an affiliated organisation and had written to the Labour Party Secretary, J.C. Middleton, asking for this to be placed before Labour’s next annual conference.<sup>828</sup> This was despite an earlier rebuttal from the Labour Party and TUC on 31 July 1941 when they issued a terse statement which initially began by applauding the Soviet Union in their in ‘fullness of the cooperation which has developed between Great Britain and the USSR’. The Statement though rounded on the CP as having been unpatriotic and of

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<sup>824</sup> A. Thorpe, *Parties at War: Political Organisation in Second World War Britain*, Oxford, 2009, p. 192.

<sup>825</sup> Minutes of the Hendon Labour Party, 799, 25 August 1939, Barnet Archives.

<sup>826</sup> Ibid, 821, 26 June 1940, Barnet Archives.

<sup>827</sup> Ibid, 840, 23 July 1941, Barnet Archives.

<sup>828</sup> ‘Communists Want Labour Link’, *Daily Record*, 22 December 1942.

taking ‘every opportunity to abstract and weaken the national effort’ and finished with the paragraph: ‘The Trades Union Congress and the Labour party conclude that no association with the Communist party is possible’.<sup>829</sup> In effect the Labour party was saying that there was only room for one party on the Left, as was discovered by the ILP some years previously. For by 1948 Labour had drawn up its own proscribed list of political organisations and, unsurprisingly, the Communist Party of Great Britain was its chief focus, with others on the list seem as guilty by association, including the Labour Research Department, Marx House, British Soviet Friendship Houses Ltd and the University Labour Federation. The Common Wealth Party also found its way on there.<sup>830</sup>

Yet Communist Party membership began to reach record levels at a time when Labour’s own creaked under the strain of war. In 1939 Labour was seen as the chief force on the Left in Britain with 150 MPs in the Commons and an individual membership of 400,000, but by 1942 this membership had dropped to 219,000 and even taking factors such as Conscription, the Blitz and the Blackout into account, this was still a substantial decline.<sup>831</sup> The CPGB, seen as its only conceivable rival, had a membership of 18,000, which dropped to 12,000 during the ‘imperialist War’ period and then sharply rose fifteen months later to a membership of 55,000 for the remainder of the war.<sup>832</sup> By 1939, Hinton points out, there had been one Communist for every twenty two individual members of the Labour Party, but by 1942 CP membership accounted for one for every four of the individual membership of Labour.<sup>833</sup> It is undeniable that the Popular Front campaign against Fascism from 1935 onwards added to growing CP membership and, as we have seen, enabled them to tap into

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<sup>829</sup> ‘British Labour and Communist Party’, *Daily Herald*, Friday 1 August 1942.

<sup>830</sup> Letter from the Labour Party National Agent attaching list of proscribed organisations, 25 October 1948, Southampton Archive.

<sup>831</sup> D. Butler & J. Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900-1968*, London, 1969, p. 108.

<sup>832</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

<sup>833</sup> J. Hinton, ‘A Study of Factory Politics in the Second World War’, *History Workshop*, No. 10, Autumn 1980, pp. 90-118.

radical sentiment within local Labour constituencies. When the Soviet Union entered the War in June 1941 the CPGB were able to harness the twin components of radicalism around grass-roots issues and patriotism. It could also be argued that the war-time success of the Common Wealth Party, though appealing to a middle-class base, adopted similar tactics of egalitarianism and patriotism and there was also a radical strain to some of their candidates. For instance, Tom Wintringham stood as their Parliamentary Candidate in the Ashford, Kent By-Election in 1942. He was described in the local press in terms of radical nationalism, as a ‘progressive’ author of works on Spain and guerrilla warfare.<sup>834</sup>

Labour on the other hand could be deemed as a voting machine centred on gradualism and social democracy. They entered into a symbiotic agreement with the trades union hierarchy in keeping politics out of union affairs whilst allowing the parliamentary party freedom from trades union interference. Here historians such as Hinton suggest that Labour’s war time difficulties were in part a result of the ‘...leadership’s inability to find anything for the members to do’, for the war involved a complete suspension of the electoral activity which sustained Labour constituencies. The Communists on the other hand would continue with an ideological mission, such as calls for the opening up of a second front and campaigns on bread and butter issues such as more Air Raid provision and appeals to a war time moral economy around anti profiteering, as well as Soviet Tank Weeks.<sup>835</sup> As grass roots accounts attest, Labour party members were far less sectarian than their leaders when it came to collaborating with the Communist party, both leading up to and during the war. There were continual calls for the Communist party to be allowed to affiliate to Labour and though this died down during the time of the Soviet invasion of Finland and the Nazi-Soviet pact, such calls firmly reappeared again when the Soviets entered the war. Indeed, the CPGB General

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<sup>834</sup> ‘Ashford By-Election’, *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, 5 December 1942.

<sup>835</sup> D. Butler & J. Freeman, *British Political Facts 1900-1968*, London, 1969, p. 91.

