

History, heritage and tradition in
contemporary British politics

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Past politics and present histories

Emily Robinson

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Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>page</i> vii
Introduction	1
1 Ideology and temporality	18
2 Structures of memory: parties and their pasts	47
3 Against the tide of history: conservatism in the 1980s and 1990s	88
4 Negotiations with Labour's past: the SDP and New Labour	122
5 New times, new politics: the collapse of the CPGB's historical narrative	153
Conclusions	181
Bibliography	186
Index	205

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In memory of my grandmother, Dorothy Lewis

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Introduction

On 23 November 2010, Nick Clegg announced a new division in British politics: between ‘new progressives’ and ‘old progressives’. The first of these categories encompassed Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters of the new coalition government but explicitly excluded the Labour Party, who, Clegg warned, were ‘at risk of ... becoming the conservatives of British politics’.¹ More than a striking piece of wordplay, this was also an explicit attempt to redraw the dividing lines of British politics. ‘Old progressivism’ became, by implication, new conservatism; old conservatism was nowhere to be seen.

While Clegg’s words were part of an immediate political strategy of justifying the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, they also indicate a wider shift in political positioning. For over a year before this speech, Cameron’s Conservatives had been describing themselves as ‘a new generation of politicians’, to whom the ‘torch of progressive politics’ had been passed.² But although both Clegg and his Conservative coalition partners were laying claim to a very specific tradition of progressivism in British politics, they have also made efforts to dissociate themselves from the social democratic policies conventionally associated with this tradition. Instead, their ‘new progressivism’ seems above all to be a statement of temporal orientation, indicating an emphasis on optimism over pessimism and reform over conservation. This is indicative of a significant shift in the British political landscape, which began long before 2010.

In 1979 Henry Drucker set out his analysis of the ethos of the Labour Party (as distinct from its doctrine) under the chapter heading ‘The Uses of the Past’.³ This choice of words indicates the importance of the past to political positioning. It is generally accepted that Labour Party activists have, in the words of a more recent scholar, ‘always had an especially strong sense of their party as a historic “movement”, which must know its past in order to

2 • History, heritage and tradition

envisage its future'.⁴ Socialists' use of the past as a political resource is frequently set against Conservatives' veneration of the past for its own sake. Furthermore, while the right have claimed the *whole* past and attempted to speak for English (if not British⁵) history itself, the socialist left have carved out a particular niche, an oppositional, self-consciously 'alternative' narrative to set against this all-encompassing hegemony.

However, Drucker also noted a competing strand of thought within Labour: that of social democracy, which ignored the past in its struggle to appear "modern", "up-to-date", "*au fait*" and to present Labour as 'a party of the future'. Drucker felt that this attitude was 'in harmony with the dominant time-perspective of our age'.⁶ The contention of this book is that since Drucker wrote this in 1979, this attitude has come to dominate not only the Labour Party but the Conservative Party as well. However, far from ignoring the past, such an attitude seeks to use it as a way of affirming the present. Contrary to the conventional wisdom which presents contemporary party politics as ahistorical, it is clear that history remains an ever-present point of reference in political discourse, providing a source of lessons, warnings and precedents. This is in line with wider social attitudes towards history in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Britain, which think less in terms of betraying or honouring the past and more in terms of adapting and adopting it as a form of (often individualised) identity affirmation.

Previous understandings of the political past emphasised its capacity to make demands upon the present – for conservatives a duty of continuity and tradition; for progressives an obligation to right past wrongs. Both of these traditions were able to offer powerful critiques of the present, yet both have now been sidelined in favour of a present-focused view of the past as 'heritage', which can be embraced or rejected as politically expedient. 'History' is no longer viewed as a political force – providing deliverance, conveying inheritance – instead, it is a tool to be mastered. This leaves contemporary politicians unable to speak of radically different futures. By imagining the present as 'the same old thing', they also imagine 'making history' (i.e. making the future) as making *more of the same*.

As will be clear throughout this study, this convergence in the parties' attitudes to time should be understood as part of a wider shift in their political positioning and particularly in the way in which they conceive their roles within national politics and national history. The division between the Conservatives and Labour can no longer be characterised as the party of 'national' versus 'sectional'

interest, of 'elite' versus 'marginalised' history. Both parties now compete for the same place in the national story and both have consequently adopted a similar approach to the past. However, the parties' narratives of their histories are increasingly becoming the preserve of an interested minority of partisans who have more in common with one another than with the wider population.

