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REVIEW ARTICLE

LABOURING THE POINT

The Lancashire working classes, c. 1880–1930. By Trevor Griffiths. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. viii + 390. ISBN 0-19-924738-2. £55.00.

Labour in crisis: the second Labour government, 1929–1931. By Neil Riddell. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999. Pp. xi + 267. ISBN 0-7190-5084-7. £45.00.

Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951. By Ross McKibbin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 324. ISBN 0-19-820853-3. £18.99.

The Labour party in Wales, 1900–2000. Edited by Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, and Deian Hopkin. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 324. ISBN 0-7083-1586-0. £35.00.

Labour's first century. Edited by Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. x + 418. ISBN 0-521-65184-0. £25.00.

Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924. By Paul Ward. Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 1998. Pp. viii + 232. ISBN 0-86193-239-0. £35.00.

Austerity in Britain: rationing, controls and consumption, 1939–1955. By Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 286. ISBN 0-19-820453-1. £40.00.

Publishers and historians have been unable to resist the opportunity provided by one hundred years of 'Labour' to subject the history of the party to fresh scrutiny. Centenary history, however, must rest upon an assumption of continuity. In this case, it is assumed that there is a clear line of descent from the Labour Representation Committee formed in February 1900 to the 'New Labour' of the present. There is nothing improper about writing the history of a political party on this basis. Yet, as with other social movements, it is no vast discovery to observe that parties change through time as circumstances and conditions change. The accompanying rhetoric, however, has often skated over such disconcerting realities. When Labour celebrated its half-century, for example, its rise was presented by its chroniclers as a 'forward march' in which were enrolled 'those of all ages and all classes' who were not afraid to fight for the progress of mankind.[1] Mr Attlee, in his foreword to the volume by Francis Williams, put the matter somewhat differently. Labour's story, he claimed, was very characteristic of Britain. It recorded 'the triumph of reasonableness and practicality over doctrinaire impossibilism'.[2] It was to be only a decade

[1] John Parker, *Labour marches on* (Harmondsworth, 1947); Francis Williams, *Fifty years' march: the rise of the Labour party* (London: n.d. ?1949), are two titles which illustrate the appeal of the 'marching' analogy. Williams identifies 'all ages and all classes' on p. 378.

[2] C. R. Attlee, 'Foreword', p. 5: Colm Brogan wrote not on the Labour party, but on Socialism in *Fifty years on: British Socialism, 1900–1950* (London, 1950).

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later, however, that various contemporary observers asked themselves whether the 'tide of history' had turned against the party.[3] In the 1970s and 1980s, indeed, commentators and academic writers almost invariably reached for words like 'crisis' or 'decay' as they contemplated its fate.[4] It looked, indeed, as though the 'forward march' might be going nowhere.[5] It was being suggested that if a Labour party still existed by the twenty-first century, there would be little about its condition which would make celebration seem appropriate. A rhetoric, and an accompanying historiography, which thought about the Labour party in terms of 'tides' and 'marches' was no longer persuasive.

However, in the event, when the twenty-first century was reached, obituaries written during decades of Conservative dominance in turn came to appear premature. A Labour government gained office with a large majority in 1997 and subsequently achieved the hitherto elusive feat of a comfortable second term. A century on from 1900, therefore, it looked again as though Labour had, at last, arrived. Even so, the 'rebranding' into 'New Labour', which made such an achievement possible, or so it appeared, was presented in some quarters as a betrayal rather than as the glorious and overdue culmination of a century of development. Whatever 'New Labour' was, such sceptics suggested, it was no longer the party that the electorate had once loved or loathed. Given such disparate viewpoints, a centenary of chequered existence does, after all, mark a convenient point to consider once again what has made Labour 'tick' and to assess, in the wide perspective now made possible by other work in social and political history, the relative importance of the various elements in its make-up. All political parties, it scarcely needs to be said, are strange coalitions of ideas and interests held together by myths and legends, but the Labour party is stranger than most.

