

To what extent is "adversarial politics" an accurate description of British inter-party conflict since 1945?

Finer coined the term 'adversary politics' to describe the British parliamentary system, which he saw as "a stand-up fight between two adversaries for the favour of the lookers-on" (McLean, 1996, p3). He saw the two-party system as having become polarised and with government change came repeated, massive and detrimental reversals of policy (Kavanagh and Morris, 1989, p18). However, not all have seen British Politics in this way. Indeed, many political historians have taken for granted the existence of a broad political consensus during the period between 1945 and 1975, often seeing this in a positive light. Only recently has this been brought into question (Jones in Brivatti, 1996, p47).

This analysis seeks to evaluate arguments surrounding the issue of whether this was a period characterised by adversarial conflict or consensus between the two leading parties. Despite Finer's criticism Ashford claims that, should the adversarial system be compromised, the democratic nature of the political system would be in jeopardy (Ashford, 1981, p264). This highlights the importance of this area of study. However, it must be noted that there are limitations and ambiguity in the knowledge available. As Marlow points out many conclusions can legitimately be drawn from the evidence at hand (Marlow, 1996, p3).

Writing in 1975, Addison is often thought to be the first commentator on the issue of political consensus but, though he is a key writer on the issue, debate originated in the immediate post-war era from 'the end of ideology' debate (Fraser, 2000, p351). In his book 'The Road to 1945' Addison described two periods of consensus, that of Baldwin and that of Attlee. Both figures symbolised a different set of ideas centring on government intervention. He considered Baldwin to have occupied a 'middle ground' between traditional Labour and Conservative policymaking (Addison, 1982, p26). Attlee however, is seen as having "a strong ethical and abstract commitment to socialism" (ibid., p271). Addison saw the ideas of the consensus as developing through the war and early post-war years, influenced by the ideas of these two Prime Ministers who set the framework for policymaking over the next few decades (Jones in Brivati et. al., 1996, p43). Kavanagh and Morris have developed his ideas of consensus politics in their work 'Consensus Politics from Attlee to Thatcher'. They are the main advocates of what is now often referred to as the 'post-war consensus thesis' (Kavanagh & Morris, 1989, pp4-5).

Firstly, it is important to explain what Kavanagh and Morris meant by the term 'consensus'. They think of consensus as "a set of parameters which

bounded the set of policy options regarded by senior politicians and civil servants as administratively practicable, economically affordable and politically acceptable" (Kavanagh & Morris, 1989, p13). They use the term in two senses, the first being a style of government characterised by the interaction between government and major economic agents (e.g. producer interest groups). The second sense refers to the range of policies supported by the parties (Ibid., pp3-4). It is important to note that they do not believe there was a lack of disagreement during this period, just that this was contained (Ibid., p13). In fact they claim that "continuity existed alongside a highly adversarial party system" (Ibid., p110).

In particular, Kavanagh and Morris claim consensus existed over the need for a welfare state, importance of a mixed economy (often referred to as Butskellism), acceptance of Trade Unions, commitment to full employment, the retreat from imperialism and membership of the Atlantic Alliance (Ibid., pp4-6). They believed that World War 2 (WW2) brought this broad consensus between the Conservative Party and the Labour party. It is claimed that it did not come to an end until the 1970's, when attitudes and circumstances changed and the main features of the consensus no longer operated as intended (Ibid., p118).

Kavanagh and Morris are not alone in these views. Bell, along with other commentators (e.g. Shils and Aron), also saw a change in the post-war era towards a rough consensus of political opinion (Fraser, 2000, p351). Western post-war politics is seen as being based on differences in practical, moderate and technical details instead of significant ideological ones (Ibid., p351 & Fraser, 2000, p331). Ryan argues that the areas where Conservative and Labour policies did differ at this time (capital punishment etc...) lacked interest in the political arena and therefore were not divisive (Ryan cited in Seldon, 1990, p83). A recent advocate of the consensus thesis, in its defence, claims that "Virtually every serious politician, certainly every senior one, acted and calculated within the boundaries of what became known as the 'post-war settlement'..." (Hennessy cited in Jones in Brivati et. al., 1996, p44).

