



UNIVERSIDAD
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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES
ASIGNATURA TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

*Britain and Consensus Politics, 1945-1955: Myth
or Reality?*

Realizado por

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Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

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TITLE: Britain and Consensus Politics, 1945-1955: Myth or Reality?

KEYWORDS: Attlee, Churchill, speeches, consensus, ideology, Labour, Conservative.

SUMMARY:

This study lies within the framework of the years 1945-1955, which correspond to Clement Attlee's Labourite and Winston Churchill's Conservative administrations. Many analysts claim that, after World War II, a tacit political and economic agreement was established. Soon dissenting voices from the so-called anti-consensualists arose in the historiographical debate. These two schools of thought are compared in the first part of this work.

The objective is to demonstrate, by means of an analysis of their speeches and the proposals of their respective political parties, that the ideological differences hindered a total agreement. These primary sources are examined from several perspectives. The main emphasis of this study falls on the ideology as a distinctive element and its influence on other fields such as education, the welfare system or the economy. The results reveal a lack of consensus based on their opposite political cultures.

TÍTULO: La Gran Bretaña del consenso político, 1945-1955: ¿mito o realidad?

PALABRAS CLAVE: Attlee, Churchill, discursos, consenso, ideología, laborista, conservador.

RESUMEN:

Este trabajo de investigación se enmarca en el período comprendido entre 1945 y 1955, que se corresponden con las administraciones del laborista Clement Attlee y del conservador Winston Churchill. Muchos analistas afirman que, tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, se instauró un pacto político y económico tácito. Pronto surgieron, en un debate historiográfico, voces discrepantes procedentes de los llamados anti-consensualistas. En la primera parte de este trabajo se contrastan estas dos corrientes de pensamiento.

El objetivo es demostrar, mediante un análisis de sus discursos y las propuestas de sus respectivos partidos políticos, que las diferencias ideológicas impidieron un acuerdo total. Se abordan estas fuentes primarias desde varias perspectivas, teniendo como eje principal la ideología como elemento diferenciador y su repercusión en ámbitos como la educación, el estado del bienestar o la economía. Los resultados revelan una falta de consenso proveniente de culturas políticas opuestas.

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1. Introduction

The year 1945 was one of the most crucial moments in British history. It was the year of victory. The country emerged triumphant from World War II and the Labour Party won a landslide victory in the national elections. It was the new beginning of peace and new political and economic changes. That year also marks the beginning of the field of study of this bachelor dissertation.

By the 1970s, historians began to assess the transformations that had occurred until then. Since 1945, two political parties, the Conservatives and the Labour Party had shared the political power. The existence of a post-war consensus during the 1940s and 1950s in terms of economy, politics and the state welfare system was a thesis proposed by some historians, the consensualists, and refuted by others, the anti-consensualists. The debate continues today. This study aims to consider and analyze both sides of this debate and to provide a clear argumentation of whether there was consensus or not.

The thesis proposed in this study is that there was not full consensus between the Conservative and the Labour political parties. As Dennis Kavanagh said, both were governmentalist political parties (15) which meant that they often had to strip off their most radical measures from their political programmes. However, circumscribing the analysis only to their policies might be completely superficial. The main theme that caused disagreement was their contradictory ideologies. This is explained by the fact that they belonged to different political cultures. The Labour roots came from the Social democracy² whereas the Conservatives in the 1950s adhered to the principles of Tory

² One of the types of Socialism. It endeavors to achieve a gradual political and economic reform towards social justice within the scaffold of liberal democracy and the capitalist economy.

democracy³. Even if their policies were similar, their approaches to tackle specific issues diverged.

The historical context which frames the period studied here (1945-1955, the administrations of Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill) in the international stage is one of a great power which had recently been on the verge of collapse and, in words of Geoff Steward, it was now a “moth-eaten one” (36). Even though this investigation is concerned with domestic policies within United Kingdom, it is practically impossible to view them without the wider scope of foreign politics. Indeed, it can be argued that the first seeds of domestic consensus (if it existed at all) were sown during World War II. Neville Chamberlain’s⁴ response to the German war machinery was lukewarm and he was replaced by the well-known Churchill as Prime Minister in 1940. In the following years, United Kingdom was able to revert its fortunes, albeit with the invaluable support from the USSR and the US. Indeed, the outcome was a moral and military victory, but it evinced the decline of the Empire. As a consequence, the British politicians’ mentalities were deeply shaped by the nature of the war and its devastating consequences. The extent to which they agreed on how to reconstruct Britain is interpretable, but it is outstandingly clear that foreign policy had had and would have a direct influence in the policies in the domestic realm.

The most direct example of how this was materialized was the wartime coalition (1940-1945). In the darkest hour, King George VI appointed Churchill as Prime Minister (PM). He included in his war cabinet prominent figures from all political parties, including the Liberal Party and the residual National Liberal Party and National Labour. This willingness to unite totally divergent opinions into a single government

³ Also known as one-nation conservatism, it is a political philosophy under the umbrella of conservatism, which was predominant in the 1950s and 1960s in Great Britain.

⁴ Conservative Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1937-1940).

must have had created some sense of comradeship. The British Union of Fascists, under the leadership of Oswald Mosley, was rejected for obvious reasons and the Communist Party only supported the government once the USSR entered World War II. Yet the political scope of the coalition was huge, as it included the majority of political parties from centre-left and centre-right. Young members of parliament (MPs) from both sides had fought in the army and senior politicians had collaborated hand in hand in the war effort. Civil servants, often overlooked in historical analysis, such as John Colville⁵ and William Beveridge⁶, had been pivotal in this alleged comradeship. The first soothed tensions between two diametrically opposed personalities as were Churchill's and Attlee's (Packwood 233), the latter was asked to work on a survey in order to improve the existing welfare system, which would later lead to the famous Beveridge report⁷. All this evidence could be interpreted as one of the signs of political consensus before 1945, at least on the personal level, but it must be taken into account that it only existed in exceptional circumstances.

The coalition ended once Germany surrendered and United Kingdom returned to the petty political rivalry. Was this a sign of division and change within United Kingdom? In the July elections, the Labour candidate Clement Attlee achieved a resounding electoral success. The first question that should be considered in relation to this study is whether his policies were maintained after he stepped out of Number 10 in 1951 or whether they were reverted when Churchill returned back to power.

Attlee laid the foundations for a mixed economy. Firstly, he developed the welfare state. The extent of whether it was a breakthrough or a gradual process of

⁵ British civil servant and Joint Principal Private Secretary during 1951-1955.

⁶ British economist, social reformer and Liberal politician. He was interested in social issues, such as unemployment and social security.