Secretary, Harry Politt was often criticised for being too accommodating to social democracy by the Comintern, where the British CP had been likened to ‘A society of good friends’ during the class on class phase.<sup>836</sup> The content and sentiment from CP publications in the 1930s though became less and less couched in ameliorative terms towards Labour. For instance, 2 April 1937 the CPGB released a document entitled, ‘Unity Campaign Will Defeat Splitters’ and wrote in the following vein:

‘In 1933 British Communist Party proposed united action with Labour Party against fascism; Labour refused .... Proposal repeated during 1934 ... and 1935 ... Each time refused. By August 1936, over 1,300 organisations had passed resolutions supporting Communist affiliation ... (block vote used to stop it) ... Communist Party continues to campaign for unity, as only basis for working-class action on Spain, Unemployed Regulations Fascism, Armaments, and Municipal elections’.<sup>837</sup>

For whilst the CP had a head start so to speak and were more adept at harnessing the concept of ‘agitate, educate and organise’, evidence from the Labour south east constituencies reveals a membership every bit as passionate about a good cause, but any notions of aping the CP by setting up work-place branches under the Labour party banner was proposed but quickly quashed by the hierarchy.<sup>838</sup>

### **Constituencies Carrying On**

In London and the south east many of the local constituency parties continued with innovative, bottom up projects in spite of the disruption of War. For instance, Bermondsey DLP offered the services of a lawyer at their offices, free of charge for an hour a week.<sup>839</sup> A number of DLPs complained about evacuated children who had now returned and were left

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<sup>836</sup> K. O. Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold – Bolshevism and the British Left*, Part 1, London, 2006, p. 229: ‘When Manuilsky famously likened the CPGB to a society of good friends, it was to cast it unfavourably with the “German Comrades” with their meticulous regard for every “least Deviation”’.

<sup>837</sup> Sara Maitland Hallinan Collection, 15x/3/2, 9 October 1936, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre.

<sup>838</sup> Labour Party Executive Committee Minutes, ‘Notes on a Discussion on Individual Membership’, 19 January 1942, The Peoples History Museum, Manchester.

<sup>839</sup> Lewisham West District Labour Party Papers, A89/100/9, War Emergency Committee General Committee, 7 November 1939, Lewisham Local History Centre.

‘roaming the streets in the danger zones in an undisciplined and uneducated state.’<sup>840</sup> Many constituencies also operated their own moral by organising Vigilance Committees to look after working-class interests on issues like pricing and rationing. It is all the more remarkable that they tried to carry on despite difficulties. However, not all constituency ECs were sensitive to the needs and sacrifices made by members. For instance, whilst Hendon wanted to keep holding regular meetings to ensure subscriptions, they revealed their skewed priorities by agreeing members’ participation in ARP and other war work but warned they ‘should not become obsessed by this and overlook their other vital (political) interests after the war’!<sup>841</sup> For as war took hold logistical difficulties arose for constituency members. For example, only two of the seven Greenwich DLP branches were still running normally by as early as February 1940.<sup>842</sup> In Bethnal Green North East, 600 members were written to in January 1940 suggesting regular members meetings, only one reply was received. The Women’s Section for the DLP closed early in the War and only reopened in 1943.<sup>843</sup>

A Mass Observation observer sat in on a meeting held at the Hammersmith South constituency Labour Party on 7 December 1939 (the early phoney war period). The Report made observations about some of the apparent quirkiness of some of the members but also their seriousness of purpose. For instance, he described Mrs. Niebaum as ‘a white haired old lady of 70 as ‘complaining about the blackout’, but that she became ‘very heated in a discussion of old age pensions’. He also spoke of another attendee, Mr. Gill, as ‘more interested in Russia’ and that he praised Pritt’s book, *Light on Moscow* (D. N. Pritt was expelled from the Labour Party in March 1940 for cooperating with the Communist party and

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<sup>840</sup> Lewisham West District Labour Party Papers, A89/100/9, General Committee, 22 October 1939, Lewisham Local History Centre.

<sup>841</sup> Hendon DLP papers, 211A, 97559/1, Executive Committee 13 September 1939 and General Committee 23 September 1939, Barnet Archive.

<sup>842</sup> Greenwich DLP papers, GLP 1.3, Annual Meeting, 23 February 1940.

<sup>843</sup> Bethnal Green North East DLP papers, TH/8488/16 Management Committee, 9 March 1941. 1943 Report to the Management Committee, 20 January 1944.

publicly defending the Soviet invasion of Finland).<sup>844</sup> Pritt was the local M.P. for Hammersmith prior to his expulsion. He quotes Mr. Gill as saying:

‘He proves in here that if the Government had treated Russia properly, there’d have been no war Chamberlain and Halifax go themselves to see Hitler and Mussolini, but who do they send to see Stalin? A junior officer! Each time they sent a note to Stalin, he answered properly, but they dillied and dallied and did nothing’.<sup>845</sup>

Whilst the meeting discussed a social and whether anyone had any dance records that had not scratched, matters associated with war inevitably crept in, such as a football match with the Air Raid Wardens. It was recorded that seven people were present in all at the meeting. They discussed whether it was worth while holding Ward meetings during blackouts. It was unanimously agreed that the continuation would be of value in keeping the party going and that meetings should take place when there is a full moon in terms of providing evening light.<sup>846</sup> Little were they to know that seven months later a full moon would be associated with bombing raids.

### **Reconstruction and the New Jerusalem**

Issues of reconstruction and the ‘new Jerusalem’ came to the fore in the south eastern constituencies and took on greater prominence following the victory of El Alamein (seen as a turning point in the war) and the publication of the Beveridge Report in late 1942. Yet the London Labour parties were no strangers to issues of consumption, health and welfare, for support for London Labour grew in the inter-war period where its activists agitated on issues of redistribution of resources, particularly that of housing and welfare, as exemplified by what Seymour et al described as the ‘innovative public health policies’ of Labour controlled

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<sup>844</sup> D. N. Pritt KC, MP, *Light on Moscow*, London, 1939.

<sup>845</sup> Mass Observation Report on Meeting held at South Hammersmith Constituency Labour Party, 7 December 1939, pp. 1-4, The Keep, University of Sussex.