The reasons Kavanagh and Morris, among other commentators, give for the development of this consensus include the success of the active state during WW2 (Jones in Brivatti et. al., 1996, p43). Many felt this involvement should be extended to reconstructing society and the economy during the post-war period, so both parties drew upon the ideas of Keynes and Beveridge in their policy-making. According to Fraser it is largely the difficulty in advancing left or right-wing ideologies that led to the development of a "compromise position" supported by both parties (Fraser, 2000, p331). It was generally considered that "the great ideologies of the earlier Industrial era had worked themselves into a position where none were able to succeed outright" leading to what Fraser calls the "social democratic compromise" (Ibid., p351). The flexibility of the

Conservative Party to adapt to the new climate (due largely to its avoidance of binding dogma and ideology) was also instrumental in the development of a post war consensus. For instance, there were attempts to open up to potential representatives with limited funds and make the party more democratic (Childs, 2001, p24). In addition to this, Butler's Industrial Charter of 1947 accepted the need for government planning and full employment as an essential goal for the Conservative Party (Ryan cited in Seldon, 1990, p82).

These and many other ideas pursued during this time by both parties tie in closely with traditional Labour ideas and it is not hard to understand their involvement in this consensus. The Conservatives on the other hand need a little more explanation. Churchill's wartime coalition was one reason to believe that co-operation was sometimes successful, wartime patriotism lingered and was reinforced by Conservative paternalism (Harrison, 1999, p301). Joseph also points out that many key politicians in this period were back-benchers during the difficult 1930's and were influenced in their policies by the prevailing idea of suffering by "those gaunt, tight-lipped men in caps and mufflers" (Joseph cited in Ibid., p302). In 1945 the Conservatives had received an election defeat and therefore, sought to steal residual Liberal votes (Harrison, 1999, p304). Consensus is an attractive pursuit for politicians, who can gain votes by going along with what policies the electorate wish to support (Ibid., p300).

In fact, the Conservatives accepted many ideas that often were thought to be more conducive to Labour. So much so they have been accused by many of selling out. According to Thatcher "For me, consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies" (Thatcher, 1981 cited in Kavanagh & Morris, 1989, p2). Not all assert that the Conservatives abandoned their values though. Interestingly, Churchill himself fought Lloyd George to be the father of the Welfare state in the 1905-14 Liberal Governments (Ryan in Seldon, 1990, p81). Some argue that the brand of Conservatism, which is the legacy of Joseph Chamberlain "is in principle a better friend to the Welfare state than to competitive individualism" (Ibid., p82).

Dutton even goes so far as to argue that after the polarisation and increased conflict of the 1970's and 80's has come a new period of political consensus centring around the idea of a 'third way' (Dutton cited in Fraser, 2000, p348). Seldon has also claimed that "In the 1990's there has been a further policy convergence" (Seldon cited in Fraser, 2000, p347). This is not a widely accepted point, however and may be coloured by the increased conflict of the Thatcher era (Jones in Brivatti, 1996, p46-47).

Despite these similarities in policies adopted by the two main parties during the post-war era, many still argue that there was no clearly identifiable consensus. Pimlott even writes of the possibility "...that the consensus is a

mirage, an illusion that rapidly fades the closer one gets to it" (Pimlott, 1989 cited in Harrison, 1999, p308). He claims that the past can be recognised as different without claiming it was less argumentative (Pimlott, 1988 cited in Jones in Brivatti et. al., 1996, p45). This critique has prompted many more writers to question the post-war consensus thesis (Jones in Brivatti et. al., 1996, p45).

Since Pimlott, some critics have argued that the idea of a post-war consensus is taken for granted and the label 'consensus' is too readily applied (Marlow, 1996, pp 3-5). Marlow offers a critique of Kavanagh and Morris' theory in which he takes issue with the way they equate continuity with consensus. He argues that continuity in government policy can be the result of many factors and does not necessarily mean a consensus exists (Marlow, 1996, p16). It is claimed that examination of the context (political climate) and strategic thinking of those involved are all too readily neglected in favour of outcomes (patterns of continuity and change). The particular circumstances and reasoning of politicians must be examined as they helped bring about any conflict and consensus (Ibid., p3). Jones contends that external factors are crucial as they limited the parties' choices, this has been misinterpreted as a consensus (Jones in Brivatti et. al., 1996, p45). For example Jeffreys argues that, far from a consensus, the coalition rested on reluctant compromise and ministers frequently had to agree to disagree (Jeffreys cited in Ibid., p46).