⁷ It was a government report which proposed to address the most pressing problems of British society so that the government tackled poverty, unemployment, education, housing and health.

continuity is open to debate. The Liberal government had implemented previously a national insurance for sickness and unemployment in 1911 and pensions already existed. Yet the Labour reforms (the National Insurance Act 1946 and the National Assistance Act 1948) were now universal for all. The creation of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1946 was another ever-lasting reform which had not hitherto been implemented on such a scale before.

A mixed economy also meant some considerable degree of control of the state over the economy. Clause IV in the 1918 Labour constitution defined nationalization as one of its primary objectives. Several private industries were nationalized, including the Bank of England, the coal industry, transport, electricity, gas, iron and steel. Were the roots of the existing economic system actually threatened or was it a controlled step towards a more “social” capitalism?

Churchill’s supposed conciliatory disposition towards the Labour reforms under his last administration is another question which determined the existence of compromise between the two political parties. Housing became a primary objective and the power of the trade unions was respected. Tory democracy became the philosophical cornerstone of the modern conservatism. However, income and purchase tax cuts in the Butler’s⁸ 1955 budget show that the Conservative party could be also prone to reduce the burden of taxation of the Labour administration whenever possible (Steward 62).

Finally, central to this study is the nature of the Labour and Conservatives when they were in the opposition. Churchill managed to maintain a firm grip of the Conservative party during 1945-1951, yet sometimes his political views were

⁸ Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer (1951-1955).

considered too old-fashioned by his peers, as when he opposed *The Industrial Charter*⁹. By 1951 onwards, disaffection grew in Labour Party. Left-wingers, the Bevanites¹⁰, seemed to challenge the supposed post-war consensus, but what was really their political strength?

The dissertation is structured as follows. The next section presents the contrasting views of different historians. Later, primary sources including political manifestos and historical speeches by Attlee and Churchill will be analysed in terms of their language and the relationship between the policies and the political discourse. The conclusion will present an argued opinion over whether there was consensus between 1945-1955.

⁹ Conservative policy statement published in 1947. It accepted most of Attlee's economic legislation and it can be argued to be a symbol of post-war consensus.

¹⁰ Supporters of Aneurin Bevan. He was the major Labour Minister of Health during Attlee's ministry and he was also Minister of Labour and National Service (1951).

2. Literature review: A historical overview of post-war consensus in Britain, 1945-1955

A historical overview on consensualist and non-consensualist views of British politics shows the widespread academic acceptance that there were common salient features in both political parties but it must not be ignored the revisionist arguments which argue against this thesis. The paragraphs below present these different viewpoints, organized in several thematic points the areas in which historians and writers corroborate each other. These points provide a general picture of the research done so far in the domestic issues that arouse at the time and serve as a clear guideline of the topics that should be examined when proving the validity of the thesis proposed.

2. 1. Consensualists

There has been some considerable debate about whether there was political consensus during 1945-1955 and in what terms. Paul Addison's study *The Road to 1945* (1975) shed some light to this historiographical debate and dominated literature for a large period of time. His contribution to the discussion revolves around a researched argument which suggests that it was Churchill's coalition government which, in Richard Toye's words, "established the groundwork" (5) of the consensus. Many historians have followed his interpretation (most clearly Dennis Kavanagh, Peter Morris, Derrick Murphy and Geoff Stewart). For Murphy, consensus was "built around a shared belief

in Keynesian¹¹ economics, the welfare and the mixed economy” (291). For Stewart, “much of the conflict was simply ritual” (20). In the following paragraphs there will be presented pieces of evidence for each of the two historical interpretations.

2.1.1. Nationalization, labour conditions and economy

Arguably, taking over 20% of the economy might have seemed at the time quite revolutionary, but Murphy argues quite the opposite (289). The companies “turned out to be ... conservatively run” (289) as the previous managers were kept in office. There were no further inroads made towards cooperatives. Stewart validates this argument by indicating that nationalization was not as extreme as it might have seemed (31). Those nationalized companies were already controlled to some degree by the government previously. For example, in the nationalization of the Bank of England in 1946, “the existing governor and deputy governor were immediately reappointed and invited for a glass of sherry” (Stewart 31). Compensations were generally generous and/or the government intervened when the private company was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Kenneth O. Morgan concludes that Attlee’s major reforms, such as nationalization, were carried out with “little controversy” (33) and “without tears” (36). Robert Blake, an anti-consensualist, acknowledges that that nationalization was taken without any “very great controversy” (316) but, as indicated by Toye (12), Brian Harrison (314) and Alan Sked (44), he believes that the Conservatives accepted it because of electoral pragmatism, (except for the nationalization of the steel industry, which was by all means prevented, and was finally reverted).

¹¹ Keynesian economics refers to the macroeconomic theories presented by the economist John Maynard Keynes. They were established, to a varying degree, in most developed nations in the 1930s amid the Great Depression.

As far as labour conditions are concerned, Stewart states that Churchill “was anxious to avoid the impression of union bashing” (56) and he did not employ troops against strikers, unlike Attlee (57). This opinion is also corroborated by Harrison (304). Murphy and Morgan coincide that consensus was also visible as trade unions, which excluded communists, readily supported the Labour government and later did not harass the conservatives (285).

2. 1. 2. Conservatives and Churchill

Harrison defends that after the electoral defeat of 1945, the Conservative party moved in the political spectrum towards the centre (304). Almost all historians, including Murphy, signal *The Industrial Charter* in 1947 as one of the cornerstones of this alleged consensus. Trade unions were no longer seen as enemies and the reduction of unemployment was deemed as a necessary step for the post-war reconstruction (Murphy 312). Stewart also points out that the National Assistance Act was not opposed effectively in the parliament by Churchill (27). For Morgan, Churchill’s attitude was one of cautious reconciliation. His restless desire was one of social cohesion and not of confrontation. “Paternalistic” figures in the cabinet like Macmillan¹², R.A. Butler and Eden¹³ were all at the forefront of this ethos (Morgan 113). The repeal of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act, which pleased the T.U.C¹⁴, and the lenient outlook towards railway strikes in 1954 exemplified this “transformation.”

Little privatization was undertaken and even some public companies were created, such as the Atomic Energy Authority (Morgan 115-116). Stewart upholds

¹² Minister of Housing during Churchill’s administration.

¹³ Conservative Foreign Secretary (1951-1955).

¹⁴ Trade Union Congress, a federation of trade unions of England and Wales.

Morgan's viewpoint, as he deems that the figure of Churchill, who had become associated with the hard-faced bosses of the inter-war years, was now in 1951 interested in the "continuity [that] would mark the change of government" (54). There was a stark difference between his political rhetoric (in 1945 he had said that the Labour would establish a quasi-Gestapo dictatorship) and his political actions, which were much more moderate (Steward 20). Blake summarizes what most consensualist historians believe by saying that "the government of 1951-5 was a very consensual one. There were occasional flourishes of partisan rhetoric, but little partisan action" (7). Churchill touched little details of the Labour reforms, but the basics were left unchanged.