<sup>846</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

boroughs such as Bermondsey.<sup>847</sup> As Tanner has argued, some of Labour's parochial concerns '...appealed across class boundaries'.<sup>848</sup> The famous Labour LCC victory of 1934 is symptomatic of London Labour's success when harnessing localised support in socially mixed areas which could appeal to women and the new migrants (internal and external) to London's new industries. The LCC success was all the more remarkable when considering that the election defeat of 1931 had reduced the national party to 46 MPs. In 1934 the Labour Party had gained 69 County Council seats in the south east and ran half of the 28 inner London boroughs.<sup>849</sup> The topics central to reconstruction among the south east constituencies had already been played out in London, where Morrison promoted localism as the key to the LCC's proto welfare state, whereas Bevan would later favour centralism in 1945.

Yet issues of reconstruction ran on class lines, for research suggests that in the run up to the 1945 election housing was of the greatest concern to the working-class whilst Beveridge appealed more to the middle-classes.<sup>850</sup> Here Baldwin argues that middle-class solidarity on state health provision was driven more by self-interest around saving on the cost of private health insurance rather than humanitarianism.<sup>851</sup> On the eve of the publication of the Beveridge Report, Mass Observation asked 200 panellists (essentially middle-class respondents) specifically which improvement in social provision they favoured, with half mentioning cheaper medicine and many feeling voluntary hospitals should be abolished.<sup>852</sup> On the other hand, The British Institute of Public Opinion research revealed that in April

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<sup>847</sup> J. Seymour, M. Gorsky & S. Hajat, 'Health, Wealth & Party in Inter-war London', *Urban History* 44, 3 2017, pp 464-491.

<sup>848</sup> D. Tanner, *Political Change and the London Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 431.

<sup>849</sup> G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914*, Oxford, 1948, p. 459.

<sup>850</sup> J. Bonham, *The Middle-Class Vote*, Faber & Faber, London, 1954, p. 181.

<sup>851</sup> P. Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875-1975*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>852</sup> MO File 1939, 'Post War Securities: The Beveridge Report', Dec. 1942. Panellists were asked 'If they had any idea about how Social Services should be organised after the war' (200 replies), Mass Observation Archive, The Keep, University of Sussex.

1944 43% of the British public were satisfied by government proposals for reconstruction, but by October 1944 this had dropped to 31%. Similarly, they also compiled polls in April 1944 and then July 1945 asking: ‘What will be the most urgent problems on the home front after the war?’. In April 1944 employment and demobilisation topped the priorities with 43%, housing placed second with 29%, food and clothing supply 4%, other problems 13% and ‘don’t know’ 11%. Yet by July 1945 the top priority had switched to housing, scoring 41%, full employment 15%, social security (Beveridge) 7%, nationalisation of industry 6% and international security 5%.<sup>853</sup>

For the Feltham constituency party housing was to the fore in the expectation of a homelessness crisis on demobilisation. They held a meeting on 27 September 1944 on the topic of ‘Prefabricated houses for Feltham’ where it was reported that the local authority would have to consider the adoption of the ‘Portal’ prefabricated house for temporary housing. It transpired that the Labour Councillors were very unhappy about bathrooms and lavatories being in the wrong position, the kitchen being too small for domestic use and the position of doors in relation to the fireplace resulting in discomfort. Also, there was no provision made for the storing of coal. They added that the house being of steel would encourage condensation in the cold and would be like ‘an oven’ in hot weather. It was urged that the duty of the public was to see that the accommodation to be offered to the men and women of the Forces comprised the best types of prefabricated house in return for the ‘fight they had made to destroy Fascism and obtain the peace desired by all’.<sup>854</sup>

Housing had long been a theme for the London Councils and as part of the LCC 1937 election campaign housing features largely by way of expensive, visual literature depicting

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<sup>853</sup> F. V. Cantwell, ‘The Meaning of the British Election’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 1945, pp. 145-157, 152.

<sup>854</sup> ‘Prefabricated Houses – Labour Party Discussion’, *Middlesex Chronicle*, Saturday 2 September 1944.

Council cottages with headings ‘Up with Houses – Down with the Slums’ and the declaration:

‘Tory Councils are satisfied to let the slums stand as long as they are allowed. Slums pay enormous profits – and what does it matter to the slum landlord if young lives are weakened by dirt and disease?’<sup>855</sup>

Transport House also highlighted housing and planning for post war reconstruction and published a Report to that effect on 16 April 1943. Among the suggestions promoted were some form of control of the building industry and continuation of the Essential Works Orders. It was proposed that there be the creation of a fund from which the State would advance at substantially lower rates than normal the money required by local authorities for housing purposes. Other proposals were nationalisation of urban land, the exclusion of industry from certain areas and joint liability as between builder and building society for details of which a mortgagor is not warned. The Report was prepared for the national Labour Conference that Whitsun and it was pointed out that ‘while short-term and long-term programmes are called for, the two must not be kept separate but in harmony’. The aim of the long-term programme was to provide for the building of at least 4,000,000 houses over ten years commencing at the end of the war.<sup>856</sup>

The Horsham and District Labour Party, Sussex, held a well-attended, open public meeting on the issue of Beveridge on 22 April 1943 with guest speaker, Barbara Ayrton Gould, Chairperson of the Labour party’s Social Insurance Committee. At the conclusion of her address Mrs. Ayrton Gould dealt with extensive questions. She said that the party saw eye-to-eye with the Tories over the prosecution of the war, but when it came to the winning of the peace, ‘they were still on completely different platforms’. She proclaimed the

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<sup>855</sup> ‘Up with Houses – Down with Slums (Leaflet), TGWU Collection, File: Labour Party & Trades Union Congress, Ref 126/RES/X/1029/C/31, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>856</sup> ‘Labour Party Wants 4,000,000 Houses’, Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail, Friday 16 April 1943.