In defence of Kavanagh and Morris, however, they do present a discussion of the importance of political personalities and the circumstances in which policies were made (Kavanagh & Morris, 1989, pp116-121). They state that "Ideas and opinions do not exist in a vacuum; to have an impact they must relate to the concerns of policy-makers" (Ibid., p118). They also make some allowances for external factors that might be in play in their description of consensus. With references to, for instance, what is "administratively practicable" they are acknowledging the restrictions on politicians policy-making decisions (Marlow, 1996, p17).

It is only recently that political historians have been criticised for the bias, which tainted their studies of the post-war era. It has been suggested that they were sympathetic to the idea of a Butskellite post-war consensus and this will have coloured their research (Harrison, 1999, p317). Addison has even admitted that he "assumed that the history of the post-war state was a success story" (Addison cited in Ibid., p317). This kind of partiality is present throughout much work on the post-war consensus and must be remembered in its evaluation (Harrison, 1999, p317).

More criticism of the post-war consensus thesis has come from Harrison for its "unduly contracted time-span" (Harrison, 1999, p308). He argues that the post-war period did not have a distinctive and unusual level of consensus. For

Harrison, consensus has been far more enduring in British society and did not exist merely in the post-war period. He claims it can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century and continued even through the Thatcher era, the time Kavanagh and Morris feel consensus came to a definite end (Harrison, 1999, pp308, 312). The political system actually needs some level of consensus to operate, as a sense of fair play must permeate party politics (Harrison, 1999, p309).

Contemporary writers have often stressed differences and conflicts between the parties. Ryan argues that Butler's Industrial Charter, although appearing to adopt many of Labour's policies, "was distinctively Conservative in its emphases" (Ryan in Seldon, 1990, p82). He also claims that the Conservatives sought to create a program, which aimed to preserve private property (apart from coal and the railways) and move towards decentralisation. According to Ryan, their aim was a complete opposite of the program Labour wanted to introduce, involving increased public ownership and centralisation, indicating that the adversarial system was alive and well (Ibid., p82).

It is important to remember that the central principle of Labour's policies was a redistribution of power, however, the Conservatives wished to maintain the existing power distribution. In their policy reform they merely wished to show how workers and capitalists shared common interests, thereby reducing class conflict (Ryan in Seldon, 1990, p82). For instance, Harold Macmillan's book 'The Middle Way' suggests how capitalism can deliver abundance without class confrontation (Harrison, 1999, p300). Jones argues that sharp differences existed between the parties in various areas including industrial relations, ideology, education, social security and health. She asserts that during the 1945 election the Conservatives tried to promote freedom and enterprise, when defeated they simply tried to make Conservative capitalist ideas more attractive to the electorate (Jones in Brivatti, 1996, p46-47). Harrison claims that "Many in the Labour party still thought capitalism outmoded" (Harrison, 1999, p313).

Writers on consensus politics, it is argued have been highly selective of what areas of policy they use in their analysis. According to Harrison, differences would be more obvious if focus were shifted from economic and welfare policies to other areas, Northern Ireland and race relations for example (Harrison, 1999, p312). He claims that consensus has never existed on the issue of Northern Ireland and the political debate has been characterised by unstable stand-offs between the two main parties (Ibid., p312). The disagreement even reached into the National Health Service, for the balance of funding from taxes was also a contentious issue (Ibid., p313).

Jones concludes that there was not an unusual level of post-war consensus. She contends that there was an unusual degree of political conflict

during the 1970's and 80's and that this has affected judgement of the post-war period and led to the misguided belief in a post-war consensus (Jones in Brivatti, 1996, p46-47). She suggests an alternative interpretation of the post-war political climate. She claims wartime collectivist values combined with the emergence of the Cold War, creating a domestic climate in the post-war period which "made the resolution of class conflict within a capitalist framework an overriding imperative of elite policy formation" (Jones in Brivatti et. al., 1996). Despite this, however Jones concedes that critics have oversimplified the post-war consensus thesis resulting in its incorrect interpretation by some as an absence of significant political debate (Jones in Brivati et. al., 1996, p44).

As this analysis has highlighted, the information available in this area can be interpreted in many ways. Political historians have often argued that 'adversarial politics' is not an accurate description of British inter-party conflict since 1945 and the era is characterised by consensus. On balance of the arguments presented, this argument seems flawed. Kavanagh and Morris, however, never claimed that adversarial politics was not present. They, along with Addison, have been misinterpreted and have faced some undue criticism. The two main parties have shared some parallels during the post-war era but they retained distinct values and objectives, which are reflected in their policy-making. The adversarial system remained intact over the period in question; party conflict never ceased and bubbled beneath the surface of this shallow consensus.

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