2.1.3. Housing, the welfare state, education and the constitution

Murphy signals that the targets of housing programmes from the Labour administration were more radical on paper than on practice. For example, many pre-fabricated houses were built (288). Again, radicalism capitulated in favour of consensus. He also underlines that another step towards consensus was the Conservative's acceptance that housing was an unprecedented problem (Conservative Party Conference in 1950) and the new party manifesto, *The Right Road for Britain* (1949) addressed this issue. Morgan similarly reflects that the Conservative administration showed full determination to complete the objectives set by Attlee with even greater impetus. The staggering figure of 318,750 houses built corroborates that (117). Stewart again considers this to be evidence of consensus, by indicating that the Conservative government outran the Labour, albeit at the cost of relaxing the housing conditions.

Consensus was also reflected in the general approval of the welfare state. For Derrick Murphy, the Beveridge Report was one of the crucial elements of post-war

consensus. 86% of the population were in favour of the report (282). In addition, the ethos of the Beveridge Report was in vogue in the 1940s, as commented by Morgan. It “found immediate endorsement ... in all election manifestos” (37) and the product of it, the National Insurance Bill (1946) was passed by the parliament without much hassle. However, as Toye also indicates, the Conservatives seemed to be out of this consensus in this respect, since they “were distinctively cool about these proposals” (282).

In terms of education, Stewart says that continuity was the hallmark here. The overall picture presented is of an acceptance of moderate reform since there was restraint towards creating comprehensive schools. The tripartite system¹⁵, proposed by the Butler Act, was largely disregarded (60).

Critics have identified another area of consensus: the constitution.¹⁶ Simon James signposts that during the 1950s the constitution was respected by both parties and little was changed. Ironically the Liberals were the “dissident voice” (21) as they strived for the curtailment of the power of the Lords altogether with the devolution of powers for Scotland and Wales, but their proposals were not taken into consideration.

2.1.4. Ideology

Kavanagh and Morris agree, broadly speaking, with other historians about the differences between the two main parties in terms of ideology: freedom versus collectivism and property-owning democracy versus equality (15). But Blackburn’s

¹⁵ The tripartite system proposed the creation three types of state-funded secondary schools: secondary technical schools, grammar schools and secondary modern schools. In practice, the majority of the education authorities never implemented it and a two-tier education system was established.

¹⁶ The British Constitution must be understood as a set of rules which is not enclosed in a single code (unlike the Spanish Constitution, for example).

analysis goes beyond this simple difference and provides a thought-provoking study. He presents a detailed distinction of the ideologies which have been neglected in this debate. He stresses that “while the parties offered different conceptions of desirable political change ... they tended to prefer evolutionary reform” (196-197).

Concepts such as “Middle Way Conservatism” and “Revisionist Socialist Democracy” were hegemonic in 1945-1955 (Blackburn 197). “Middle Way Conservatism” was more effectively pursued by young conservatives such as Macmillan, who were interested in trying to amalgamate capitalism and equality. Their interest lay, therefore, in full employment and suitable labour conditions for all. The publication of *The Industrial Charter* reflects this shift of ideology (Blackburn 198). Redistribution of wealth was a necessary principle in a nation that war had tied together. “Revisionist Social Democracy”, on the other hand, was the result of the critique of rigid Marxism: no extensive nationalization was essential for egalitarianism, in order to prevent that excessive taxation would lead to an effective economy (Blackburn 198).

According to Blackburn, the epistemology that rested behind these two ideological currents led to continuity, that is, to “acknowledge the positive contributions that their opponents had made to public policy” (203). Unilateralism and dogmatism were vetoed by both political factions in favour of constructive opposition. They avoided referring to utopian views which were not related to human reason. Conservatism in the 1940s and 50s was not a divergent alternative, it was not anti-socialism, but a construction of dialogue with those on the opposite bench, that is the creation of a “Hegelian synthesis” (215).

2.2. Anti-consensualists

Ben Pimlott has attacked the consensualists by stating that consensus is a concept promoted by those who felt “nostalgia” (Toye 5) when it was really a historical period of bitter political division. Revisionist Pimlott labels consensus as a “mirage, an illusion that rapidly fades the closer one gets to it” (Pimlott, Kavanagh and Morris 13). He discusses that the Labour and Conservative parties did not consider themselves as part of the political consensus, quite the opposite. Blake and Ian Cawood partially subscribe to his thesis. It is inferred, through Cawood’s lines, that true consensus lay *only* in the Conservative opposition and later its government: the acceptance of the Labour reforms, but also ending rationing, extra house building and less bureaucracy (250).

2.2.1. Middle and upper classes. Social divide, polarization and rationing

Blake contends that, for the general public, Attlee’s ministry during 1945-1951 caused bitter resentment and division. The middle-class was “disenchanted” (315) and the upper classes were unwilling to allow “a new world of high wages, full employment” (315). Mainly the Labourites and even some Conservatives, as Blake comments, “deplored” (346) the new consumerism of the fifties. Rationing, according to Cawood, was also reviled in comedy shows and in the middle-class pressure groups (249). For Murphy, the ending of the rationing which occurred within a Conservative administration (313) at last made the Conservatives the only protagonists of the consensus.

Morgan, who devotes much of his work to this issue, states that the general “mood” during Attlee’s ministry during 1945-1947 was “one of welfare and the public ethic” (41), but since 1947, consensus crumbled. The government was attacked from the

left and the right. Society became more polarized as the Liberal party collapsed. The “sharpness of the division was unusual” (63), as the right “re-armed” itself too with the creation of nostalgic middle-class pressure groups (as commented by Murphy previously) who would undermine the Labour government. Stewart agrees with Morgan in the sense that since 1947 consensus was falling rapidly. Rationing had alienated the middle classes, and the “mood of the country became almost rebellious” (41). By 1951, the Conservatives had their electoral machinery well-oiled and moved to the offensive. Morgan concludes that “two nations were clearly emerging in England” (85) (in opposition to Disraeli’s one nation conservatism) and that the 1951 elections were one of the most disputed ones up to 1979. Pimlott also clarifies that the results of the elections do not reflect consensus but an electorate “sandbagged in their electoral trenches ... anonymous infantry of two implacably opposed armies” (Pimlott, Kavanagh and Morris 13). Roy Jenkins also complements Morris’ viewpoint by stating that the 50s were an “era of ... committed party loyalties” (9), but he does not consider this as evidence of anti-consensus. Kavanagh, on the other hand, opposes this vision. Kavanagh is quick to notice that since 1951, the Gallup polls “noticed a steady reduction in the proportion of voters perceiving important differences” (180) and they discard Pimlott’s argument about party identification: “they are irrelevant ... to the thesis of consensus” (Pimlott, Kavanagh and Morris 15).