Beveridge Report as a tremendous advance, adding that comprehensive social security had already been pressed for by the trades unions and the Labour movement, but having put it forward the government felt ‘cold water on their toes’ and were ‘inclined to take them out again’.<sup>857</sup>

The national party published its own endorsement of Beveridge with its post war proposals on health in April 1943 by way of a booklet costing two pence entitled, ‘National Service for Health’. It criticised the existing health provision in the following terms: ‘we must recognise that the physical standard of a great part of the nation remains deplorably low’ and highlighted the irony of food rationing improving things for the poorest where food rationing had assured ‘that the nation in general is better nourished on its war time diet than it was before the war’.<sup>858</sup> It urged that the war time funded State Emergency Medical Service be enacted in time of peace to take the voluntary hospitals under state control. It specifically highlighted the situation in London where, despite the maternity and child health being covered by the Public Health Act 1936 and the Midwives Act of 1936, maternity provision in London was too ‘numerous and uncoordinated’.<sup>859</sup> Yet Davis makes the powerful point that as an insurance scheme Beveridge never set its sights on improving the lot of single mothers, the elderly, inner city youth, disabled people or the mentally ill and as such their plight re-emerged in the 1950s, 60s and 80s as ‘rediscovered’ poverty, leaving commentators questioning whether Britain ‘was really a welfare state’.<sup>860</sup>

Yet the south eastern members’ priorities for reconstruction not only differed according to class, but by locality and ideology. For some it was hoped the post war

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<sup>857</sup> ‘Beveridge Plan – We Cannot Afford Not to Have It’, *West Sussex County Times*, Friday 23 April 1943.

<sup>858</sup> National Service for Health – Labour Party Post War Policy, published by Transport House, April 1943, p. 4, Iron & Steel Trades Federation Collection Ref. 36/H24/40, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>859</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>860</sup> J. Davis, ‘Reshaping the Welfare State? Voluntary Action and Community in London, 1960-75’, in L Goldman (ed.), *Welfare and Social Policy in Britain Since 1870: Essays in Honour of Jose Harris*, Oxford, 2019, p 198.

settlement could be fashioned on a sense of fair play as opposed to class antagonism. The prospective Labour candidate for the Uxbridge division, W. H. Ayles, spoke at a conference held in Hayes in October 1942 on the theme of 'Post War Reconstruction'. He gave a lengthy talk which contained noticeable strains of Socialist League thinking on economics and European federalism. He spoke of a military victory as pointless 'without an alternative principle and alternative policy'. He urged the need to nationalise the Bank of England and the joint stocks and to create new forms of rating, tax and grants to meet a new age. The address promoted an ethical socialist response when he said: 'There must be equal economic power, not to take economic power away from those possessing it today, but to share it with all the citizens equally'.<sup>861</sup> He spoke in a similar vein at an Uxbridge constituency meeting the year previously in July 1941:

'economics must have an ethical basis and a real practical utility'...Capitalism is to go and be replaced by the moral and economic principle of socialism. There is no greater purpose for our life than to work for others in the community'.<sup>862</sup>

Another concern raised by south eastern constituencies was that of education. In April 1942 the Chairman of the London Labour Party, Harold Clay, was reported in the *Daily Herald* as telling various reconstruction conferences that 'Education reconstruction must be the basis of any real new society' and that:

'.....There was no better way in which to attack the idea of "the two nations" in Britain – the rich and the poor – and break down the double system in our society as a whole.'<sup>863</sup>

Responses to Mass Observation from women diarists of the south east suburbs revealed their own concerns come the end of war. For instance, one middle-class, 37 year old single parent from the suburb of Purley, Croydon, was concerned that most married women

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<sup>861</sup> 'Post War Reconstruction – At Home and Abroad', *Uxbridge & W. Drayton Gazette*, Friday 9 October 1942.

<sup>862</sup> *Uxbridge & W. Drayton Gazette*, Friday 25 July 1941.

<sup>863</sup> 'Education First', *Daily Herald*, 27 April 1942.

would see themselves confined back to the home. She wrote of consumption and of the labour-saving devices providing the extra time and of women being happier ‘...doing congenial work than killing time at bridge or shop gazing’, believing that the wider a woman’s interest the happier she was. She wrote that ‘Part-time Nursery school or infant welfare work, and so on, should attract more and more married women’.<sup>864</sup> Another diarist from Wembley, a 45 year old married woman with one child working as a war time radio valve maker, had similar concerns, writing, ‘I hope the return of married women to the home will not be made a grave issue after the war’. She went on to write: -

‘Speaking for myself, I shall be sorry to leave my job, and the part time hours I work could be continued ad infinitum as far as I am concerned. I have not enough to do to occupy me intelligently in the house, and after years of voluntary “good works” a small regular pay packet is very welcome’.<sup>865</sup>

However, the rural constituencies had their own specific concerns for reconstruction. At the meeting of the mid Bedfordshire Labour Party held in December 1943 they passed a resolution on reconstruction saying that they were ‘deeply perturbed’ by certain absences in the King’s Speech as to policy on post war reconstruction covering the ‘control of land’.<sup>866</sup> They set out three main points of concern: control of land in public interest, the provision of employment and social security. They saw such legislation as ‘An earnest of sincerity’ more in keeping with the ‘brave new world’ which ‘our fighting forces and citizens alike have so richly earned’.<sup>867</sup> The common ownership of land was hardly a new demand for these rural activists in that as early as the Edwardian period there had been concerted pressure for the right of way, public regulation of the wages for rural workers and the collective ownership of farms. Yet such traditional concerns were lent weight by the vogue for planning and

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<sup>864</sup> D. Sheridan, *Wartime Women – A Mass Observation Anthology*, London, 1990, p. 237. These replies are responses to Mass Observation on the question of ‘Should married women be able to go out to work after the war?’.

