

CHAPTER I

POLITICAL CONFLICT

I. POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

The stuff of politics consists of the ideas and prejudices in the minds of politicians. What it is in their minds is, however, not very different from what is in the minds of their constituents. Though the *corpus* of knowledge and experience in the mind of one man differs from that in the mind of another, there is in our modern society a large common element, due to the fact that parents, schools and churches teach very much the same things and that newspapers, magazines, books and broadcasts publish much the same ideas. There are of course variations between one family and another, one school and another, one newspaper and another, and so forth. Personal experience is more varied: but ease of communication in modern Britain has tended to diminish variations in the environment. We recognise at once the different environmental influences on, let us say, Mr Harold Macmillan and the late Mr Aneurin Bevan, but they would have been far greater if they had been born a century earlier. What is more, they would probably have been less if both had been born forty years later, because both would probably be distinguished members of the Oxford Union Society. Mr Macmillan at Eton would have obtained even the higher qualifications which Balliol College now insists upon; and Mr Bevan would have obtained very similar qualifications at his grammar school and have been very acceptable to an Oxford college.

This increasing uniformity of opinion is politically important. It helps, for instance, towards the stability of the party system. It is not so important in relation to the stuff of politics because politicians have always been drawn from the educated class, among whom there always have been methods of communication. Possibly we tend to assume too readily that the members for the Cornish boroughs and those for the Yorkshire boroughs in the Long Parliament had identical ideas. Clearly they had much in common because the invention of printing in the fifteenth century and the growing circulation of literature, the develop-

POLITICAL CONFLICT

ment of the grammar and other schools under the Tudors, the use of the universities and the inns of court for the education of laymen, the circuits of the judges and the meetings in quarter sessions, and above all the comparatively frequent meetings of Parliament since Henry VIII had enabled ideas to be shared. Even if there were greater differences among the country gentry than there are now among the members of the Conservative party, however, there was a very solid core of common ideas. Much of it came from the universities and the inns of court, where people chatted over their drinks much as they do now. Nor were there divergences at later times. It is not at all easy to separate the 'landed interest' from the 'mercantile interest'. There were eccentrics like John Wilkes in one century and Keir Hardie in the next, but even they shared most of their ideas with their contemporaries. The essential factor in the rise of the Labour party is that the trade-union leaders had been to board schools and could read newspapers. Most of the active politicians have in fact read the same sort of literature as the Conservative and Liberal politicians, even though they had much less formal education.¹

Because party politics gives an impression of perpetual conflict, it is necessary to insist upon the solid core of accepted ideas. It is perhaps more obvious to one who has lived in an Asian country in which there is a large English-educated class. At first he seems to be, at least intellectually, very much at home. Further experience qualifies this impression. First, he finds that the ideas which he shares are limited to the English-educated class. Indeed, the gulf which separates the ideas of those educated in English and those not so educated is an important political factor which has no parallel in Britain. Secondly, he finds that there are important differences relating to family life, social relations, religion, communal relations, relations with servants, etc. Ceylon politics had a distinct flavour even in the quiet days after Independence, when the leading politicians were doing their best to run a democratic system on the best models. The flavour was not due

¹ See, e.g. Thomas Burt, *My Autobiography*; Lord Elton, *Life of James Ramsay MacDonal*; Viscount Snowden, *Autobiography*; Lord Snell, *Men, Movements and Myself*; Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography*; and even Alan Bullock, *Life and Times of Ernest Bevin*.

POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

to personal factors. There was a variation in assumptions which would probably be noticeable in most other countries to those who had an intimate knowledge of their politics. It is equally noticeable at different stages of British history. Indeed, one of the main difficulties of the student of politics who is not a professional historian is to appreciate the degree to which social ideas have changed. Some examples appear in Volume I of this work—the conversion of land from the foundation of the social order to a mere commodity, the change in the concept of the family which occurred when people began to congregate in towns, and what Coleridge called the ‘spirit of commerce’, which has spread even to labour relations.

It must not be thought that prejudices and ideas change as rapidly as events. Even the most active student of politics, whether he be a practical politician or not, faces new problems and new conditions with old assumptions. Most of those who merely take a daily dose of politics from a newspaper and broadcasts will not even notice that such problems and conditions exist. Startling events like the Spanish Armada, the Gunpowder Plot, the Civil War, the Revolution, the loss of the American colonies, the French Revolution, Peterloo, the Chartist agitation, the Irish famine, the two great depressions, and the two great wars lived long in the memory and created prejudices for decades. Less startling events, such as the invention of printing, the rise of a critical theology, the development of new forms of literature, the voyages of the great navigators, the development of historiography, the discoveries of scientists, the inventions of the industrialists, though they altered the environment profoundly, altered ideas and prejudices very slowly. There is usually a considerable time-lag between the cause of a social change and its consequences in terms of accepted ideas.

