

Account for Labour's victory in the 1945 General Election

Labour's 'landslide' victory in the 1945 general election – they won 393 seats to the Conservatives' 197¹ – was unexpected in that it came immediately after Britain's victory in the Second World War, and amidst high approval ratings for Winston Churchill, the Conservative Prime Minister². A number of factors explain this victory, with the key being the popular mood for social and economic reform revealed by Mass Observation reports³, and articulated most coherently in the seminal Beveridge Report of 1943; the key points of the report, set alongside the wishes of the British people, will be explained. Consequently, Labour won because it made itself the most credible option in relation to the delivery of these desires, and was most capable out of the two main parties at providing an answer to the widespread public cynicism⁴ – comprised of a fear that the suggested reforms would not be implemented – that arose alongside the publication of Beveridge's report. Additional factors, all of which feed in to the fundamental importance of Beveridge's report in this analysis, include the contrasting notion that the Conservatives failed to reflect the popular mood, and its inability to appear genuine, the fact that the electoral campaign of Labour was far more effective than that of the Conservatives, and finally, that the Conservatives were blamed for many of the failures of the inter-war period. In constructing this argument, I will draw upon the work of the likes of Field⁵, Brooke⁶, Jeffreys⁷ and Jones⁸, to show that the alternative 'Apathy School' analysis of the 1945 election – that Labour only won because it was the only realistic alternative to the distrusted and unpopular Conservatives – made by the likes of Addison⁹ and Fielding¹⁰, is false.

¹ Geoffrey Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p 367

² *Ibid*, p 359

³ M-OA: FR 1783, 'Social security and Parliament' (17 May 1943).

⁴ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, (London: Pimlico, 2008), p 536

⁵ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*

⁶ Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party during the Second World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992)

⁷ Kevin Jeffreys, *The Churchill coalition and wartime politics, 1940-1945*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991)

⁸ H. Jones, 'The Conservative Party and the welfare state', PhD Diss., London University, 1992. (Accessed at: <http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do>, 9/12/16)

⁹ Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British politics and the Second World War*, (London: Pimlico, 1995)

¹⁰ Steven Fielding, 'What did "the people" want?: The meaning of the 1945 general election', *The Historical Journal*, 35, no 3 (1992),

Firstly, the publication of the Beveridge Report in 1943 was significant in that it was immediately extremely popular with the public, with 100,000 copies sold in its first month, 95% of people having heard of it two weeks after its release, and 86 per cent of people favouring its implementation¹¹. Mackay highlights the basic premise of Beveridge's Report; which was essentially a proposal to introduce 'subsistence benefits for all within a unified system of compulsory social insurance'. Benefits for unemployment, ill-health, old age, maternity, orphanhood, industrial injury and widowhood would be offered in exchange for a universal weekly flat-rate contribution. Additionally, a 'national minimum' of income was guaranteed if the need arose. Beveridge asserted that his system would depend on action by government to maintain full employment, introduce family allowances, and to establish a national health service¹². The report fed into what Field terms a 'loosely conceived social democratic reform agenda' amongst the public, with three themes made clear by surveys; expansion of social services, the obligation of the State to maintain full employment, and confidence in social engineering and planning¹³. Indeed, in articulating the results of surveys that took place between September and October 1942 – a year before the publication of the report – Mass Observation asserts that they 'clearly' showed how close the report was to 'pre-formed ideas' for change¹⁴. Public opinion was further stimulated by what Field describes as 'intense' coverage of Beveridge's report in the media; with most papers across the political divide endorsing it¹⁵. Beveridge himself used language – such as talking of the 'Five Giants' of 'Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness' that must be 'slain' – which went beyond the technical proposals of his report; this only heightened the fervour around its publication¹⁶. Given the popularity of Beveridge's report, it is fair to argue that there was a latent feeling of desire for change amongst the public, and that its policy proposals were popular for that reason. Therefore, Fielding's analysis that the 1945 election was played out amidst an environment of 'disengagement' and apathy, with Labour merely being the fortunate beneficiary of anti-Conservative feeling¹⁷, is unconvincing; there was a clear desire

¹¹ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*, p. 336

¹² Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian morale in Britain during the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p

¹³ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*, p. 341

¹⁴ M-OA: FR 1783, 'Social security and Parliament' (17 May 1943).

¹⁵ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, p 336

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 339

¹⁷ Steven Fielding, 'What did "the people" want?', p 639

for change, and victory would ultimately come by persuasively and convincingly converging with that desire.