<sup>865</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>866</sup> ‘Labour Party’s Resolution on Post War Reconstruction’, *Bedfordshire Times*, Friday 10 December 1943.

<sup>867</sup> *Ibid.*

nationalisation in the latter part of the 1930s, leaving many a commentator asking why land had been omitted from the scheme of nationalisations which Labour had enshrined in its reconstruction proposals. Indeed, The Common Wealth party was to win war time by-elections precisely on this issue. As Griffith argues, Labour never quite escaped from seeing the countryside as a foreign land and they regarded the rural electorate and the agricultural workforce as ‘different and subject to peculiar constraints.’<sup>868</sup>

### **Southern Labourite’s Thoughts on the 1945 Election Victory**

Interviews from the Labour Oral History Project reveal south eastern suburban constituency veterans as having their own theories around Labour’s 1945 success, whether it was unemployment, the inter-war mixing of classes within the forces and or middle-class support from the 1930s onwards. For instance, one member gave an account of the way in which non-traditional Labour areas of the south east reacted to the Election victory of 1945. Thomas Cole was a Labour member who took part in the victory parade in Winchester, Hampshire and recalled how some people deliberately drew their blinds in disapproval as they passed. He added, ‘It was unthinkable that Labour should win Winchester.’<sup>869</sup> Another interviewee, Stanley Bell, spoke of ongoing gains being made in the 1930s among the middle-class voters of the Kingston Constituency Labour Party which encompassed Malvern and Surbiton, Surrey. He spoke of the steady rise in the local Labour vote whereby he narrowly missed winning a Council by-election in 1937 by only fifty votes. He then stood again in 1938 and ‘just failed to win’. He remarked that on the second occasion we forced the opposition to come out as Tories, thus ending the farce of, ‘No Party politics.’<sup>870</sup>

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<sup>868</sup> C. Griffith, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Britain 1918-1939*, Oxford, 2007, p. 339.

<sup>869</sup> D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism – Reflections of Life in the Labour Party*, Sutton, 1997, p. 170.

<sup>870</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

As a young Labour activist in the West London suburb of Ealing, Syd Bidwell (who went onto become a member of Parliament from the 1960s to the early 1990s) felt that the rise of Labour and the 1945 victory had a great deal to do with unemployment in the 1930s and remarked that ‘...people, even middle-class people, moved over towards socialist ideas’.<sup>871</sup> He also felt that the forces vote played its part in the 1945 result where being in the armed forces acted as a leveller, stating: -

‘...not all the middle-class become army officers, or officers in the air force or navy, and that had a profound effect on the shift to the left, a shift, if you like to socialist appreciation and determination’.<sup>872</sup>

One middle-class activist from St. Pancras, London, spoke to the project of the way in which she ended up becoming a Labour supporter, adding, ‘It was a toss-up between the Liberals and Labour’, further adding, ‘...I had no socialist feelings whatsoever, I just wanted to be in something reforming after the war...I was working full-time in an office, I had also been doing a University Degree.’<sup>873</sup> John Horner spoke of having lived in a village in Hampshire at the time of the 1945 Election and that, to his surprise, several ladies (owners of big houses) were active Labour supporters and that the canvassing in local villages and public meetings went ‘extremely well’.<sup>874</sup>

In 1948 a *New Statesman* commentary seemed in little doubt that it was the middle-classes who were the decisive factor responsible for bringing Labour to power in 1945. The article was of the view that there were a number of positive reasons why a ‘large number of thoughtful’ middle-class people turned towards the Labour Party where by 1944 the idea of post war planning stirred their minds as much as the working-class. It posited that the

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<sup>871</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>872</sup> Ibid, p. 194.

<sup>873</sup> Ibid, p. 197.

<sup>874</sup> Ibid, p. 198.

middle-classes, ‘nodding their heads over their wireless sets, reading their Penguins, or looking at *Picture Post*’ were on the side of the planners and that many voted Labour. The article maintained that there was a ‘prima facie’ case for believing that the middle-class vote meant the difference between a substantial majority and a small minority for the Labour Party.<sup>875</sup>

However, the article pondered on Labour’s prospects for the 1950 General Election as to whether they could rely on the middle-classes. It cautioned that the middle-class comprised a multifarious category, querying as to what the shop keeper would have in common with the industrial chemist, the retired Civil Servant with the Managing Director or with the G.P.? It went on to argue that their only claim to be members of the same class had been that they belonged ‘neither to the working-class nor the class of independent wealth’. In essence, it was warning Labour that if needing to court what Morrison had referred to as ‘all the useful people’ they needed to target those middle-class committed to the public sector.<sup>876</sup> It argued that Labour should not rely on those whose prosperity was tied up with the aggressive scope of laissez-faire economics.<sup>877</sup>

For as has been argued in this thesis, it was the south east middle-classes who played a pivotal role not only in the growth of the inter-war Labour Party but its landslide victory in 1945. This is supported by Bogdanor who contends that the swing to Labour was regional, so giving a clue as to why they won in 1945. For instance, he is surprised by the low swing in places such as Glasgow (just 2%), but points to the largest swings as having been in the suburbs of London, where they were around 23%. He argues that London’s suburban swing to Labour was larger than that in 1935, larger than 1997, and possibly larger than any election

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<sup>875</sup> *New Statesman*, 12 June 1948.