I

There has been no general disposition to roll out the 'forward march' once again, but there has been some uncertainty about the appropriate tone which historians should adopt. Debate continues on the circumstances which saw the emergence of the party in the first place. Was it a feeble infant lucky to survive or the carrier of the class politics of the future? It is now thirty or so years since the relationship between the various strands in Edwardian Liberalism and the emergence of Labour occupied the centre of attention with weighty contributions by Peter Clarke, Ross McKibbin, Martin Pugh, Kenneth Morgan, and other scholars. Some aspects of the well-known arguments of this period will be revisited but it is not the intention here to rehearse the issue in the round.[6] It is not difficult to disagree with the conclusion, advanced by Keith Laybourn, that the rise of Labour and the decline of Liberalism are not easily susceptible to monocausal explanation. More than that, we can

[3] Mark Abrams and Richard Rose with Rita Hinden, *Must Labour lose?* (Harmondsworth, 1960) p. 119. It was in 1961 that Henry Pelling published his *A short history of the Labour party* (London, 1961), an introduction which, in its successive editions, was to become a standard account for some three decades.

[4] For example, Kenneth Coates, *The crisis of British Socialism: essays on the rise of Harold Wilson and the fall of the Labour party* (Nottingham, 1971); and David Howell, *British social democracy: a study in development and decay* (2nd edn, London, 1980). In 1975, the Labour party contented itself with *A pictorial history of the Labour party, 1900–1975 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of its birth* (London, 1975).

[5] E. Hobsbawm, ed., *The forward march of Labour halted?* (Harmondsworth, 1981).

[6] A useful summary is Keith Laybourn, 'The rise of Labour and the decline of Liberalism: the state of the debate', *History*, 80 (1995), pp. 207–26.

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perhaps conclude on this matter, in line with what is said subsequently, that it has only been possible to construct a persuasive account of this complex relationship when the angle of vision has been regional rather than national. Familiar explanations – the First World War, the rise of class, the composition of the franchise, the ideological bankruptcy of Liberalism – all continue to make their appearance, and have their backers, but on their own cannot account for the strange birth of Labour England.

The editors of *Labour's first century*, one of the appraising volumes, have attempted to steer a path between hagiography and excoriation. Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, and Nick Tiratsoo state that they have not put together an 'official history' but neither have they assembled 'an assault on everything that Labour has attempted to achieve'. The introduction concludes by remarking that 'all those associated with this party should feel justly proud'. That conclusion is reached after a series of sentences in which Labour's members, activists, and officials are portrayed not as flawless angels, nor as zealots but rather as 'committed individuals, engaged in public service because of a cause in which they believe and for little tangible reward'. Presumably this does not mean that there has been a complete absence of zealots or flawless angels but only that they should not be taken to be characteristic. Puzzlingly, however, Labour's thinkers and leaders are presented as being 'more thoughtful, more intellectually coherent and consistent, more dedicated, than is sometimes the case'. More so than is normally the case with political thinkers? What does that mean? The party's policies are shown, it is claimed, to be 'more rational, more practical, more reasonable and sometimes more effective'. Does that mean more rational than they have been presented in the past or more rational than the policies of other parties? In addition, instancing a variety of world issues, it is stated that 'Labour members have supported the defence of liberty, reform and freedom.' One gets the message – though it would be interesting to know why there is reference both to 'liberty' and to 'freedom' – but such assertions do not otherwise greatly assist in understanding how Labour members have coped with the conflicts between 'reform' and 'liberty' which not infrequently occurred in the twentieth century. Further, 'changes' during the century, we are told, required Labour to adapt its policies, move with popular opinion, embrace changing expert views 'to create effective economic and social policies'. In all of this process, it is claimed, many of the party's key aims and values have remained intact, even though 'items of its traditional faith' have been 'challenged'. Such a soothing conclusion, one supposes, would scarcely be out of place in an 'official' history.[7]

This centenary volume does recognize, however, that more than a narrative history is called for at this juncture. The contributors have sought to focus on particular features which, either in the past or the present, have given the party its defining identity. Thus, presumably in no particular order, we move through a series of 'Labour ands …' – namely, the economy, welfare, international affairs, the constitution, gender, the trade unions, its membership, the electorate, beginning with Jose Harris's reflection on Labour's political and social thought. Three concluding essays, by Stefan Berger, Jon Lawrence, and Steven Fielding respectively, place Labour in comparative perspective, examine the myths by which it has lived, and consider New Labour and the past. Such an approach certainly

[7] *Labour's first century*. These quotations all appear on p. 5. Chris Williams in *The Labour party in Wales, 1900–2000*, p. 16, also stresses that this collaborative volume is not an official history. He too feels obliged to present some kind of balance sheet. The party, he writes, 'has suffered from limited horizons, timidity, defensiveness and particularly from male chauvinism' but the 'collective verdict' on a century of the Labour party in Wales 'is more positive than negative'.