However, alongside the public fervour that was made obvious by the publication of the Beveridge Report was a feeling of public cynicism; that the Report would never be implemented. According to a Government intelligence report published in 1942, this cynicism was 'very real', with the fear being that because of 'vested interests' – such as big business – the plan 'will not materialise'¹⁸. There was the additional fear that a similar scenario to the aftermath of World War One would develop, that promises of post-war reconstruction would be left unfilled. One former soldier said that the plan 'makes me laugh; I don't forget the Land Fit for Heroes of the last war'¹⁹. Amidst this cynicism, as Mackay notes, the 'perceived attitude' of politicians was crucial to gaining the trust of voters that would lead into the '45 election, and it was the Labour party that was able to capitalise on this²⁰. First of all, in the debates of February 1943, ninety-seven Labour backbench MPs, led by James Griffiths, rebelled against the Government's lukewarm position on Beveridge, with only two voting with the Government; this helped to solidify Labour's association with Beveridge's report in the public's eyes²¹. In addition, prior to Beveridge, Labour had consistently argued for reforms similar to those found in the Report; its 'Immediate Programme', put forward in 1937, included measures to advance 'Socialism', 'Peace', and 'Democracy', and specific promises related to 'Reconstruction' and 'Food', 'Wages', 'Leisure' and 'Security'²². Field asserts that, by the outbreak of the War, Labour had 'gone far towards developing the ideas for economic management and blueprints for social legislation that formed the basis of the programme it put forward after 1945'²³. Perhaps most significant was the fact that Labour had consistently held to the line that, alongside planning for war, plans had to be made for peace, and it was under this condition that it entered Churchill's coalition in May 1940²⁴. Indeed, Atlee had raised the spectre of "derelict areas, derelict industries, derelict human beings", when he talked of remembering "what

¹⁸ H. I. Weekly Report, 1–8 December 1942, INF 1/292. In: Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p 246

¹⁹ H. I. Weekly Report, 8–15 December 1942, INF 1/292. In: Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p 246

²⁰ Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p 234

²¹ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p 224

²² The Labour Party. 1937. *Labour's Immediate Programme*. Available at: <http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A4474> [Accessed: 12/12/16]

²³ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*, p 345

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 346

happened at the end of the last war”; and it was clear that he was attempting to assuage public cynicism by asserting that things would be different²⁵. Field goes as far to say that Labour had such success with associating itself convincingly with the Beveridge Report – such as by ‘orchestrating a great deal of [media] coverage’ for it – that it ended up ‘in effect appropriating it’²⁶. Furthermore, the more convincing image that Labour was building in relation to Beveridge was helped further by the ‘countless lectures and debates’ organised by civic associations, labour organisations and women’s groups, with the rise in publicity around Beveridge most probably being automatically associated with Labour, even when not all publicity would have been driven by the efforts of the Labour Party itself. The impact of war itself also helped Labour to be the more natural choice in relation to delivering Beveridge, because it demonstrated that policies of economic planning and social engineering – imposed during war and proposed by Beveridge and Labour – could be successful²⁷.

By contrast, the Conservative party failed to align with the popular mood that was latent both before and after the publication of the Beveridge report. Firstly, it was Conservative ministers during the February debates of 1943 who seemed most indifferent to the plan, thus helping to form a negative image in the minds of voters. Calder highlights how figures such as Sir John Anderson, the Chancellor, ‘lingered, with apparent satisfaction, over the financial perils of the plan’, to the extent that the subsequent backbench revolt by forty-five Conservative MPs ‘did as much as anything to bring about the Labour Party’s electoral victory in 1945.’²⁸ Similarly, the failure of Conservative members of the wartime Government to guarantee that the report would be enacted, went some way, in Field’s view, to ‘revitalising partisan politics’ and ‘galvanising the opposition’, thus inviting voters to make a judgement on the relative positions of both parties²⁹. In addition, Jeffreys argues that the swing to Labour caused by the hardships of the war years was not unchallengeable, but that the mere ‘lip-service’ paid to post-war reform by the Conservatives resulted in their ‘crushing defeat at the polls’. He cites opinion polls from 1943, showing a Labour lead of around ten per cent, and argues that anti-Conservative ‘sentiments’ became ‘so pronounced

²⁵ Brooke, *Labour’s War*, p 42

²⁶ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil*, p 354

²⁷ *Ibid*, p 341

²⁸ Calder, *The People’s War*, p 531

²⁹ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, p 340

as to be unmistakable³⁰. In essence therefore, whilst the Labour party appeared to be both genuinely capable and willing to implement the promised reforms of Beveridge, the Conservatives failed to demonstrate a similarly convincing commitment, and were also handicapped by the hardships of war, which caused voters to gravitate leftwards towards Labour.