2.2.2. National Health Service

For Cawood (252) and Harrison (313), another piece of legislation which undoubtedly did initially not fall under the umbrella of consensus politics was the National Health Service, as the doctors were worried about becoming state employees. On the contrary,

other historians undervalue this criticism. Sked believes that the NHS “was not opposed on principle” (44) by the Conservatives. Stewart also concedes that the “NHS was to prove quite safe in Tory hands” (57). Proof of it was that Aneurin Bevan and Iain Macleod¹⁷ became paired (58) and that the spending of the NHS raised during both administrations (it was undistinguishable the difference between the two administrations). Harrison here accepts this point (304).

2.2.3. War-time coalition and left-wing Labour

Blake points out that by the end of the war “the parties had run out of domestic policies on which they could agree” (305). The fact that there were tensions already within the war cabinet, as most of the Labour party wanted to participate in the forthcoming national elections independently, is, according to Blake, a valuable indicator that consensus did not exist.

Morgan (and also Cawood, 248) underlines that, ironically, those who were more critical to the reforms was the far-left labour party faction, concretely the backbenchers. They insisted that the managers of the nationalized businesses were still not accountable to the workers (35). They also considered the building house programme insufficient, and there were instances of squatters breaking into houses (40). In addition, Ellen Wilkinson’s¹⁸ implementation of the Butler Act of 1944 in education brought hostility from the far-left again as the grammar schools continued to be the refuge of the elite class (41). Bevan’s resignation in 1951, in Morgan’s words, marked “a notable divide in post-war politics” (103) and sectionalism. Extremism seemed to

¹⁷ Conservative Minister of Health during Churchill’s ministry (1951-1955).

¹⁸ Minister of Education under Attlee’s administration (1945-1947) and suffragist.

gain more and more support, for example, in the National Executive Committee¹⁹ (61). These are pivotal pieces of evidence that show that consensus was not totally widespread. Stewart, a generally consensualist historian, admits that overall, 1951-1955 was a period of general peace and tranquillity, but surely not in the Labour ranks, which continued to experience internal division brewing between “Bevanites” and “Gaitskellites”. For Brian there are significant difficulties for taking the consensualist view. Dissension still existed: the “fundamentalist left” (315) of the Labour party considered “consensus” as an inevitable step for a fully-fledged Socialist state. Consensualist historians have neglected the internal divisions within the Labour party. Similarly, the ROBOT²⁰ proposal scheme in 1952 reflects that the Conservative party was also not a homogeneous political group (315), although it was never implemented.

2.2.4. Butskellism and trade unions

Morgan demystifies one of the best-known concepts of consensus: Butskellism. Did it really exist? He does not think so (entirely). Hugh Gaitskell²¹ and Butler had different approaches towards economy (fiscal policy, public investment). Stewart disagrees, as he considers that the “most consensual figure was R.A. Butler” (60) even though he was unwilling to accept it. Yet their “state of mind” towards “social consensus” (119) was similar and the monetarists, at least for this period, were kept at bay. Kelly’s paper also focuses on the myth of “Butskellism”: there was a “disagreement centred on the use of economic controls on the economy” (8). He believes that Gaitskell put the accent on

¹⁹ The National Executive Committee ensures that the Labour party objectives are fulfilled.

²⁰ R.A. Butler planned an economic policy which would mark the end of Keynesianism and further devaluation of the pound by making it a floating currency. It stands for Sir Leisle ROWan, Sir George BOLton and OTto Clarke, three civil servants who were in favour of it.

²¹ Leader of the Labour Party (1955-1963) and Chancellor of the Exchequer (1950-1951).

import control, licences and the rejection of the “free pound”,²² whereas Butler was convinced that controls were not necessary in a globalized economy. Basically, their differences reflected their clashing convictions (8). Sked takes a different stance here, because he considers the Conservative adherence to Keynesian economic principles (concretely *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), which consisted on maintaining at all costs unemployment rates low not by deflation but by government investment) an unequivocal evidence of consensus (42).

The role of trade unions during Attlee’s administration has been a contested issue in the debate. Morgan argues that, to a large extent, the T.U.C. remained faithful to the government, despite the wage-freeze imposed (78). Stewart counter-argues that it was not the case, as by 1950 they rejected “further wage restraints” (47). The debate is still open in this aspect.

2.3. Other interpretations

Some historians have eluded themselves from taking sides in this dichotomy, either because they have rather investigated the definition of “consensus” before plunging into the debate or because have provided some mixed responses for this debate. For example, Morgan considers that consensus was transient and sporadic during 1945-1955. He differentiates three phases: there was consensus during 1945-1947, there was not from 1947 up to 1951 and finally Churchill was a pivotal figure who brought back consensus. Historian Kavanagh believes that there was a common agreement in most matters, but, in addition, he refers to the four usages of the term “consensus”: to apply

²² The “free pound” or “floating pound” is not backed by gold.

to ends, to apply to style, “negative consensus” and “relative consensus” (177). Firstly, Kavanagh readily accepts that there was consensus based on the basic principles: “shared assumptions and expectations among the front-benchers” (177), that is, those policies which were the only ones that could be “administratively practicable, economically affordable, and politically acceptable” (177). However, Kavanagh explains the other side of the coin. He effectively counter-argues every argument in favour of consensus. It is argued that the most centrist faction in the Conservative party²³ and soft left in the Labour party had a melancholic vision of consensus, but their view must be taken with precaution. The fact that the Liberal vote plummeted during this time also may hint at the lack of consensus (184).

He supplies other concepts which exemplify the many nuances of this debate. “Negative consensus” is a term employed by those who from the far left and far right felt excluded. There was, obviously, some much more room for reform e.g.: the introduction of healthcare vouchers instead of the NHS in the right, or unilateral disarmament in the left. When, as Kavanagh explains, the political party was in opposition, these proposals gained support within the party, but later, when they were in government, they did not implement them. In the article “Is the ‘postwar consensus’ a myth?” Kavanagh determines that the “*governmentalists* ... were overwhelmingly drawn from the centre of the political spectrum” (Pimlott, Kavanagh and Morris 15; original emphasis). Kavanagh seems to be a consensualist here as he says that those who upheld the political power (the *governmentalists*) were the majority of the

²³ From the 1980s onwards, they were labelled as “wets” in British politics. Those members of the Conservative Party who opposed Margaret Thatcher’s most right-wing radical policies were called “wets” by their opponents, the “dries”.

members of the two most important political parties (they are sometimes called frontbenchers²⁴).

Finally, “relative consensus” is a study of this agreement compared to other countries and other historical periods. Toye had already argued that there was a similar political and economic agreement only in the USA (6) but Kavanagh believes that it existed in other countries in Western Europe (178). If compared to inter-war Britain, or post-World War II Britain, when the menace of communism was much more evident, it is safe for Kavanagh to conclude that in United Kingdom there was consensus.