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enables us to look at the party from illuminating angles. Even so, there are topics which, while they are touched on in passing, might have merited more central attention, such as 'Labour and the Nation' or 'Labour and Class', even 'Labour and Religion', if the party is to be adequately located in a political, cultural, or social landscape.

II

Clement Attlee, as has already been noted, supposed that the Labour party was 'characteristic of Britain' – a fact, he thought, to be welcomed, not regretted. In other words, its fundamental assumptions and ethos were consonant with those of the wider society which surrounded it. 'Britishness', however, does not take us very far. Miles Taylor has argued in his contribution to the *Labour's first century* volume that Labour did not accept all of those alleged characteristics without question. There were arguments about the role of parliament, the machinery of government, and the representation of the people, at regular intervals – indeed about the nature of 'the state' itself – even if these debates had little immediate consequence. Certainly Labour did not take the view that all was for the best in the best of all possible constitutions. Equally, however, Labour's understanding of 'the British way' ruled out exotic attempts to bring about constitutional change. Parliament would be central. In 1913 Philip Snowden warned the Commons that 'if the people lose faith in Parliament, they will turn to other methods to try to remedy their grievances and to improve their conditions'. If parliament failed, Britain would be given over to a condition of anarchy.[8] While some were not unduly worried by such a prospect, they were always in a minority. Snowden did not hesitate to use the first person plural when speaking of the 'traditions' and 'good things' inherited from the British past. According to Ramsay Macdonald, as cited in Ward's *Red Flag* (p. 9), a nation was not an abstraction but a real community. It has a common life and was the product of a particular historical evolution. The nascent party, therefore, did not stand outside the community but wanted to share in 'Britain for the British'. This early emphasis, while never fully shared in all quarters, remained predominant throughout the century. The party did criticize the stewardship of the 'national interest' by other parties but it never doubted that the 'national interest' did exist, to be properly identified and defended. It is in this sense that Stephen Howe is right to argue in the *Labour's first century* volume that the Labour party has never had its own distinctive foreign policy. There has never been what he calls a 'package' of views on the place of Britain in the world which could claim derivation from socialist or social-democratic thought as such (p. 119).

It is this theme of the nationalization of Labour which Ward has explored systematically. It was obviously highly significant in the years 1917–24 when Henderson and others argued that what should be created was a 'genuine national party'. Its membership was open to all those who depended upon their own exertions by hand or by brain. The Communist party of Great Britain could be accused of taking orders from 'the Asiatic mind'. Frank Hodges, secretary of the Miners' Federation, told the party conference in 1923 that of all the Labour movements in the world, the British was the best. The monarchy, empire, and parliament were historical components of Britishness which the majority of the party accepted without difficulty. At Labour's victory rally in January 1924, MacDonald claimed not to be thinking

[8] Cited in Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, patriotism and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 95.

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of party. He was thinking, rather, of national well-being. Once this emphasis had been established, it was to be rarely challenged over subsequent decades. In a recent article, Martin Pugh has emphasized the importance of this strand, noting, for instance, how the *Daily Mirror* in 1945 characterized Labour's programme as moderate and reassuring – 'a typically British solution for British problems'.[9]

It was also the case, at least until the latter decades of the twentieth century, that the 'nation' whose well-being was being so earnestly sought was not in itself ethnically problematic. There were the customary stumbling blocks surrounding the words 'England' and 'Britain' which could sometimes cause offence. Ward (pp. 20–4, 175–6) instances the following examples. It is likely that Robert Blatchford was specifically advised to write *Britain for the British* (1902) rather than 'England for the English'. It did not seem to be a problem to welcome Keir Hardie, the Scot who sat for Merthyr Tydfil home from his 1907–8 world tour by singing 'England, arise!' William Morris thought of his fellow-countrymen as 'a great homogenous Teutonic people infused usefully with a mixture of Celtic blood' whose development had been deflected by the Norman Conquest. J. R. MacDonald wandered in both the Scottish and English countryside and when in the latter generously remembered 'our British predecessors'. It looked indeed as though the party could reasonably claim that the Labour house successfully accommodated many mansions. While individual Labour MPs continued to profess allegiance to 'Home Rule', they did not seriously expect it to arrive. It appeared that national issues within the United Kingdom were by general consent subordinate when set alongside Labour's social and economic objectives.

