



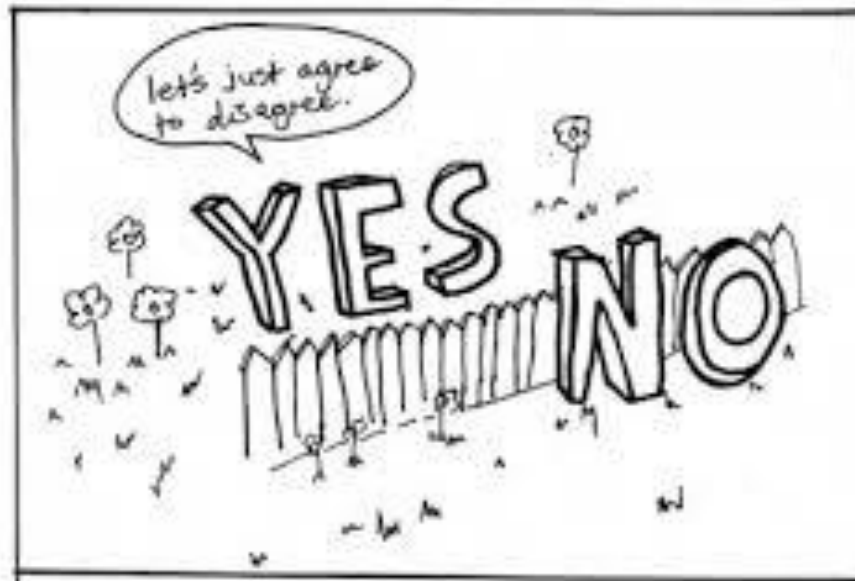
EALING  
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# The Making of Modern Britain 1951-2007



# Was there a Post-War Consensus?



*The Things  
Klein, Gold and Levine*

# Exam Practice...

\* 'There were more similarities than differences.' Assess the validity of this view of the policies of the Conservative and Labour parties in the years 1951 to 1964.

\* *(25 marks)*

# Labour's Legacy

- \* While there may be some legitimate criticisms of the Labour government regarding some policies there is a broader significance to this period. In governing during that period, Labour laid down the policies that were to be followed in all essentials by successive Labour and Conservative governments during the next 35 years. Until Thatcher came into power in 1979 and deliberately challenged this CONSENSUS, there was a BROAD LEVEL OF AGREEMENT on what were the major domestic and foreign issues and how they were to be handled.
- \* Britain of 1951 was shaped by its recent history:
- \* GREAT DEPRESSION OF 1930'S - regarded post WW2 as awful time of misery and mass unemployment, never to be repeated
- \* WORLD WAR - 'good war' where nation had come together to defeat the forces of evil by heroic national effort. Victory must lead to a fairer, better Britain
- \* REBUILDING OF BRITAIN UNDER ATTLEE'S GOVERNMENTS AND ESTABLISHMENT OF WELFARE STATE

# The Consensus...

- \* **ECONOMICS** - Keynesian principles of public expenditure and state direction, never more than 2% unemployment
- \* **WELFARE** - based on the implementation of the Beveridge Report.
- \* **EDUCATION** - based on the notion of creating equal opportunity for all.
- \* **FOREIGN AFFAIRS** - pro-American and anti-Soviet stance
- \* **IMPERIAL POLICIES** - principle of independence for Britain's former colonies.



# Why the consensus...

- \* Legacy of national unity
- \* 'Big government' - Conservatives convinced of need
- \* Full employment - post WW2 fears and didn't want to be seen as party of unemployment
- \* Importance of trade unions - Conservatives wanted a cooperative relationship
- \* Welfare State - implementation of Beveridge Report. NHS iconic and Conservatives had warmed to it
- \* Conservative majority was slender in Parliament - did not feel strong enough to dismantle Attlee legacy
- \* Mixed Economy - left most of Labour's nationalisations alone

# Why did the Conservatives continue Labour policies?

- \* There could be no outright rejection of the welfare state
- \* There could be no total reversal of nationalisation
- \* Experience of war had meant that people were far more ready to accept the need for state intervention and planning - attitudes towards industry, the trade unions and social policy were going to have to be very different from that of the 1930's
- \* NHS had already become iconic
- \* Just as Labour had moved to the right by accepting capitalism and the mixed economy, so the Conservatives moved to the left by accepting Keynesianism and the managed economy.

# Consensus

- \* Remember:
- \* Consensus is rather difficult to define - there were sharp policy differences, but also broad lines of convergence



# Consensus? Yes...

- \* Attlee's legacy - Labour's welfare policies were too successful eradicate so many Conservatives changed their minds and were less hostile towards the welfare state.
- \* Popularity of the NHS - Conservatives would commit social suicide if they revoked the NHS.
- \* Feeling of national unity after the war - wartime coalition ministers from all the major parties were more willing to cooperate with each other.
- \* "Big government" - many Conservatives were now convinced of the government intervention in social and economic policies. As a result, they were more in tune with public opinion and so accepted Labour's welfare policies, Nationalisation and Keynesian economics.
- \* Wanted to maintain full employment - Conservatives wanted to avoid being seen once again as the "party of mass unemployment", a key issue that led to their loss in the General Election in 1945.
- \* The Conservatives recognised the importance of the trade unions who had become very powerful and influential after Labour had nationalised key industries like the coal and railways.
- \* Conservative leaders didn't feel that they were in a strong enough position to dismantle the Attlee legacy and even if they did, there was the fear that the electorate would swing in Labour's favour.
- \* Labour proved that they did not want all-out socialism and accepted capitalism. Conservatives in turn saw the positives in nationalisation.
- \* *Addison - so it was right for coalition. There was a collective age of politics due to a shared experience of World War One.*
- \* *Seldon - broad agreement on the fundamentals of economic, social and foreign policies*

# Consensus? No...

- \* The Conservatives were quick to denationalise the steel industry and road transport in 1951.

- \* Right wing Conservatives frequently challenged Labour's policies such as Nationalisation.

- \* Left wing Labour Politicians disagreed with the fact that Attlee decided to side with the US instead of the Soviet Union - they believed that it was a wasted opportunity for Britain which could have become a communist state like the Soviet Union.

- \* *Pimlott - "we need to consider the possibility that the consensus is a mirage, an illusion that rapidly fades the closer one gets to it."*

# More interpretations...

- \* **Hennessey** - Attlee set foundation stone of all that is best about post war Britain 'the fusion of myriad hospitals and private practices into a National Health Service, the transfer of a workforce of 2.3 million people into nationalised industries, the Attlee government also took the first steps towards changing an empire into a Commonwealth
- \* **Lawson** - 'Attlee government of 1945-51 set the political agenda for the next quarter century. The two key principles which informed its actions and for which it stood, big government and the drive towards equality, remained virtually unchallenged for more than a generation, the very heart of the post-war consensus.'
- \* **Coates** - Attlee failed to bring about true socialism and lost an opportunity.
- \* **Barnett** - post war consensus was a mistaken policy, Conservatives should have broken from it sooner as it produced a 'nanny state' Britain overly dependent on welfarism. Thatcherism was a necessary correction of this problem. 'Illusion and the dreams of 1945 faded away one by one - the imperial and the Commonwealth role, the world power role, British industrial genius and the New Jerusalem itself, a dream turned to the dank reality of a segregated, sub-literate, unskilled, unhealthy and institutionalised working class, hanging on the nipple of state paternalism'