Toye asks the reader not to assess “consensus” from a retrospective perspective (3). He considers just as important what the British society and politics thought about “consensus” at the time and how the Liberals have been ignored in this debate. Toye argues that terms such as “the middle way”, “Whitehall consensus” and simply “consensus” were already employed in the 1940s. According to Kavanagh, defining consensus has been troublesome, and other historians have preferred to call it “policy agenda” or “postwar settlement” (179). It is worth noticing that both the left and the right had different interpretations of this political concept and it was used for their own political agendas and purposes.

Toye questions himself how to frame “consensus” as an abstract concept and in what terms it should be done – was it simply the product of rhetorical language or did it include real areas of common agreement – such as economy and the welfare state? The bipartisan nature and discourse of British politics has often distorted the image of consensus (7), especially because there were some areas in which there was indeed consensus, such as in road safety legislation. The Labour party, according to Toye,

²⁴ Spokespeople who sit in the front row in Westminster Parliament and are trustworthy supporters of the main political party policies.

viewed “consensus” rather negatively, as they wanted a radical shift which would no longer be under the control of the political establishment. For the right, “consensus” was synonymous for the abolition of the most radical aspects of the Labour programme, as noted in Churchill’s reluctance to implement the reforms proposed by the 1942 Beveridge Report during the coalition government.

The idea of a “common ground”, was, of course, reshaped and rebranded for the specific purposes of the different political parties. During Attlee’s government, the term “middle way” was most commonly used, with the evident connotations of “catering” for the needs of the middle class. Toye points out that those that stood outside consensus were the Liberal Party, who eschewed this notion of “middle way” because both the Labourites and the Conservatives considered themselves representatives of it. As they seemed partially marginalized, they proposed a different concept, “the Third Way”. But as Toye states, if there “were genuine differences between parties” (15), does that mean that consensus did not exist?

In sum, dissenting voices exist amongst historians about the question of whether there was political consensus or not during 1945-1955. In the following chapter primary sources will provide more insight concerning this discussion.

3. An analysis of post-war consensus through primary sources

The next part of the study attempts to answer to the question proposed in the introduction and it contributes to the existing research of this debate. For that purpose, the 1945 and 1950 Labour and Conservative Party electoral manifestos and some of Churchill's and Attlee's speeches during that period will be extensively compared and contrasted. The full list can be found in the appendix below.

One of the limitations of the analysis of these primary sources is that they do not generally tend to reflect completely the political positions held by the different factions within each of the political parties referred previously in this study. It is worthy of comment that, for example, in some cases, Churchill's views did not mirror entirely the "official" political position expressed in the Conservative political manifestos. The generational gap between him and the younger generations within the political party, who in words of Stewart, were climbing "the greasy pole" (56), was noteworthy: generally speaking, Churchill's political beliefs tended to be more right-wing compared to the rest. The opposite problem occurred in the Labour party. Attlee's control of the party was never complete and the discontented Bevan and Harold Wilson²⁵, altogether with those who sided with him, pressed for a much more socialist programme. As a result, it is found that sometimes, the political discourse employed by these political actors was far more radical than the actual measures that they implemented.

A balanced judgement is only reached based on assessing the interaction between the *rhetorics* and the actual *laws* of those politicians who implemented them. Churchill's ideas were well respected in the Conservative Party, so his speeches serve

²⁵ President of the Board of Trade (1947-1951) and later, Prime Minister during 1964-1970 and 1974-1976.

as a reliable source for the diagnosis of the political climate during the time. Attlee's speeches and proposals also showed the current state of affairs, as they attempted to bring to the forefront the social inequalities he vividly experienced in the London East End district. Overall, the most of the selected primary sources are suitable for the investigation as they mention measures and policies that really would have an impact in post-war Britain. The division of this analysis is twofold: the first section examines broadly the ideological theories that set these two political organizations apart, whereas the last sections show how ideology had an influence on the conduct of the economy and social matters.

3.1. Ideology

3.1.1. Property-owning democracy

On this first issue, Churchill's speeches unmistakably presented the ideological differences between the Conservative and Labour Party; he particularly paid attention to the concept of property-owning democracy²⁶ referred by him one year after his electoral defeat (359) and later consolidated in the 1950 Conservative manifesto "This is the Road". Churchill referred to the possibility that the employees could become involved in the profit of a business by means of shares (360). He intended to create a social system in which individuals could participate in the market as a means for social advancement. This philosophical tenet became the hallmark of the Conservative party during the 1980s. This idea was not new in the Conservative party, but he presented it in a moment in which nationalization was popular and swept most of Conservative

²⁶ In its wider sense, it refers to an economic system in which the main aim is the extension of the distribution of property to all the social groups.

opposition. However, we must not exaggerate the significance of his words either. The Labour party was not really interested in creating a corporativist society. The state intervention in the economic market did not mean that the employees had now a direct control over the newly industrialized industries. So, in practice, the idea of property-owning democracy was really reduced to the possibility that everyone possessed their house, as expressed succinctly in the 1950 Conservative manifesto (“This is the Road”, no pages).

Churchill defended that British tenants should have the right to purchase from the local authorities (373). This would be later manifested in the 1980 Housing Act. Attlee encouraged quite the opposite. The creation of council houses, public rented accommodation in the New Towns Act of 1946²⁷ and the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947²⁸ were two measures in a totally different direction. The final objective was that people from all social classes lived in the same type of residence, which would hopefully erase class differences. The 1945 Labour manifesto also aimed to ensure price control (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages), which was quite different to the deregulation of the housing market proposed by the Conservatives. So, in a sense, this reinforces the idea that Churchill can be regarded not as a consensualist politician, but rather as a precursor of the hard-line Thatcherian politics.

Even though on the surface the debate centered on the right to buy private housing, the underlying debate had ideological undertones: it was a struggle between individualism and collectivism. Attlee lightly touched on this historical and political struggle when he addressed the parliament in the second reading of the National Insurance Bill in 1946, but his pungent criticism towards individualism explains why

²⁷ The government could designate the areas for the development of new towns by means of this act. The Development Corporation would have the power to regulate it.

²⁸ The Act stated that land development was only authorized if it had a governmental planning permission.

collectivism as a moral value would be the essence of the Labour reforms, both in terms of nationalization and also, going back to the topic dealt here, housing: “the ill-regulated and insufficient efforts of individuals” (92) should be replaced by the “collective security” (92). The subject of property-owning democracy and housing thereby became a conflict in the domains of ideological discourse.

3.1.2. Economic prosperity and even distribution of wealth

Wealth inequality and its causes was another area of discrepancy on ideological grounds. Churchill explained it in the following words:

In the socialist view the strong should be kept down to level of the weak in order have equal shares for all. How small the share is does not matter so much, in their opinion, so long as it is equal. ... Such a principle is, of course, destructive of all hopes of victory in social and philanthropic advance (382).