Both of these observations have their parallels in the studies of political scientists. In 1966, Otto Kirchheimer suggested that in the post-war years mass parties began to play down their sectional class appeal and instead aimed to be national 'catch-all' parties, which could appeal across the social spectrum.⁷ More recently, Katz and Mair have argued that Kirchheimer's catch-all parties have now become 'cartel parties', which are entrenched in the state but distant from civil society. According to this model, the political elite from all parties colludes in order to protect their own privileged position within the state.⁸ In our story, this could be transposed to the parties' positions within a rarefied historical narrative of parliamentary politics, perpetuated across the political spectrum. Lawrence Black has shown that in the late 1950s and 1960s party politics became an increasingly marginal activity, estranged from popular culture and treated with cynicism and derision when not ignored altogether. The parties responded by attempting to utilise and ape popular culture, using celebrity supporters, market research and modern advertising techniques.⁹

History as culture

There is a close relationship between ideology and history. At the most obvious level, this plays itself out in politically slanted interpretations of the nation's past. At its most profound, it shapes beliefs about the historical process. However, in the period under scrutiny in this volume, history and heritage have also become increasingly important components of popular culture, part of the cultural landscape which politicians must negotiate. As Raphael Samuel noted, the late twentieth century was marked by an increasing public interest in the past – from 'retrochic' to the 'heritage industry'.¹⁰ More recently Jerome de Groot has added TV historians, historical re-enactments and history-themed computer games to this list.¹¹ However, this very interest has also been seen to be a symptom of decreasing 'connection' with the past.

These arguments were particularly explicit in France, around the bicentenary of the 1789 Revolution and in the seven-volume

4 • History, heritage and tradition

discussion of public memory organised by the historian Pierre Nora.¹² In Britain, they coalesced around questions of the conservation of historic buildings and the consequent growth of a commercialised 'heritage industry', with a particular emphasis on industrial heritage. Commentators such as Robert Hewison saw this as a desperate and disingenuous search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless post-modern world. Desperate because it was associated with the sense that the past as a living memory was disappearing and must be caught and fixed before it did; disingenuous because this was a sanitised past of quaint interiors and supposedly traditional values, in which hardship, poverty and misery became little more than tourist attractions.¹³ The fear was that memory was becoming 'historicised' and the living past was becoming 'heritage' – closed off from the present and of interest only as a reminder of 'the way we were'.

Such critiques have been particularly associated with the left. The debates over the 'heritage industry' were sharpened by its association with the Thatcher governments' commercialising approach to culture and political mobilisation of narratives about the national past. Patrick Wright's text *On Living in an Old Country* is a wonderful example of this genre.¹⁴ However, the complaint that Labour was losing touch with traditions of working-class solidarity dates back almost as long as the labour movement itself, and became particularly prevalent in the post-war years, when Labour-in-parliament seemed to replace Labour-in-society. Running alongside the narrative of modernisation and popularisation was the perennial lament that popular culture was not what it had been and that left politics, working-class identity and indigenous culture had lost out in the process.

More recently, Martin L. Davies has discussed the 'historicisation' of society, whereby history has become the dominant mode of thinking, yet because it encompasses everything, it also means nothing.¹⁵ This historical attitude can be seen in British party politics. The past is called upon to provide lessons (was Brown following Callaghan's mistake in not calling an election in autumn 2007?), to confer legitimacy (monetarism as 'Victorian values') and to demonstrate continuity (abandoning Marxism as itself 'Marxian' in spirit). Yet, by its very malleability, and its ubiquity, the political past has ceased to exist as either a radical or a conservative force. Instead, a rather general sense of continuity is invoked in the service of the present. In a culture in which antiquity is coded as authenticity – from estate agents' brochures to vintage clothing boutiques¹⁶ – a link with the past is a valuable political commodity.

British political parties provide a particularly interesting study in this respect because they are relatively stable as mnemonic groups – as communities bound together by a sense of collective memory. The procedures and processes of parliament positively encourage a sense of lived continuity with the past and the parties themselves remain recognisably consistent as political institutions. Moreover, unlike pressure groups and social movements, the subject of a great deal of academic interest in recent decades, parties are also unusually interested in the means by which they will *become History* (emphatically with a capital H). As we will see in Chapter 2, parties occupy an unusual position between top-down elite history and bottom-up collective memory. Whilst high-politics parliamentary narratives remain firmly lodged in the ‘official’ story of British history, it is also clear that as levels of party affiliation continue to decline, parties’ institutional pasts become further removed from the mainstream cultural memory of the nation. Neither trade union banners nor Primrose League pins now resonate with large sections of the population. Indeed, it is not fanciful to suggest that in terms of narrative memory, the parties have more in common with one another than with the wider public. Although party political interpretations of the past are often in direct competition with one another – both between and within parties – it is also clear that they (mostly) function within an overarching mnemonic framework; they are retellings of the same stories from different perspectives.