<sup>876</sup> B. Donoghue & G. W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison – Portrait of a Politician*, Oxford, 1973, p. 336. Morrison switched from his Hackney seat to the middle-class constituency of East Lewisham in the General Election of 1945. He believed that Labour had to win such white-collar constituencies to be truly national in character.

<sup>877</sup> *Ibid.*

in the twentieth century, except 1906 and 1918.<sup>878</sup> Bogdanor perceives this suburban, middle-class support as one for limited reform, ‘as long as it did not harm the middle-classes too much’.

Franklin and Ladner though argue that the driving force behind Labour’s Election victory in 1945 was demographic in nature and not a conversion in voters.<sup>879</sup> They agreed that the mood of the electorate had changed between 1935 and 1945 and that the change revealed itself among both new and established voters. However, they argue that ‘conversion to the Labour Party did not play a major role in Attlee’s surprise victory.’<sup>880</sup> Instead, their ‘realignment’ theory argues that it was the young voter that won Labour the Election, those whose voting patterns had not become entrenched in family based loyalties to one party and that the 1945 Election saw the coming of age of a new generation of voters socialised in Labour partisanship during the years when the Labour Party was building its support base.<sup>881</sup> Thus, it could be argued that because new voters were not set in their ways, the number of those who voted Labour as a consequence of socialisation might well have been swelled by additional young, middle-class voters who were swept up by the general enthusiasm for Labour.

In 1948 the LSE conducted an election inquiry described, as ‘the first of its kind’ in Great Britain’ headed by research luminaries such as Harold Laski, Michael Young, David Glass and Henry Durant of the Institute of Public Opinion. The research was published

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<sup>878</sup> V. Bogdanor, ‘Industry Must Serve the People – Not Enslave Them - The General Election 1945’, Transcript of talk given by Professor Vernon Bogdanov (Gresham College, Cambridge) at the London Museum, Tuesday 23 September 2014). Accessed at: <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-general-election-1945>.

<sup>879</sup> M. Franklin & M. Ladner, ‘The Undoing of Winston Churchill: Mobilisation and Conversion in the 1945 Realignment of British Voters’, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 4, October 1995, pp. 429-452, p. 450.

<sup>880</sup> *Ibid*, p. 450.

<sup>881</sup> *Ibid*, p. 452.

under the title 'How People Vote' and studied the voting behavioural patterns of the Metropolitan Borough of Greenwich. Its aim was to look at social class and voting intentions for the 1950 General Election.<sup>882</sup> Their chief conclusion about 'changers' who swung away from voting Labour in 1945 to the Conservatives by 1950 were found more often amongst those whose original vote intention deviated away from the majority of their social group. Hence, the middle-class support for Labour in 1945 was fickle in that the study's common conclusion was that Labour support began to decline and Conservative prestige rose soon after the 1945 Election. They cite the Labour candidate in Greenwich as holding onto their seat in 1950 albeit with a diminished majority from 66% to 38% of the vote.<sup>883</sup>

## Conclusion

By the time of war Labour's south eastern constituency parties were somewhat in the doldrums and unenthusiastic about the possibility of a 1940 General Election. For despite being at the helm of the growth in party membership in the 1930s, the south eastern rank and file dwindled and did not pick up until 1943. Dissent and resentment festered over the national party's lack of support for the idealist's cause celebre, the Spanish Republic, together with the expulsion, albeit a temporarily, of their folk hero, Cripps. The grass roots (particularly middle-class) membership felt as passionate as any CP member for an international cause and indeed had plenty to choose from. Fielding makes the salient point that ideology played a greater role in giving shape to Labour's sense of purpose than has hitherto been considered.<sup>884</sup> However, their national leaders sought a respectable, no-nonsense, pragmatic approach to winning elections and as such conformed to Michels' summation as the archetypal social democratic party acting as an essential voting machine.

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<sup>882</sup> M. Benney, A. P. Gray & R. H. Pear, *How People Vote – A Study of Electoral Behaviour in Greenwich*, Oxford, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>883</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>884</sup> S. Fielding, Labourism in the 1940s, *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1992, pp 138-153, 139.

Indeed, for national Labour there was only room for one party on the British Left, as was later endorsed by the Attlee government's list of proscribed organisations, including the CP and the Common Wealth Party.

Looking to the national Party's response to the old bogey of Communism, both before and after the Soviet Union's entry into the war, this was reminiscent of the Party's expulsions of the 1980s, for large numbers of south east individual members were expelled or Ward parties disaffiliated for transgressions such as sharing a platform with a Communist or, as in the case of Bermondsey constituency party, for endorsing their own internal candidate against that dictated by the national party. Tensions also heightened when the national party went into a war time Coalition which engendered increased mistrust by the rank and file that their leaders had become beguiled by high politics. As victory looked likely they were keen that the national party should dislodge itself from the Coalition.

South east members' priorities for reconstruction revealed themselves on class, demographic and ideological grounds. For although various Gallup Polls in the weeks leading up to the election revealed shifting priorities, the middle-class respondents to Mass Observations lent weight to Beveridge and medical care, seen as acting in self-interest to save on the cost of private health insurance. The priority for the working class switched to housing. Rural Labourites felt the countryside had, once again, been forgotten and the more intellectual members adopted an ethical approach that accommodated capitalism, so hoping to bring about 'revolution by consent'.