In a somewhat uncertainly devolved United Kingdom at the start of the twenty-first century, however, 'Labour and the Nation' requires a rather different perspective since it is no longer so clear what 'nation' is being alluded to. Naturally, the volume edited by Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, and Deian Hopkins, which has a specific focus on Wales has to dwell upon the ambiguities of nation. Its very title, *The Labour party in Wales*, points to the difficulties of balance and emphasis since the party is now keen to market itself in Wales as 'Welsh Labour'. Historically, however, the contribution from Wales after 1918 was a significant element in the Labour party's growth in Britain as a whole. One third of that rump of fifty-two Labour MPs returned in the 1931 general election represented Welsh constituencies. In that year, whereas Labour's share of the vote fell in Britain as a whole to 31 per cent, in Wales it rose to 47 per cent. A share comfortably above the British average came to be perceived as characteristic. In 1966 Labour held thirty-two of the thirty-six Welsh seats. In 1997 Labour held thirty-four of forty. Although in 1983 its representation had reached a low of twenty out of thirty-eight, this record amply justifies the conclusion of Chris Williams that much of Wales has been a Labour stronghold since the early 1920s.

Yet much complexity lies behind this apparently self-evident conclusion. The editors and contributors all wrestle, implicitly or explicitly, with the question of how 'Wales' and 'Labour' should be linked. Williams supposes (p. 2) that 'the Welsh contribution to the party of Hardie, MacDonald, Bevan and Kinnock is easily demonstrated'. But is it? While Wales has been 'loyal' to Labour, MPs from Wales, as a generalization, have not made a major mark on the Labour party when it has been in government. Hardie and MacDonald – the latter briefly – held Welsh seats but were not Welsh. Aneurin Bevan stands out as the only Welsh Labour MP to make a major mark in government. Michael

[9] Martin Pugh, 'The rise of Labour and the political culture of Conservatism, 1890–1945', *History*, 87 (2002), p. 536.

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Foot and James Callaghan represented Welsh constituencies when they led the party, but were not Welsh. Neil Kinnock, in this capacity, was Welsh but it has sometimes been suggested that it was his 'Welsh exuberance' which fatefully led to defeat. As Duncan Tanner notes (p. 287), Kinnock was attacked by Plaid Cymru for opposing devolution, but castigated in the London popular press for his 'Welshness'. We return to the 'Labour party in Wales/Welsh Labour party' dichotomy. It is pointed out that organizationally there has only been a 'Welsh' Labour party since the formation of the Welsh Regional Council of Labour in 1947. In every decade, there have been differences of emphasis on the extent to which the 'Labour party in Wales' should project itself as the 'Welsh Labour party'. There were both opponents and proponents of devolution. For some, unless Labour addressed what were portrayed as essentially Welsh issues it would be doomed. Political nationalism with separatist ambitions would occupy this territory and make progress. For others, Labour might always be outbid if it sought to focus too much on Welsh issues. It was therefore necessary to continue to emphasize the importance of Wales within Britain, and Welsh labour within the wider movement. In this volume Merfyn Jones and Ioan Rhys Jones skilfully disentangle the threads in this complicated and shifting story. Kenneth O. Morgan, in writing of the years 1939–51 suggests that this period cast a shadow over the Labour party and Welsh politics for the rest of the century. These years, as he puts it, 'symbolized people's power, solidarity, a collective response, central planning, a welfare democracy and social citizenship' (p. 186) with the objective of renewing the nation after the suffering of the interwar years. There was, however, a paradox. This period of 'reform' was also one of social and cultural conservatism. Morgan further notes on this page that the 'legend' which attached to Labour in post-war Wales had not been related to 'the concept of a living Welsh nation'. That was to remain unfinished business, 'to beguile or torment comrades yet unborn', as he puts it. The National Assembly for Wales was established by the narrowest of majorities. The inescapable ambiguity continues.