This time-lag is due in the main to the fact that the ordinary citizen is not consistently engaged in the adaptation of his ideas to the changing environment. Even the professional scholars, the poets and prose writers, the artists, the inventors, the propagandists and the *entrepreneurs* tend to have their minds concentrated on their own work and do not appreciate its cumulative effect on social attitudes. It is easier to write history than to write prophecy. The ordinary citizen does not even realise that some at least of the assumptions by which he is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12979-4 - Party Politics, Volume III: The Stuff of Politics

Ivor Jennings

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POLITICAL CONFLICT

regulating his life are being undermined. Even the young—if one may judge from the universities, in which there is usually more exacting analysis of beliefs than elsewhere—are not able to explain the variations between their own views and those of their fathers. Where they conform with the social attitudes of their environment, as they usually do, there is variation in their conformity due to their shorter memories. Undergraduates of this generation know about Hitler, but any repugnance that he produces in them is second-hand. If they know about the Great Depression, and they may not, it will be a bit of economic history. An effort of imagination is needed to think of undergraduates of a generation for whom there were no jobs. These are examples only. The environment has changed in many ways; and, though the public-school men generally conform with the conservatism of their parents and schoolmasters, the ideas and prejudices implicit in that conservatism are slightly different. They probably find themselves more in sympathy with the Bow Group than with Cabinet Ministers; and even the Bow Group is beginning to ‘date’.

This reference to ‘conservatism’—which has a small ‘c’ of deliberate purpose—is by way of example only. We are at the moment less concerned with party politics than with general attitudes, the whole complex of ideas and prejudices with which the citizen is furnished. The fact that an undergraduate calls himself ‘Liberal’ or ‘Socialist’ does not in fact imply that he is failing to conform. Since nobody argues from first principles, nobody can have taken all knowledge to be his province, and nobody under fifty (and not many over that age) can have much political experience, most ideas and prejudices are second-hand. The young man who calls himself ‘Socialist’ has, in the main, the same ideas and prejudices as the young man who calls himself ‘Conservative’. They seem to him—unless he is a mere careerist, which rarely happens—to lead to different conclusions. Even the conclusions are really not very different, for there is a large measure of agreement.

Undergraduates are a small and unrepresentative section of the population. There is no reason to suppose that the process is very different in other sections. Those who leave school at the age of 15 and go into industry probably have (under the post-war educational system) less

POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

native ability than those who go to the universities; they are thrust into an environment where ideas are not so frequently argued over and where the men in the 'shop' determine 'public opinion'; and there is consequently an even greater pressure towards conformity. Politically speaking it is probably 'Labour'; but the *corpus* of ideas and prejudices is for all practical purposes the same.

We have so far avoided discussion about the nature of these ideas and prejudices. If it be true that at any given point of history they are in all essentials common, the reader can answer that question by answering the question about the nature of his own ideas and prejudices. Let us, however, take a fairly typical young man. He began to acquire doctrine as soon as he was born. He learned to behave in the way in which his parents wanted him to behave. Both at home and at school he has been encouraged to conform. He comes, let us suppose, from a most respectable professional family. His parents have shown no signs of eccentricity, whether by voting Labour or otherwise. By careful housekeeping and a limitation on luxuries, they have sent him to a school which has never been corrupted by public money. He is about to acquire those marks of competence which are accepted by universities as sufficient evidence of intellectual merit. He has played for the house, if not for the school. He has been a fag and he looks forward to becoming a prefect. He is 'C. of E.' because his parents are; and when he was 'confirmed' he accepted all the parson's assurances. He is, in fact, a credit to his school, and, as his housemaster has already indicated in a confidential letter to the tutor of St Jude's, he has every prospect of becoming a useful member of that ancient foundation if he is admitted to it.

There are, however, other types. Our young man is even more likely to come from a most respectable working-class family. His father is a trade unionist in good standing who pays the political levy. His mother shops at the 'co-op' and does not bother the officials by attending meetings. Our young man passed into the county grammar school at what is called, in the jargon, 11 +. His football has received favourable attention from the 'scout' of Coventry City, but his father doubts if he ought to become a professional footballer because, though 'there's money in it', the prospects are poor. He has, therefore, been

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12979-4 - Party Politics, Volume III: The Stuff of Politics

Ivor Jennings

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POLITICAL CONFLICT

apprenticed at the 'shop', has joined the trade union, and will in due course pay the political levy.