Churchill’s reasoning is inspired by the paternalistic one-nation conservatism which dates back to the PM Disraeli in the 19th century. This ideology proposes that the “weak” should receive support from those with higher income but nothing should be done to dismantle the social class divisions. Those up in the social ladder ought to feel the ethical obligation to help but the state should not intervene. In other words, the preservation of social harmony from the middle way conservatism could only be achieved by reform from above and not from below. It can be claimed that this ideology was far more socially inclusive than the neoliberalist economic ideology from the New Right²⁹, but it was still distinct from Socialism.

²⁹A specific current predominant within the Conservative Party in the 1980s in favour of full economic liberalism, deregulation and privatization of state-run businesses.

3.1.3. Nationalism

In no Churchill's speech it is more evident the committed disapproval to socialism than in "Socialism is the Philosophy of Failure" (372). The Conservative manifestos and speeches always referred to the Labour Party as "Socialist" purposefully, although the Labour party was never full-fledged socialist. This was one of Woolton's³⁰ electoral strategies. His aim was to alert the sensitive electorate of the negative connotations of this "alien" ideology (Harris 378). These attempts of a "Red Scare" were not new in British history, as for example seen in the Zinoviev Letter Affair³¹. Woolton's emphasis on the ideological differences can be observed as a sign of lack of consensus. In the speech, it was expressed the fear of the loss of the great empire status as Socialism was deemed to be destructive to abstract values such as nationalism: "our national independence will be gone" (372). He also blatantly resisted the creation of "irresponsible employees" (360) in nationalized industries. His main concern was that they would produce a mass of inefficient, dull and uninspiring workforce, who, without any sort of reward system, would have no initiative to push for further limits in technological process. In a sense, he was already foretelling the repercussions of "British disease"³². Only by means of labour flexibility, he stated, the "traditional virtues of the British character [would] be preserved" (360). This statement is significant, as he subtly linked British identity and patriotism with the willingness of the

³⁰ Conservative Party Manager, responsible for the change of fortunes of the Conservative Party in the 1950-1 general elections.

³¹ This was a public scandal in 1924, motivated by the publication of a fake letter by the Conservative newspaper *Daily Mail*. In that letter it was expressed that the renewal of diplomatic relations between the Labour government and the USSR would cause an upsurge in demands and in the violence of the proletariat.

³² The British disease was a term used by British right-wingers to describe the decaying economy of the 1970s in which low productivity, high wages and excessive power of the trade unions were visible. Other countries such as Germany and Japan overran United Kingdom in technological advance and GDP.

workforce to accept the ever-changing conditions of the free market. So, a reasonable assessment so far is that there was little consensus between the two political agendas.

The anti-establishment and egalitarian ethos in the 1945 Labour manifesto was a pivotal difference between the two parties. Their concept of patriotism was totally distinctive: it is the economic elite, and not the socialists, who were undutiful to the country. According to them, the rich businessmen and their vested interests “controlled the means by which the people got their living” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages) and “they felt no responsibility to the nation” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages). Whereas the Labourites’ main effort was to raise awareness of the class segregation, the Conservative 1945 manifesto indicated that their main objective was the “unity of the British people, which transcends class differences” (“Winston Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors”, no pages). It is obvious that the target against whom both political parties fought against were divergent and hence little can be said in favour of the idea that there was consensus between them.

3.1.4. Meritocracy

Meritocracy was the seal of the Conservative party and one of the elements which must be considered in this discussion. Nowhere it is more evident than in the proposal of The Worker’s Charter³³, where it was stated that “extra effort should always bring extra reward and ... promotion shall be by merit” (“This Is the Road”, no pages). Intimately linked to this concept was the level of taxation. Churchill argued that the income tax was a burden which “discourages the extra effort and superior skill” (384). High taxes should not be levied as it would provoke a brain drain and an uncompetitive economy:

³³ A section of the Industrial Charter (1947).

“extra work, effort and skill ... instead of being penalized, shall gain their just reward” (“This Is the Road”, no pages). The reduction of the income tax in the Butler 1953 budget was a natural response as a way to cater for the needs of the Conservative electorate, very much in line with their dogmas. Churchill blamed the excessive taxes but he very lucidly did not condemn that the taxes were employed to maintain the NHS or the new social measures. He rather savaged the high costs of the bureaucracy newly created: “in order to pay this and similar and Socialist institutions, oppressive taxes are exacted from all” (384). According to him, the sufferance of the high taxation rested on the shoulders of the housewives and the working class, emphasizing that consumer goods such as beer and tobacco had been disproportionately taxed (384). This claim was totally right. Beer was taxed seven times higher than before the war (Steward 40). But electoral opportunism can be seen here. These items, no matter how high its consumption was, were only commodities. Conservatives really distanced themselves from the taxation scheme of the Labour administration because it was disincentive for the bright minds of the British Empire and this was completely logical according to their principles, but their assertion that the taxation affected all alike can only be understood if we consider it as part of the common political rhetorics of a catch-all party.

The Labour Party also clearly specified that the taxation should “bear less heavily on the lower income groups” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages) in a similar fashion to the Conservatives. Dalton’s³⁴ social justice consisted of taking some measures to keep their promise in order to protect the worst off. By 1949, taxation was relaxed: the maternity, unemployment and sickness benefits were exempt from it (“Budget Resolution and Economic Situation”, no pages) and three years before, the

³⁴ Chancellor of the Exchequer during Attlee’s administration (1945-1947).

purchase tax had been eradicated for some household items (Francis 171). On the whole, Churchill's disagreement with Attlee was mainly about the sharp slope of the progressive taxation.

3.1.5. Civil liberty

Freedom stood by itself as a distinctive sign which separated the Labour and the Conservative Party. Churchill's position directly clashed with the controls and regulations of the Labour government and he considered this as part of the process in which the "machinery for the totalitarian grip upon British society is being built up and perfected" (371). His critique, when comparing Great Britain with a quasi-Orwellian state, was most plainly seen in the 1945 election broadcast, when he declared that a Labour government would establish a Gestapo-like government (Steward 22). For Churchill, Socialism and freedom (the inherent essence of the Britishness) were oxymorons, as "Socialist politicians immediately curtail [freedom] if they are displeased with our [the British] behavior" (386). Attlee's response was a sustained ideological argument based on the idea that other countries such as New Zealand and Norway had Socialist governments "with none of these dreadful consequences. There are no countries in the world more free and democratic" (7). Attlee, from his ideological standpoint, understood the lack of civil liberty in other terms. He rather put the accent on the freedom of association of trade unions, severely curtailed by the Conservative administration by Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act³⁵ (25) and considered that trade unions were the beacon of freedom in a world for the workers who found themselves "enslaved by the economic system" (106). Attlee and Churchill understood the concept

³⁵After the General Strike of 1926, Stanley Baldwin (Conservative PM), this Act prohibited strikes, picketing, and prohibited civil servants from joining the Trade Union Congress.

of what totalitarianism meant and what it involved differently and it confirms the lack of consensus.