Moreover, as several contributors stress, there was no 'one-size-fits-all' agenda for Labour in Wales, since Wales itself was not a political monolith. Information in this book on party membership at constituency level, and other material, reinforces the picture of a party which 'played' differently in Wales and with difficulty sustained a common platform. One might, of course, suppose that this was a peculiarly Welsh situation, given the importance of linguistic and cultural issues in Welsh politics. Pugh plausibly argues, however, that in searching for some overall explanation for Labour's peculiar and chequered history, not enough attention has been given to the extent to which Labour's appeal to the electorate varied both chronologically and geographically – and these latter two aspects have to be held together. There has long been an emphasis on the extent to which, as it made progress, Labour 'took over' former Liberal strongholds and, in terms of individuals and mentalities, 'incorporated' Liberal elements. Thus, by 1945, the areas of former Liberal strength had largely become areas of Labour strength. However, Pugh notes that Labour never acquired the same popularity as the Liberals in south-west England, East Anglia, and rural Scotland. Labour compensated, however, by winning predominance in major conurbations, such as Birmingham and Liverpool, which had been Conservative. The conclusion drawn is that Labour is best understood not as a single 'national' party operating with regional 'branches', but rather as 'two or three distinct parties reflecting the diversity of political culture in the regions of Britain'.[10] The ever-increasing number of

[10] Ibid., pp. 536–7.

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studies of local Labour parties certainly should make it possible to test the validity of this notion. The difficulty, however, is that in this context 'region' is as problematic as 'class' or any other organizing notion. Moreover, the socio-economic circumstances and predominant employment patterns of particular communities might link their fates with distant, but comparable, communities in ways which were not those of the 'region' in which they existed. Up to a point, therefore, it is plausible to see Labour as an awkward agglomeration of 'distinct' parties but the nature of that distinctiveness needs to be more carefully considered before such a characterization can be simply adopted. In the end, it was still 'one' party, or had to contrive to appear as one.

III

The extent to which it succeeded as a single party depended on how Labour succeeded in mobilizing a social base around 'core beliefs'. That in turn depended upon the nature and competence of its leadership. The remainder of this review focuses on some of these issues. At one time or another, historians have placed predominant emphasis on one or other of these elements in trying to explain the Labour story. Recently published work which, directly or indirectly, addresses these topics is illuminating in detail but cautious in suggesting that a 'master key' has been found.

Labour has been a Socialist party, but it has not been 'the Socialist party'. The fact that it was not so called could be taken merely to indicate a suspicion of 'ideas in politics' which was allegedly a national characteristic. Stefan Berger, however, refuses to accept that Labour can be completely characterized as an insular oddity quite outside the mainstream of at least Northern European Socialism (p. 310) though it did have some peculiar features. Likewise, in her essay, Jose Harris sees Labour as having a long, though sometimes meandering, engagement, with the generation of what Sidney Webb called a 'body of systematic political thought' (pp. 8–10). Not content with having already played his part in drafting the party's 1918 constitution, Webb published *A constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* in 1920. This is not the place to embark on a systematic exposition of what such a Commonwealth would entail. The point is simply to emphasize the extent to which, in the persons of the Webbs, Tawney, Cole, and Laski, to name only a quintet of thinkers and writers, 'Socialism' was the central objective. In 1927 Laski thought that MacDonald had a horror of ideas, that Snowden had largely ceased to be a Socialist and that J. H. Thomas had never been one. Riddell (p. 39) cites Laski as further lamenting that if Labour had a philosophy which was as related to Socialism as a jerry-built house was related to Westminster Abbey, it would not continue to attract those who still ventured to dream 'of a new world built by high courage and arduous effort'. It scarcely needs to be said, however, that both the route to the achievement of Socialism and indeed its very nature remained challengingly problematic. There was always a tension swirling round the concept, both in the interwar period and after. When the Independent Labour party decided, at a specially convened conference in Bradford in July 1932, to end its affiliation to the Labour party, its chairman, Fenner Brockway, argued the working-class unity could only be expected behind 'the red banner of revolutionary Socialism' – something which the Labour party, it seemed, did not aspire to wave.[11] Whether Socialism could

[11] Gidon Cohen, 'The Independent Labour party, disaffiliation, revolution and standing orders', *History*, 86 (2001), p. 202.