It is not really as simple as these hypothetical examples suggest. There is a divergence between one generation and another because conditions have changed since the fathers learned to conform thirty years ago. Moreover, family life may set up, not a desire to conform, but a pressure to rebel. One way to annoy the 'old man', who sometimes acts the heavy father, is to deny his political principles. Also, the schoolboy who does not quite fit the pattern may well want to distinguish himself by joining the Communist party so that he can talk darkly about 'bloody revolution'. If the boy in the 'shop' is being pushed around by the men it is pleasant to spite them all by joining the Young Conservatives.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to under-estimate the generous sentiments which so often sweep the young. The French Revolution stimulated English minds more than any event since the Civil War. The Cambridge evangelicals produced a reaction in the Oxford Movement, and both profoundly influenced the opinion of undergraduates, though neither movement went very deep among the rest of the population: but the Oxford Movement, in turn, aroused the relics of the old anti-clerical tradition and helped to establish the reign of a non-theological (and sometimes atheistic) 'science'. Intellectual activity encouraged the study of political economy in the early years of the nineteenth century and the reaction took two forms, an emotional nationalism and an emotional socialism (originally a wider term than now, and including what we call the Welfare State). In our own day the economic depression of the thirties, Hitler's attack on the Jews, the rape of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, the exhilarations of 1940, the Suez attack of 1956, the destructive power of nuclear weapons, and the return to racialism, have caused waves of emotion. Such emotions are particularly strong among the young, partly because they are not experienced enough to keep a wary eye on their own impulses, partly because they have not always learned the cautious cynicism which enables one to appreciate how mixed are people's motives, especially those of professional propagandists like parsons, professors and politicians.

POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

In any event the environment is constantly changing in ways too numerous to mention. The physical environment changes because of increased population, higher standards of living, new means of transport, new tastes in gardens, houses, furniture and clothes. Changes in the physical environment produce changes in social convention; and conventions change even when there are no very evident changes in the physical environment. There is, too, a constant development of knowledge, which forces changes not only in the physical environment and in social conventions but also in apparently stable doctrines like those of the Christian sects. There is indeed nothing that does not change, for even Homer reads differently to one who has studied elementary physics. The environment for one generation is different from that of the preceding generation. The circumstances which give rise to political ideas are in continual flux. The emotions which develop out of them are necessarily different.

We are apt to think of these changes as occurring in generations, and there is some justification for this oversimplification. The changes are of course constant, but men's ideas are less elastic. Ideas are not fixed, but they tend to run on tram-lines. A young man, born into conditions different from those of his father, lays his own lines. Even if he is by nature or environment a conformist, his lines start in a different place, run into a different direction, and end in a different place, from his father's lines. It may be that in due course he gets back to what were the ideas of his great-grandfather, making all allowances for time and circumstance; and there is some evidence that this does happen frequently. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the fundamental assumptions of the father and those of his conforming son, deriving from the changed environment, and evident because the ideas of the father have not changed as quickly as the environment.

There is, of course, no such thing as a generation. Children are being born every hour of every day. Nevertheless, external events provide a framework of reference. If those born in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the early decades of this century, between the wars, and since 1939, are regarded as 'generations', the differences in the environment, and therefore in their political ideas, are marked. One can, therefore, speak of a cycle of generations. On this basis, the adult

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12979-4 - Party Politics, Volume III: The Stuff of Politics

Ivor Jennings

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POLITICAL CONFLICT

life of a politician may spread over two generations. So does the adult life of an elector, and this is even more important because in all probability his political ideas, being more rarely expressed and less often attuned to current problems, are more likely to be comparatively fixed. It must be remembered that one third of the electorate is over 48, one third under 38, and one third between 38 and 48. The politics of the Government and the Opposition is the politics of the oldest of these three age-groups. The 'Edwardians', born before 1914, dictate politics to those who have never heard of Lloyd George, except in the history books. The 'inexorable march' of the Labour party before 1951 was clearly due to the fact that what was called 'socialism' (whose vagueness we shall discover in a later chapter) appealed to a majority of the young men and women put on the register each year, of whom there were about 300,000. The 'swing of the pendulum' is caused partly by the same phenomenon. The young men and women who vote for the first time (and normally they are approximately eight per cent of the electorate) tend to have views different from those of their fathers and grandfathers. The balance then tends to shift against the Government, merely because the Government is in office.