It is still true that the government control during post-war Britain was arguably higher than in the inter-war period, much to the irritation of the Conservatives. Rationing was one of the clearest examples of these restrictions. The Conservatives' reluctance to endorse this policy showed that the two political parties were far apart in this aspect: "the question ... arises whether there is not some better way of helping the lower income groups ... than ... the whole vast, complex, costly apparatus of rationing" (381). Churchill portrayed himself as the defender of the consumer society of the fifties in contrast with the grey Britain built by Labour party. He summed up his analysis in the following terms: "in peace it [rationing] may well become the alternative to abundance" (383). Oppositely, the 1950 Labour manifesto reaffirmed the necessity of extending rationing as long as necessary. It was openly stated that "only by price control and rationing can fair shares of scare goods be ensured" ("Let Us Win Through Together"), so the different political outlooks between the two political parties regarding regulations were quite marked.

The implications of Churchill's words must be put in a wider perspective. Churchill's speech "Our Socialist Masters" made reference to rationing in the 1950s (378). By that time, clothes and bread were no longer rationed. Even though rationing was reduced at a higher rate during the Conservative administrations, these criticisms can be argued to be exaggerated, playing on the fears of the housewives for electoral benefit. Despite all of this, the rift between the two political parties on this issue was still perceptible because their inherent moral values were different.

Overall, this subsection demonstrates that the lack of theoretical consensus stemmed from their different intellectual backgrounds. Both political parties occupied

the middle ground in the political spectrum, but that did not imply that they were sympathetic to the political culture of the opposing political party and that they shared a vision of a common utopian social environment, but quite the opposite.

3.2. Nationalization and employment

Nationalization was an area of disagreement between the Labour and Conservative parties. Here, unlike in other cases, we must differentiate the realm of the words from the one of the government policies. Churchill publicly and frequently dismissed nationalization: “an awful flop!” (389). He openly criticized nationalization not because it harmed the big business, but the working class. Ironically, he stated that the employees had more difficulties in bargaining the working conditions with their new government bosses than with the previous private employers (389). It was also pointed out that nationalization would raise the food prices for the housewives (“This is the Road”, no pages). Again, the appeal of the common British man is a distinctive feature of the one-nation ideology. A historian must not be misled by these harsh words: even though he condemned the nationalization programme, he only brought the steel industry back to the private sphere during his administration. The most logical explanation is that Churchill personally considered that nationalization was inefficient, but he was forced to maintain the *status quo* due to its popularity. Again, ideological principles contrasted with reality, but disagreement still existed.

The Labour party stressed that the private sector was incapable of achieving full employment and opposed *laissez faire* as its cost was “too high if it is bought at the cost of idleness and misery” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages). In their 1945 political manifesto the Labourites included a comprehensive list of industries which were “over-

ripe for public ownership” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages). This clearly makes reference to one of the Marxist premises, that is, the social ownership of the means of production. Hence it is evident the underlying message that nationalization was indispensable in the following years according to the Labour Party. The Conservatives, on the other hand, firmly stated that only through private enterprise “can mass unemployment be averted” (“This Is the Road”, no pages). Attlee’s 1945 election broadcast simply treated this economic school of thought in these terms: “it is a pathetic faith resting on no foundation of experience” (7). This comment is presumably based on the painful experience that the workers underwent in the thirties when unemployment soared. To conclude, Attlee and Churchill polarized on the remedy of unemployment.

Overall, were there two different political outlooks regarding nationalization? The Labour Party had the impetus to push forward the nationalization even after 1950, when they proposed an extensive programme over less strategic industries such water supply, sugar production, meat, fruit and vegetable trade (“Let Us Win Through Together”, no pages) that would turn the country even more socialist. In contrast, Churchill did not have any intention of continuing the nationalization programme: “we shall bring Nationalisation to a full stop here and now” (“This is the Road”, no pages). Nationalization and employment was a contentious issue which reflected the ideological fracture.

3.3. Education and welfare: debunking the myth of consensus

Education, in general terms, was not drastically reformed by any political party. There was an acknowledgement in the 1945 Labour manifesto that the recent Butler’s 1944 Education Act was the right step (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages). It must be

remembered that this piece of legislation was approved during the coalition government, so both political parties agreed in this area. Yet, ideology, as always, also marked the differences in terms of their priorities. Ellen Wilkinson wanted to raise the school leaving age to 16 (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages) as a way to prevent child labour. On the other side of the coin, the Conservatives primary concern was the parental’s ability of free choice of the school for their children and the maintenance of grammar schools which were admired by the middle-class and upper-classes (“This Is the Road”, no pages). What was at stake, as in other cases, was an ideological battle: how would young generations access the working world?

The first impression that the reader has when the sources are analysed is that the welfare system was understood by both political parties as something that had to be protected. The Conservatives promised “to maintain and improve the Health Service” (“This Is the Road”, no pages) and Macleod began a new phase of consolidation of the NHS. But there were still subtle differences that must not remain unnoticed. The Conservatives sought the decentralization of the NHS and allowing the family doctor to practice outside his hometown (“This Is the Road”, no pages). This was another way in which the Conservatives aimed to provide more freedom from the restrictive legislation, in agreement with their views.

The Conservatives also proved that they would care for the housing. Harold Macmillan even surpassed all the expectations by building more houses than the Labour government. But this was achieved at the expense of relaxing the previous housing legislation (“the restrictive licensing system as it applies to house building should be removed” (“This Is the Road”, no pages)) and reducing the standards of housing (Steward 59). Ideology, even here, permeated all aspects of government. Furthermore, in terms of town planning, the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 was reviled by

the Conservatives because it was not sufficiently flexible and placed too many restrictions in small development plans (“This Is the Road”, no pages). Even though their objectives were analogous, their methods in order to reach the objectives were slightly different.

3.4. Constitutional and political reform

Constitutional reform is not a major theme in any of the sources analysed, but it was implicitly stated in some manifestos. The Labour condemned the class and the hereditary privileges of the House of Lords: “we will not tolerate obstruction of the people’s will by the House of Lords” (“Let Us Face the Future”, no pages). The House of Lords had already become infamously known for blocking progressive laws throughout the 19th and the 20th century, for example, the People’s Budget in 1909. The Labour Parliament Act 1949³⁶ was a natural answer to this Socialist demand. The Conservatives felt that this was a disaster: “they have gravely weakened our system of democratic local government” (“This Is the Road”, no pages). One of the views conveyed by the Labourites was that the House of Commons, that is, the executive power, should have unlimited control for passing laws which were deemed to be “populist”. The opposing view was that it should have a system of checks and balances that would prevent radical reform, irrespective of the electoral results. The absence of consensus can also be grasped in the way in which each of the political parties fundamentally envisaged democratic politics.