The formal election campaign began upon the breakup of the wartime Coalition on the 23rd May 1945, with polling day set for the 5th of July. The Labour Party had the advantages explained above of appearing to be more genuine, but its campaign was also more successful in a number of ways. Firstly, Labour had been building up the structural resources necessary for an election campaign since the start of the wartime coalition. It had an intention from the start of the War for its local branches to continue their social and political activities as 'close to normal levels as possible', and therefore they maintained – by holding meetings and publishing pamphlets – at least some semblance of political activity. Similarly, their annual conferences continued during wartime³¹. By contrast, the Conservative Party's local associations 'met infrequently or suspended operations altogether', the Conservative Research Department closed down, and its party conference in 1943 was the first since 1937³². Therefore, Labour was in a far better position to mobilise voters in advance of their cause, and they had better developed local structures; whereas the Conservatives did not.

Secondly, Field asserts that Labour's manifesto – in offering a 'comprehensive programme' of social security, housing, full employment, healthcare, and a commitment to economic planning and ownership of specific industries – was 'intelligent and well executed with a clear and consistent message'³³. It aimed at a cross-class appeal by appearing both sufficiently radical to appeal to Labour voters and also offering moderate pragmatism to appeal to middle-class voters who would ordinarily have voted Conservative. For example, there was an average swing of 12 per cent to Labour³⁴, and Jeffreys highlights the significant

³⁰ Jeffreys, *The Churchill coalition and wartime politics*, p 150

³¹ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, p 351

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid, p 360

³⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation. 1997. *5th July 1945*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/background/pastelec/ge45.shtml> [Accessed: 13th December 2016]

gains Labour made among 'skilled workers and lower middle-class voters, many of whom had no previous pattern of support for the party'³⁵. Touching on this, a July 1945 edition of *The Economist* notes that, 'The greatest paradox of British politics in the past quarter century—the faithfulness to the Tories of the propertyless lower-middle class—is at an end... the middle class is voting Labour, and Socialism is now respectable'³⁶. In offering this well-articulated programme which converged with the aims of Beveridge, it is clear that Addison's view – that electoral victory fell 'like a branch of ripe plums into the lap of Mr Atlee'³⁷ – is difficult to sustain; instead, their campaign was clearly the result of preparation and planning.

By contrast, the Conservatives' manifesto was a 'rushed job and vague on details'. Rather than focussing on the issues that voters had deemed important through their endorsement of the Beveridge Report, much of their campaign rested on both a denunciation of Labour's popular socialist-style solutions, and an over-reliance on Churchill's popularity. For example, the manifesto was titled, 'Mr Churchill's Declaration of Policy to the Electors' and contained several warnings against Labour's 'socialism' whilst also advocating an end to the wartime use of economic planning³⁸. The vague commitments that were made to a 'high and stable level of employment', amongst other similarly vague promises, were in stark contrast to Labour's manifesto³⁹. This inevitably failed to strike a positive note with voters, given their aspirations for post-war reconstruction. The reliance on Churchill is picked up by a number of writers, with Calder saying that the party used his image like 'naked heathens' when they 'spurned an ignored' him in the 1930s⁴⁰. It certainly appears to have been a mistake for the party to rely on its links with him, given that he had spent a long time out of the party entirely, and had been unpopular in Parliament in the run-up to the War, and therefore his personal popularity was no guarantee that voters would choose the Conservative Party in the election. Indeed, Field notes the 'deceptive' approval ratings of Churchill – standing at 83% in 1945 – in that they were linked inextricably with his performance in wartime, rather

³⁵ Jefferys, *The Churchill coalition and wartime politics*, p 200

³⁶ *The Economist* (London, England), Saturday, July 28, 1945; pg. 105; Issue 5318

³⁷ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p 14

³⁸ Politicalresources.net. 2012. *Conservative Party 1945*. Available at: <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/con45.htm> [Accessed: 13th December 2016]

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Calder, *The People's War*, p 575

than the expectations of his virtues as a peacetime leader⁴¹. Churchill was also guilty of perpetrating a now infamous 'gaffe' of – when broadcasting on the radio during the campaign – invoking the spectre of Labour needing to 'fall back on some kind of the Gestapo' in order to enact its policies. This harsh comparison against a wartime colleague was, says Mass Observation, treated with 'genuine distress' by voters, and it perhaps reinforced the view that Churchill was unsuitable as a peacetime leader, but its significance in the wider context of the Conservatives' other failings outlined above, is perhaps limited⁴².