The socio-economic dislocation of war and its promotion of an egalitarian populism among considerable sections of the working and lower middle classes, was a necessary, though not a sufficient, cause of Labour's victory in 1945. As we have seen, the embrace of

communitarian solidarity (the so-called Dunkirk spirit) and the emerging conviction that post-war Britain must not experience the same deprivations of the preceding decade, did not necessarily favour social democracy or even the looser 'Labourism' for that matter. The Commonwealth Party, with its peculiar combination of English Republican patriotism and commitment to public ownership, presented Labour with a serious competitor within the Home Counties. Moreover, as Fielding has cogently argued, a significant percentage of the electorate (if not a majority) believed as late as 1943 that the cause of post-war reconstruction was best served by the continuance of the wartime coalition government headed by either Churchill or Eden.<sup>885</sup> Rather, it was those Labour activists' steady commitment to building the 'New Jerusalem', as a practical movement and ideal which enabled the party to eventually harness disaffection with the Conservative Government concerning their half-hearted commitment to the Beveridge report. In striking this rhetorical middle ground between political utopia and electability, what Cole once called "sensible extremism", constituency activists and intellectuals were able to preserve Labour's organisational strength to the extent that its rival, Commonwealth, was unable to shake the former's image as the main electoral opposition to Conservatism and the 'Guilty Men'.<sup>886</sup> Consequently, Fielding goes too far in suggesting that decision between Labour and Conservatives in 1945 was merely a tactical 'Hobson's choice' foisted upon a dispirited and cynical electorate. Even if this were the case, the fact remains that a decisive section of the southern working-class and 'Black Coats' believed that Labour could be trusted with presiding over post-war reconstruction. That this was so was due to the patient labours of activists and intellectuals over the course of the preceding decade.

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<sup>885</sup> S. Fielding, 'What Did 'The People' Want?: The Meaning of the 1945 General Election', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Sep., 1992, pp. 631-4.

<sup>886</sup> N.W. Thompson, *Political Economy and the Labour Party: The Economics of Democratic Socialism, 1884-2005*, Abingdon, 2006, p. 104.



## Conclusion

Commenting upon the political developments of the 1930s, Max Beloff once wrote that this decade inaugurated ‘a new period of stabilization’, a two-party system with ‘class and region – the two often interlocking – as the main determinants of political allegiance’.<sup>887</sup> This classic characterisation of the political cleavage within 1930s Britain, an increasingly affluent and politically Conservative Midlands and south-east on the one hand versus the Labour strongholds in London, the north of England and Scotland has, in its essence, stood the test of time (at least until c. 2014-19). The election results available demonstrate a clear Conservative dominance of the ‘new England’ rising in the south-east from 1929 through to 1935 where they maintained a lead of at least a hundred seats alone.<sup>888</sup> Yet, as this thesis has found, the traditional depiction of a north-east and south-east divide in British politics obscures as much as it illuminates. In particular, the main political problem confronting the Labour Party of the ’30s was precisely the divide between its increasingly middle-class, south-eastern, urban membership and its failure to penetrate the lion’s den of Conservative England. This thesis has shown that this failure was not simply down to the delusions of Orwell’s ‘fruit juice drinkers’ and ‘vegetarians’; the Labour Party’s institutional and ideological structures posed an insurmountable obstacle for those members who took the work of political consciousness-raising and self-empowerment seriously.

Matthew Worley has argued that Labour historians enthralled by political language must rediscover the contextual importance of socio-economic and regional analysis in explaining the growth of the inter-war Labour Party.<sup>889</sup> This thesis has attempted to answer Worley’s challenge by examining how Labour’s burgeoning south-eastern membership

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<sup>887</sup> M. Beloff, *Wars and Welfare: Britain 1914-1945*, London, 1984, p. 212.

<sup>888</sup> D. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-1960*, New York, 1963, p. 125.

<sup>889</sup> M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate – A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars*, London, 2005, pp. 4-7.

contributed to the Party's political and ideological reconstruction from 1931 to 1945. Famously described by Priestley as a "new" England of American-style suburbs, arterial roads, or giant cinemas, the south-east between the wars provided the main site for a significant spatial-temporal restructuring in the division of labour. As the urban core of this region turned to light or service industries centred upon the production of consumer goods and free-time, the rural home-counties hosted the development of a suburban commuter-belt or leisure-tourism fringe. Consequent to this shift debates concerning what Castells terms 'collective consumption', or the permissible use of free time rose to the fore within regional politics.<sup>890</sup> Previous scholarship has emphasised that the Conservatives were the main beneficiary of this socio-economic shift and that the 'Baldwinite' rhetoric of "Englishness", constitutionalism and individual self-improvement resonated with a flourishing and "aspirational" suburbia.<sup>891</sup>

Yet, as Conservative critics of 'Americanisation' foresaw, the equalitarian logic of this new modernity was also potentially beneficial to their main political rival. Indeed, Labour's individual membership and intellectuals made a crucial contribution to the Party's recovery by offering a democratic, welfarist model of socialism that potentially appealed to both service workers or clerical come professional employees within the south-east. It suggests that the true origins of the post-1945 welfare state lay within the collective-consumption based needs of an urban working class, elaborated by the 'compassionate professionalism' of a new administrative and academic 'petit-bourgeois'. Thus, it is argued that Labour's south eastern expansion has been gravely underestimated and that the Party had

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<sup>890</sup> M. Castells, *City, Class & Power*, London, 1978, p. 16. This concept was central to Marxist urbanism and social theories developed in the late 1960s and 70s. Castells argues that advanced capitalism required increasing state involvement in the so called means of collective consumption.

<sup>891</sup> R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class – Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 259-293.

some (albeit limited) success in appealing to what sociologists later termed ‘the affluent worker’.