It is striking that what we might call the emotional side of political identity – both personal and collective – is often expressed through discourse about the past. History is used as a proxy for emotion. The flipside of this, as we will see in relation to New Labour, is that references to the past can be interpreted and presented as intrinsically emotional, sentimental and hence irrational, even when they are part of a conversation about policy and ideology, focused on the options for the future. Whilst parties and politicians are expected to remain ‘true’ to their pasts – thus demonstrating continuity, integrity, authenticity – they must also demonstrate that they are of their time, in tune with time and have time on their side. The awkwardness of this juggling act is demonstrated by the title of an event held in June 2009 by New Labour pressure group Progress: ‘Focus on the fourth term: where have we come from and how can we get there?’¹⁷ In many ways, the particular pasts to which parties and individuals must be ‘true’ matters less than a general sense of rootedness. In popular culture, discovering one’s roots has become a means of self-authentication almost (it seems) regardless of what those particular

roots are.¹⁸ Peter Mandler suggests that tracing a connection to even 'very remote ancestors provide[s] a more individualised form of identity, better suited to a highly individualised society than the traditional markers of identity, class, religion or nation'.¹⁹ This rarely, if ever, imposes obligations upon the descendant but is instead a means of enhancing their sense of self.

Mandler suggests that the appeal of such history is rather different from its older, nationalist forms, which relied upon establishing a linear narrative with ourselves as (he quotes Richard Evans), 'the end product of a process of becoming'. Instead, 'The new appeal of history has more to do with people rejecting their "place", seeing themselves as artists of their own becoming, and using history imaginatively to assist in that process'.²⁰ As we will see throughout this study political approaches to the past are rather caught between these two forms. On the one hand, individual politicians and activists may be interested in establishing 'connections' with their forbears, picking and choosing from a range of possible inspirations and political identities; on the other, the political present is also imagined as part of a rather more whiggish linear historical narrative. It is, in other words, continually constructed as 'historic'.

Politics as history

While for the historicised society *everything* is history, it is also the case that some things are seen to be more 'historic' than others. Parliamentary politics is resolutely one of those things, as seen in E.A. Freeman's maxim that 'history is past politics, and that politics are present history', from which the sub-title of this book is drawn. This view may be outmoded among academic historians, to the extent that proponents of the 'new political history' have had to defend their decision to study politics at all,²¹ yet it forms the staple of public and political conceptions of 'the historic'. The everyday language of parliamentary politics revels in declarations of historic missions – whether to tackle climate change, bring democracy to Eastern Europe or eradicate child poverty.²² It is not enough to make a political pledge to reduce child poverty; it must, instead be an 'historic commitment' – even if the particular target is unachievable.

These could be seen as attempts to pre-empt history, to project the present moment into a history not yet written. But the present can only be presented as historic if it is set within a temporal framework, leading from a receding past towards a still malleable future. To be historic is to be part of an ongoing historical narrative. There is also

a powerful sense that *marking* history is somehow historic in and of itself. For instance, Margaret Thatcher declared the fiftieth anniversary of Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister as itself one of the many 'historic events' to have taken place in 10 Downing Street.²³

Political memory also operates with a keen regard for the formalities and authority of professional history. Political actors are not only aware of their role in history as *what has happened*, they are also intensely aware that they will be part of history as *what is written about what has happened*. We will see in Chapter 2 that party archives are maintained through a general sense of obligation to historians of the future, rather than as a practical aspect of political operations or even as a mode of identity affirmation. At the same time, however, a large number of politicians have engaged in historical research, most often biographies of their political forebears, and the party history groups are well attended. By these means political actors set themselves in the context of an ongoing, familiar, narrative. Moreover, Oliver Daddow describes the way in which political actors attempt to write the 'first "cut" of history' by publishing 'retrospective justifications of their opinions, decisions and policies, in the form of diaries, memoirs and autobiographies' during the time in which official documents remain closed to scholars. Daddow believes that this puts historians 'on the back foot' as 'the texture and shape of scholarly debates' has already been determined by the way in which policy-makers are able to 'foreground' particular events and 'forget' others.²⁴