We are not yet ready, however, to discuss conflicts of opinion. We have first to ask whence came the political principles which politicians profess. Clearly they do not come from the politicians, from whom capacity for independent thought is not required. Men of originality seldom get into Parliament, and this has especially been so since party organisations developed. One cannot imagine, say, John Locke, or even Edmund Burke, satisfying a selection committee in ten minutes that he was a good party man. The old theory, that anybody with ideas must be a heretic, has been carried from religion into politics. Nor, indeed, is it likely that a person with original ideas would be successful in Parliament. It is perhaps useful to have a Ricardo, a John Stuart Mill, or a Sidney Webb on the back-benches: but a political leader must, according to convention, make 'party political' speeches, and any originality, except in methods of expression, 'lets the party down'.

Political philosophers, using that phrase in a rather broad sense, are undoubtedly influential, though progressively less so as British politics has developed. In the eighteenth century Locke and Blackstone were

POLITICS AND PRINCIPLES

particularly influential. Burke and Adam Smith were relevant for something like a century. Bentham's ideas seeped into public discussion, though in large measure through his disciples. Later in the nineteenth century the apostles of nationalism and socialism became prominent, though they are seldom read today. It is indeed doubtful if any author has had any considerable influence on politicians since Lloyd George. Nor, indeed, was there very much originality in most of the writers who have influenced policy. Adam Smith was an exception, but even he gathered up ideas and applied them to the new conditions of the industrial revolution whose consequences few had seriously considered. Blackstone was at the other extreme, for he never said anything original, though he synthesised legal and political knowledge and made it accessible.

In the eighteenth century the politicians could be expected to have read Locke; and until well into the nineteenth century they had read Burke and Blackstone also. Adam Smith was regarded, in some quarters, as seditious, though strong-minded men like Huskisson and Peel could trust themselves to read the *Wealth of Nations*. Only bits of Bentham were readable, and not much more was accessible. On the other hand, nearly everybody in the later nineteenth century had read Mill. We must not, however, place too much emphasis upon this branch of learning. Ideas percolate through many channels. The romantic reaction to the industrial revolution, which had a profound influence on British politics, was better portrayed by the poets and novelists than by political philosophers and economists. The political notions to which it gave rise were in fact neither philosophical nor economic, but emotional. Whatever Adam Smith might say of natural liberty, what he meant by it was abhorrent to an increasing number of thinking people. Democracy, nationalism, the Welfare State and socialism may have had rational explanations, but it was never necessary to produce them because, if the politicians had understood them, the electors would not. A good piece of Disraelian rhetoric was worth all the pamphlets of the Fabian Society.

It is, however, easy to exaggerate. Behind the Cabinet 'minute' of a few lines is the memorandum submitted by the Minister; behind the memorandum submitted by the Minister is the memorandum

POLITICAL CONFLICT

submitted to the Minister; behind the memorandum to the Minister is a bulky file; behind the file is a mass of miscellaneous reading and all the talk in pubs and clubs, debating societies and trade associations, professional conferences and trade-union meetings. A policy is possible because it looks practicable, it looks practicable because it seems sensible, and it seems sensible because there has been enough argument over it and writing on it to make it generally acceptable. The sum of all these policies, or strictly speaking the ideas behind those policies, is the current political philosophy, not the philosophy of the schools (which has become increasingly denuded of practical value, except as a critical apparatus) but the philosophy of the Clapham omnibus or the Southend train.

2. THE CONFLICT OF OPINION

It is necessary to emphasise the general acceptance of this current philosophy, because the politicians do their best to persuade us that there is a great gulf fixed between the two sides of the House of Commons, not merely a gangway designed to prevent the clashing of swords. The swords are wooden because the battle is something of a sham. Arrows fly across but they are only words, too few of them being tipped with gold.

It is obvious that even within the framework of accepted ideas there is ample scope for differences of opinion, relating for instance to emphasis, practical application, or timing. Even if parties were always based on principle and not on personalities there could be a host of parties. 'Principle' is a bad word, for it assumes something fundamental. The fact is, however, that any difference of opinion becomes fundamental if any group feels sufficiently strongly about it. For instance, there is broad agreement that limitations should be placed on the sale of alcoholic liquor, this broad agreement being based on the assumption that 'temperance' is a social good and that, so far as is practicable, the law should enforce it. Some think, however, that 'intemperance' is so harmful socially that the inhabitants of a district ought to be able, by majority vote, to forbid altogether the sale of alcoholic liquor in their district. If this opinion is strongly held by enough people it forms a distinction of sufficient importance to be the