The concept of region, long utilised by political scientists and economists as a valid unit of analysis, has only won acceptance among Labour historians during recent decades. Crucial studies by Savage, Tanner, Howell, and Worley have underscored the importance of varying local solidarities, socio-economic structures and political strategies to Labour’s eventual displacement of the Liberals as the second largest Party in the 1920s.<sup>892</sup> Yet, as Berger has commented, regional analysis has several flaws: in comparative studies it is difficult to draw general trends from multiple regions and the concept can be too abstract to grasp significant differences between localities and can marginalize the importance of ‘National’ structures such as class.<sup>893</sup> Considering how the 1930s has been widely interpreted as a decade marked by the “nationalisation of politics” (as termed by McKibbin), it would indeed seem that such an approach is unhelpful. However, this would be to ignore the fact that the ’30s was also the era of growing regional disparities in political economy, culture, and electoral strength. Notwithstanding the elitist elements of the ‘north-south divide’ as defined by (largely middle class) observers, real differences existed between north and south, for the latter experienced only isolated pockets of unemployment, saw the greatest boom in house-building before 1945 and was subject to the most thoroughgoing separation of work and home-life. In this way southern membership possessed an awareness of distinctive, shared organisational and social ties. From 1932 dissatisfied individual members organised themselves into the Home Counties Labour Association and lambasted the Party’s

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<sup>892</sup> M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics. The Labour Movement in Preston 1880-1940*, Cambridge, 1987; D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge, 1990; D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906*, Manchester, 1983.; M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate. A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars*, London, 2005.

<sup>893</sup> S. Berger, ‘The Decline of Liberalism and the rise of Labour – The Regional Approach’, *Parliamentary History*, Vol 12, Pt 1, 1993, pp. 84-92.

failure to facilitate political contact between individual constituency parties outside of London, or to provide any coordinating bodies between CLPs and NEC.

The second part of this thesis has brought these separate organisations together within two case studies. Firstly, a chapter reappraises Labour's activities in Hendon and Faversham (two parties for which significant material survives), one the most rapidly industrialising constituency in the south, the other a rural-commercial town. Following this a separate chapter is devoted to re-examining the HCLA's conflict with the NEC over the Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War. Each chapter testifies to growing discontent with national Party policy. With the exception of the mass of members within the older municipal and transport unions, others were well aware of the need to present a socialist alternative to working class electors, as well as the appeal of nationalisation to employees within a burgeoning public sector of health and social services, with the need to organise the younger generation of women typists or shop-workers. Here relative affluence (at least compared with the distressed areas) produced the confidence to use the new workforce's power in pressing the claims of socialism. Indeed, HCLA members were the first to call for a direct-action campaign to end the National Government's policy of non-intervention during the Spanish crisis of 1936-9. Yet strong divisions also weakened such initiatives. The surge in socialist activism within the south-east was riven by anti-Communism and the important ethos of Party loyalty; the HCLA did not go so far as to embrace the Popular Front, unlike the Socialist League which split as a result. Pimlott was only partially justified in suggesting that the Labour Left's Marxian rhetoric harmed the Party's electoral chances in the south-east. Rather, it was the membership's contradictory commitment to 'Revolution by Consent' which prevented the Party from forging productive links with social movements and parties to the Left or appeasing the reformist impulse of liberal progressives to the right. Thus, the

ideology of Labour members comprised a fudged, half-way-house that failed to choose between the two alternatives of full-throated radicalism or ameliorative gradualism.

Of course, these conclusions may seem impressionistic at best when considering the scantiness of surviving records from local Labour Parties active in the 1930s. For unlike the plethora of social studies which have endured the ravages of time, it is rare to find a complete set of Executive Committee minutes from CLPs or Women's Sections and even harder to obtain records from annual members' meetings. The culture of 'amateurism' among Labour's (usually unpaid) local organisers has bestowed considerable problems upon subsequent Labour historians – it is common to read of minute books water-damaged whilst stored in sheds, or party papers being shredded by retiring local Chairmen. However, enough material survives which, when combined with reports of local activities in the Labour press (*Daily Herald, The Tribune, London Labour Chronicle, Labour Woman, Reynold's News*) help provide a rounded view of branch life, activities and political position. When coupled with available documents on national constituency party membership provided by internal documents (held at London Metropolitan Archive) and the available Census Digests for Constituencies in 1931 (one of the few surviving records for this year), it is possible to construct a reliable picture of the social background and environment underpinning most Branches.

The necessary socio-psychological data of members' values or interests can be gleaned from comparing printed biographies of politicians, both national and local, together with archival material from Dan Weinbraun's Labour Oral History Project (1993). Considering that interviewing members active in the 1930s is now impossible (even members of the League of Youth at the time would now be in their late nineties, if not deceased), the significance of this material stored at the British Library cannot be underestimated. When combined these sources paint a largely coherent picture of an increasingly active, enthusiastic

socialist membership embracing docker's caps and bowler hats, discontented with the caution and organisational sclerosis of a trade union dominated, overly male national Labour Party. Thus, threatened by the electoral and political demoralisation of operating within a largely Conservative region, these members succeeded in preserving a utopian vision of socialism essential to Labour's revival as the champion of equality and solidarity during the war years.

Following the explosion of 'Corbynmania' since September 2015, critical attention within the media and academia has come to rest on the perplexity of a thriving socialist youth emerging from the one region of England least affected by the 2008 economic crash. This thesis suggests that there is nothing novel in this spatialisation of socio-political divisions, which can be traced back through the 'Metropolitan Intellectuals' of Michael Foot's Labour Party to those of the 1930s. At the same time it takes issue with this simplification by noting the importance of a new, service based working-class within the Greater London region, more concerned with wage regulation and the efficient provision of collective consumption than production centred grievances concerning alienation within the workplace. Overall, this work argues that the progressive alliance essential to Labour's success was rebuilt within the social clubs, party branches, universities and reading groups of the south-east.

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