Further, Labour's use during the campaign of propaganda appears to have been more effective than that of the Conservatives. Newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* gave the Labour Party consistent support from 1938⁴³, and allowed 'extensive coverage to leading Labour figures' on the lines of social democratic reform⁴⁴. In addition, nearly all the popular cartoonists of the time, such as David Low and George Whitelaw, were explicitly pro-Labour, and Low's cartoons even featured in the *London Evening Standard*, which was owned by Lord Beaverbrook, who was a declared Conservative, as well as also being the owner of the pro-Conservative *Daily Express*. Similarly, Addison notes the concomitant 'radical' tone of much of the arts, such as Allen Lane, owner of Penguin Books, Tom Hopkinson and Edward Hulton, with Lane saying, 'we were against the privileged classes'. Addison says that these books created 'an ideology' for a 'generation of labour activists'⁴⁵. Overall therefore, the respective electoral campaigns of the Conservatives and Labour – with Labour's being more effective, convincing, and organised around the issues of Beveridge – contribute to the explanation of Labour's victory.

A final significant reason for Labour's victory in the 1945 General Election was the fact that the Conservative Party were in government for nearly the entire inter-war period and were therefore held responsible by many for the failure of Appeasement, the economic hardship during the 1930s, and the failure to fulfil promises of reconstruction following the First World War. The Labour Party effectively exploited this latent feeling, with Field noting that

⁴¹ Field, *Blood, Sweat and Tears*, p 359

⁴² M-OA: FR 2270A, 'The General Election 1945' (July 1945)

⁴³ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p 151

⁴⁴ Field, *Blood Sweat and Toil*, p 364

⁴⁵ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p 153-4

papers such as the *Daily Mirror* focussed on the ‘betrayal of 1918 and starving Jarrow’, as well as the ‘guilty Appeasers’⁴⁶. The *Mirror* also referred to Rab Butler, a Conservative minister, as having been ‘up to his neck’ in appeasement, in the ‘lamentable “Trust Hitler – Trust Mussolini” period of our political history’⁴⁷. Mass Observation also recorded ill-feeling towards appeasement, with one person saying that the election was about being against ‘Mr Chamberlain and all that he stood for.’⁴⁸ Atlee himself alluded to the failures of peace planning, talking of a ‘conspiracy of greedy men’ wanting to ‘do what their predecessors did in 1919’⁴⁹. Field also contrasts Labour’s campaign built around the idea of a ‘People’s Peace’, with the ‘bleak images of pre-war unemployment’, demonstrating that the choice for voters was an easy one⁵⁰. Similarly, Fielding refers to the ‘level of disenchantment’ with the mainly Conservative interwar governments, and references Gallup polls taken between 1943 and 1945, showing support for the Labour party amongst up to 42 per cent of those interviewed as a result⁵¹. The economic hardships of the 1930s also generated hostility to notions of the ‘free market’ advanced in the Conservative manifesto, which were thought to have led to the pre-war mass unemployment. It was, says Fielding, something that cast ‘a long shadow’ over the whole campaign, and contrasts were easy between the aforementioned optimistic promises of post-war reconstruction made by Labour and the ambivalence to similar policies on the Conservative side⁵². Overall, Labour benefitted from being out of power during the interwar period, and were therefore not able to be held responsible by voters for perceived failings. The Conservatives, rightly or wrongly, were associated with said failings, and did little to counter this association, either in their manifesto or general attitude towards Beveridge.

In conclusion, all the points mentioned go some way to repudiating the view expressed by the likes of Fielding and Addison, that the ‘45 election was played out amidst general apathy, with Labour being the fortunate beneficiaries. It has been shown that the central reason for Labour’s victory was its convincing convergence with the popular mood that had

⁴⁶ Field, *Blood Sweat and Tears*, p 365

⁴⁷ *The Daily Mirror* (London, England), Wednesday, 27th June 1945; page 2

⁴⁸ M-OA: FR 2270, ‘The General Election 1945’

⁴⁹ *The Daily Herald* (London, England), Wednesday, 20th June 1945; Issue 9147

⁵⁰ Field, *Blood Sweat and Tears*, p 372

⁵¹ Fielding, ‘What did “the people” want?’, p 629

⁵² *Ibid*, p 635

been evident for post-war reconstruction, and which was articulated in detail with the publication of the Beveridge Report. Whilst the Labour Party had a consistent record of policy proposals which addressed the desires of the British people, the Conservative Party did not, and paid mere 'lip service' to the desire for reform. The actual election campaign of Labour – centred around a consistent message of post-war reconstruction – was more issue-focused than that of the Conservatives, who relied on their tenuous links with the personal popularity of Winston Churchill, and also failed to maintain levels of party organisation during wartime, whereas Labour did. Churchill's mistake in warning of the dangers of socialism and in comparing Labour to the Gestapo was not overly significant in the context of their other failings and Labour's other advantages, but it fed into the public mood that the Conservatives were not credible. The failings of the inter-war period, during which the Conservatives were in charge, are also important in that they further highlight the central issues of post-war reconstruction and Beveridge which were central to all the reasons outlined above for Labour's victory.

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