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ever come by constitutional means was a question Stafford Cripps was anxious to pose in 1934.[12] Andrew Thorpe has reflected, in this connection, on the impact and image of Stalin on the Socialisms of Britain.[13] In 1945 Labour had, for the first time, a majority which would enable it to 'move to Socialism'. Certainly, large-scale nationalization and major reforms of the social security system could be taken to be important stages. Nevertheless, as has often been noted, the Attlee governments still operated on a comparatively narrow front. In *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951,* Ross McKibbin argues, for example, that what he calls an awkward compromise was reached. A social democratic definition of democracy had not entrenched itself in civil society and an all-too-limited social democracy had virtually expired before Attlee left office in 1951 (pp. 534–6). Indeed, in her analysis of the party political aspect of *Austerity in Britain,* Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska doubts whether the electorate shared the Labour government's wider purpose of 'building socialism' and suggests that its literal failure to 'deliver the goods' undermined its initial popularity (p. 203). Short supply, bottlenecks, black markets, spivs, registered customers, under the counter, utility, pool, queues, coupons, crisis and cuts – in successful Conservative propaganda these were the everyday expressions of the 'Socialist era' (p. 238). One explanation might be that most Labour voters did not want 'Socialism'. Anthony Crosland's *The future of Socialism* (1956) directly assaulted many of the interwar assumptions, particularly after 1931, about what Socialism should entail and how it should be achieved. Whether its arguments were found persuasive or not, there remained the conviction that there was a coherent 'Socialism' which could be attained and which would be recognized the closer it came to being achieved. In the later decades of the century, however, it was becoming increasingly difficult to determine who could plausibly be said to 'own' the Socialism of the Labour party. From the Left, there was a vigorous reassertion that Labour was Socialist to the core. The 1981 launch of the SDP seemed to offer a 'social democracy' that was not 'Socialist'. 'New Labour' in turn finally achieved the abandonment of the icon which was 'Clause Four', an achievement which for some signified that Labour was no longer the Socialist party which they had supposed it to be. On the other hand, there have been repeated assertions by Tony Blair and other figures prominent in his entourage that the 'core beliefs' of the party remain undisputed.

This chequered history of Socialism in the Labour party can be variously interpreted. At one level, it could be held to demonstrate that, in its present form, Labour has jettisoned any notion that Socialism entails a comprehensive 'blueprint' for the ordering of society, a blueprint that is in direct contrast with Capitalism, of whatever kind, and with a 'market economy'. Its demise might be held to be one aspect of a loss of faith in political ideology generally or to stem from a realization that Socialism might only be obtainable at too high a cost to liberty or even to prosperity. In its place have come loose aspirations linked to concepts of fairness and opportunity which have to be packaged for the electoral marketplace. It is no longer necessary to ask what the distant scene might be: one step at a time is enough. There remain within the party those attracted by a more transformative vision of a quasi-religious character but, so it appears, as a party of government Labour cannot succumb to such temptation. Around the centenary point, therefore, Socialism appears

[12] Keith Robbins, 'Stafford Cripps', in Kevin Jefferys, ed., *Labour forces: from Ernest Bevin to Gordon Brown* (London, 2002), pp. 69–70.

[13] Andrew Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British politics', *History*, 83 (1998), pp. 608–27.

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to have run its course as a 'ruling ideology' – though no one can say whether future circumstances might produce a reversion.

IV

In any case, whatever Socialism has been taken to entail, it is often stated that it was not a comprehensive doctrine which explained the party's appeal. It was as 'Labour' that the party expanded as the vehicle of the working class in the early twentieth-century era of 'class politics'. Much effort continues to be spent trying to identify when 'the working class' transferred allegiance from the Liberal party to the Labour party. However, while political historians have persisted in this quest, other scholars, however they label themselves, have ventured deep into the jungle of 'class'. The difficulty has then been to relate the complexity of the identities disclosed by such investigation to the dynamics of party development. Indeed, is it even meaningful to pose the question concerning 'transfer' at all in the form indicated?

One notable probe into what he calls the fundamental mentalities and structures of English society from the end of the First World War until the mid-1950s has been that undertaken by McKibbin whose general conclusion has already been cited. The challenge of the task is formidable if it is to be undertaken at all comprehensively. McKibbin takes it as axiomatic that England in this period was a country of social classes into which the English freely categorized themselves. He further states that these classes were not rigid and nor were all their respective members as one in how they saw the world. Even so, he claims that, as a categorizing principle, class was 'less flawed' than any other. That proposition is not a conclusion which stems from a comparison of such other categorizing principles as there might be, but one declared at the outset. In hierarchical fashion, the 'class' chapters move down from the 'upper class' through the 'middle class' to the 'working class'. He admits, however, that one might possibly speak about 'the middle classes', but so capacious is this category that he prefers not to do so. Two substantial chapters on 'the working class' deal illuminatingly respectively with employment and workplace issues and with domestic and 'neighbourly' relations. There is a categorization into a 'traditional' and a 'new' working class. These class categories are then followed by reflections on education, religion and belief, sexuality and morality, the sporting life, music, the cinema, radio, and language. There is, however, by deliberate omission, no consideration of high or party politics. So broad is McKibbin's canvas that it is difficult to relate his general – and by no means uncontentious – assessments to the specifics of party allegiance.