Within the wider mnemonic activities of the parties (history groups, written histories, commemorative projects), great respect is accorded to professional historians. For instance, Dianne Hayter felt that in order for her history of Labour's right wing in the 1970s and 1980s to be authoritative, it needed to be a PhD project.²⁵ Similarly, Professor Penelope J. Corfield described the way in which members of Battersea Labour Party's centenary DVD project were happy to allow her to shape the narrative of the party's history because they trusted her skills as a professional historian. This is all discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. It is, however, worth noting that at an event discussing the Battersea DVD, Corfield asked Tony Belton, veteran leader of the Wandsworth Labour Group, how it felt seeing himself 'rendered into history on film' and thus *becoming* 'an historical personage'.²⁶ This is a particularly explicit statement of the complicated interaction between politics as present-action and politics as future-history: it is through becoming enshrined in narrative that politics becomes 'historical'. Looking at this from the

other direction, Edwina Currie has justified publishing her diaries which reveal her affair with John Major on the grounds that 'It is history; it is a part of history.'²⁷ The implication is that the leaders of national parties are necessarily 'part of history'; they are part of a historical narrative which is already in progress and have the advantage of attempting to shape it as they go through.

Re-using the mould?

The principal focus of this study is the period from 1979 to 2010, dominated by the Thatcher and Blair governments. This period was marked by its claims to novelty. The late 1970s and early 1980s were constructed by contemporaries as a break with the past, from Stuart Hall's assessments of the new terrain of Thatcherism to the feeling of some right-wingers that changes in the politics and procedures of the Labour Party justified the founding of a new Social Democratic Party (SDP). The subsequent period is seen to mark the end of post-war Keynesianism, the rise of neo-liberalism and the collapse of communism; all of the major political parties in Britain underwent substantial organisational and political change and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) disbanded completely. None of these events should be understood as self-contained, but rather as much longer-term processes with roots in the 1950s and – ultimately – in the early decades of the twentieth century.²⁸ It is striking how often debates about 'the past' in this period revolve around the period at the end of the First World War, when the Labour's Party Constitution was drawn up, the Communist Party of Great Britain was established and the Lib-Lab alliance of the Edwardian period came to an end. The other 'past' is the post-war settlement, seen variously as the founding moment of modern Britain, the cementing of the Labour Party as a serious national force, an unrepeatable moment of popular socialism, a lost opportunity for genuine radicalism and a dreadful mistake.

The wider context of the book therefore stretches back into the earlier twentieth century. However, as will be clear from the arguments presented below, it is in the years after 1979 that these longer-term changes became solidified. This is when the new right strain of Conservative thought, visible from the 1950s, came to dominate not only the party but also the country. It is when Labour revisionism became (New) Labour orthodoxy. And it is when the 'history boom' of the later twentieth century reached saturation point. It is also clear that the relationship between people and politics

shifted in this period. The alignment of voters along class and partisan lines broke down in the 1970s and while concerns about public disengagement from the political process were audible in earlier periods, it was in the 1990s and 2000s that they became deafening.

The causality of the relationship between cultural and political changes is opaque and it is likely that the work of unpicking the interaction between the two will continue for some time yet. What is clear, however, is that political actors in this period were self-consciously constructing themselves, their actions and their circumstances as novel, historic and unprecedented. The declared intention to 'break the mould' of politics was particularly common in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Stuart Hall used the phrase in relation to Thatcher in 1978 and it was later adopted by the SDP.²⁹ This speaks of a desire to break out of the existing narrative of political history, to take a new course. The rhetoric of 'new politics' was evident as well, used by the CPGB modernisers and Tony Blair, long before Cameron and Clegg.³⁰ Yet, at the same time, efforts were made to convey the historical roots of these supposedly radical departures – witness the convoluted attempts to place Thatcher within either the traditions of conservatism or liberalism (or both!). Even New Labour, though explicitly devised to demonstrate discontinuity with Labour's past, was quick to claim the legitimacy of the 1945 government and to portray itself as a return to an older form of socialism, based on the co-operative movement and the 'historic progressive consensus' with radical liberalism.

Davies' analysis of the historicised society shows how it inevitably reduces new events to 'the same old thing' by setting them in a historical framework and showing that this is really a story we already know.³¹ Thus, the 2010 General Election was proclaimed to be 'an historic moment', or rather, an extended series of historic moments: from the first televised leaders' debate³² right through to *that* handshake outside Number 10.³³ At the 'historic' press conference in the Rose Garden, the new Prime Minister announced that he would be taking the country in 'a historic new direction' as leader of the 'historic Liberal Democrat–Conservative administration'.³⁴ Yet, for all the attempts to proclaim 2010 as a wholly new departure, media reports were also saturated with historical comparisons. Thus, we had the first hung parliament *since 1974*, the first coalition government and first Liberals in government *since 1945*, the Conservatives' largest gains *since 1931* and Labour's lowest share of the vote *since 1983*. The BBC's election coverage involved Jeremy