By contrast, in *The Lancashire working classes, c. 1880–1930*, Trevor Griffiths takes a very specific focus – not only Lancashire but basically two towns, Bolton and Wigan. Further, he is not only concerned with the formation of class identity, but relates it directly to electoral politics. The use of the plural in his title is very deliberate and whilst the details of his argument cannot be reproduced here, his conclusions should be noted. Class, as an influence affecting the choices made, from the workplace to the ballot box, was at best secondary. Religion and hierarchies of income and skill were more likely to shape the social and political dynamic. The working class, far from being 'remade' after 1880, remained fundamentally unaltered in its essential character. The Labour party, across large parts of Lancashire, had still to put down strong and durable social roots by 1931 (pp. 331–3). It is a conclusion which Griffiths believes obtained across most of Britain. His case is powerful in a specific setting. Whether it does indeed hold across most of Britain is another matter. A reading of these two books brings home the customary difficulty of applying the general to

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the local and moving from the local to the general. No doubt more work will be done in this area but those historians who do so will not be able to escape full immersion in the 'class' question.[14]

V

Whatever the party's ideology, whatever its social base, Labour, like any other party has had to be led. It may be coincidence, but the centenary has also seen the appearance of books which focus again on the role of individuals in Labour's history. Taken together, they remind us of the extent to which 'leadership' has been a peculiarly problematic concept for the party. It is not surprising that the figure of Ramsay MacDonald has continued to fascinate. In his study entitled *Labour in crisis: the second Labour government, 1919–1931* Neil Riddell suggests that he arguably 'had a greater hold on the Labour movement than any leader before or since' (p. 230). In that very fact, if we accept it as such, lay the dilemma. David Howell has elsewhere further explored the ironies to be found in the party's relationship with a man who was both the great exemplar and the great betrayer.[15] Could it ever place such trust in an individual ever again? The career of George Lansbury – 'at the heart of Old Labour' – has been in turn comprehensively examined. Lansbury had many attributes but it is scarcely conceivable that he would have led the party in any other circumstances than those which obtained when he took over.[16] Clement Attlee seemed to meet a need for leadership which disdained charisma and 'leadership qualities' as these had been conventionally identified.[17] Somehow, it seemed, Labour had to fashion a low-key style of leadership which would make it different from that exercised in other parties.[18] However, increasingly, the painful fact had also to be faced that a leader whose appeal was restricted to the party faithful would not gain Labour that electoral support which it needed. The sad reality appeared to be that at the end of the twentieth century there was no alternative to the projection of personality. Whatever the merits of the package presented as 'New Labour', it needed one 'commanding' individual to embody the new formula in a winning way. It is manifest, however, that the success which has been achieved, and the manner in which it has been achieved, has not removed the awkward echoes from the past. Whether the differences of outlook and origin, of policy and personality, still evident in the present jostling worlds of 'Old' and 'New' Labour will, at some stage, lead again to decline and fall no mere historian can say. It may be that in the new century, a way has been found which avoids that oscillation between implausible evolutionary optimism and bleak internal antagonism evident, at different times, in the history of last century's Labour.

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[14] P. Joyce, ed., *Class* (Oxford, 1995); M. Savage and A. Miles, eds., *The remaking of the British working class, 1840–1940* (London, 1994); and David Feldman, 'Class', in P. Burke, ed., *History and historians in the twentieth century* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 181–206.

[15] David Howell, *MacDonald's party: Labour identities and crisis, 1922–1931* (Oxford, 2002).

[16] John Shepherd, *George Lansbury: at the heart of Old Labour* (Oxford, 2002).

[17] Perusal of Keith Robbins, ed., *The Blackwell biographical dictionary of British political life in the twentieth century* (Oxford, 1990), however, may caution against any simple identification of such qualities.

[18] What this could entail in individual instances was examined by Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour people – leaders and lieutenants: Hardie to Kinnock* (Oxford, 1987), and recently by the contributors to Kevin Jefferys, ed., *Leading Labour: from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair* (London, 1999).

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