³⁶ It reduced the time of delay of a bill of the House of Lords to one year.

3.5. Economic management

Both political manifestos established unemployment as one of the main aims (“This Is the Road”, no pages), yet their economic management differed substantially, as Gaitskell and Butler had two economic rationales. The Conservatives called the Labour economic management the “socialist deception” and Butler, was, unlike what the myth of “Butskellism” has said, the man who shaped, or at least tried to shape, a completely new vision of the economy: “Butler favoured convertibility; Gaitskell defended exchange controls” (ODNB). His primary *ad hoc* response to the inflationary drift in 1952 was that the pound should float, that is, that the exchange rate would be allowed to fluctuate, as a way to counter the negative effects of devaluation and the frequent risk of balance of payment crisis which had happened previously in Attlee’s administration. Even if this, altogether with the deeply prejudiced monetary policy he also proposed, were never implemented (ODNB), the fact that some members of the Cabinet such as the Chancellor of the Exchequer supported it, shows that the ideological origins of this new economic rationale (later seen in James Callaghan’s³⁷ and Thatcher’s administrations) were already perceived as early as in the 1950s. The different approaches to running the economy can be considered as disrupting factors of the consensualist thesis.

3.6. The United Kingdom: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

A distinctive feature not mentioned in any of the secondary sources nor in Labour manifestos is the political integration of the nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern

³⁷ Labour PM (1976-1979), responsible for the implementation of deflationary measures which were necessary under the conditions of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in 1976.

Ireland. Once more, another example of an ideological dispute was conspicuous. The Conservatives felt that a Labour government was synonymous of excessive centralization from London and excessive power of local authorities, but presented it as inherent to the political doctrine of Socialism: “Centralised control which ignores national characteristics is an essential part of Socialism” (“This Is the Road”, no pages). The different policies proposed were an antecedent of the political devolution³⁸ (the Conservatives hoped that it would unleash the potential of each of the nations). The preliminary measures were the creation of a new Ministry of State for Scotland and specific workload related to Welsh affairs would be provided to one of the Ministers in the Cabinet (“This is the Road”, no pages). Limited scope for agreement was achieved here as well.

³⁸ Devolution is a political system by which specific powers from the Parliament of United Kingdom are conceded to the each of the Parliaments of the other nations which constitute United Kingdom.

4. Conclusion

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, there exists sufficient evidence to argue that there was no total consensus between the Conservative and the Labour Party. The main contribution of this study of the post-war consensus debate is to underscore the central role of ideology, which other authors have considered to be less significant. However, the scope of analysis of this bachelor dissertation is limited, in terms of length (the common historiographical discussion spans for many more years than this study: from the end of World War Two, until the advent of Thatcher, when usually consensualists argue that consensus collapsed) and in terms of the geographical framework. Some recommendations for broadening the breadth of analysis could possibly go along the lines of tracing elements of discrepancy of the two political parties during the previous years of war effort (which have generally assumed to be quite peaceful in the War Cabinet), as way to demonstrate that consensus was an illusion. Another line of research could contrast the differences between Blatcherism and the Third Way³⁹ in opposition to “Butskellism” (if it ever existed) and Attlee’s ideology. Finally, the comparison of post-war politics in Britain with those of other countries, specifically New Zealand or those which adopt the Nordic model⁴⁰, might be useful to view this debate in a wider context.

The Labour government commenced in 1945 an unprecedented series of changes in the domestic sphere. The fact that the Conservative Party approved the passing of the laws which implemented these reforms has been one way in which historians have proven the existence of consensus. But, politics, as it has been demonstrated throughout

³⁹ Political philosophy situated in the centre of the political spectrum, whose main politician in United Kingdom was Tony Blair, PM (1997-2007). Blatcherism is, to some extent, a term applied to the establishment of the Third Way during the nineties as a merge of Thatcher’s and Blair’s doctrines.

⁴⁰ The Nordic model refers to the economic and social system in the Scandinavian countries in which a far-reaching welfare state, mixed economy and a heavily unionized society is the norm.

this study, is not just a matter of policy making. Politics is also a battle of ideas and moral values. And, in that respect, as it has been seen, Attlee and Churchill could not differ more.

When Churchill won the 1951 general elections, he faced an important constraint. Many British citizens agreed on the political agenda set by Attlee for the next decades. The historical and political construct of a Conservative party eager to follow Attlee's path, as many consensualists argue, falls apart when it is unveiled that Churchill only consented to maintain this new *status quo* in the name of stability and electoral success. He did not publicly acknowledge to the Conservative electorate that there was no possibility to go back to the pre-war Britain. But his inner convictions and the Conservative creed were incompatible with it. Throughout his speeches and political manifestos, the reader feels this tinge of counter-reform, expressed in strong reproaches against Socialism. They did not take shape in major reforms which would dismantle Attlee's reforms— not at that time. Thus, political consensus seems no more than a myth.

The sources have demonstrated that it was a myth for many reasons. Attlee supported collectivism; Churchill believed in the creation of a property-owning democracy. Attlee assumed that the government was the only entity to rely on for full employment; Churchill believed that the private enterprise would be the motor which would generate wealth and employment. Both had different concepts of what "true Britishness" meant. How can we speak of consensus, if they could not agree on such matters?

In effect, Attlee and Churchill envisioned two ways how British society should be structured. Their divergence can all be summarised in one word: ideology. Decentralization, monetarism and civil liberty were all the underlying themes which the

Conservative party essentially put on the table. Even if compromise was reached in some areas, such as the protection of the NHS and the education system, Attlee and Churchill attempted to leave their distinctive ideological mark in their management in these governmental departments and their legislation. Political parties are often influenced by purely possibilist and pragmatic attitudes, but their ideological thrusts explain much of their policies and disagreements. The conclusion to be drawn is that consensus was a mirage: a nostalgic view of those who were too fearful of Thatcher radical measures during the 80s. They purposefully forgot that during the 1940s and 1950s United Kingdom had been the arena of an ideological struggle which would fully surface in the decades to come.

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6. Appendix

Speeches reviewed in this study:

Churchill's speeches

“A Property-Owning Democracy” 5 October 1946 Conservative Party Conference, Blackpool.

“The Rights of The British” 4 October 1947 Conservative Party Conference, Brighton.

“Socialism is the Philosophy of Failure” 28 May 1948 Scottish Unionist Conference, Perth, Scotland.

“Our Socialist Masters” 9 February 1950 Forum Cinema, Devonport.

“An Experiment in Freedom” 18 May 1950 Usher Hall, Edinburgh.

“Renewing the Glory of our Island Home” 21 July 1951 Royal Wanstead School, Woodford.

Attlee's speeches

“The Election Broadcast” 5th June, 1945.

“A Speech To The House of Commons During The Debate on the Address” 16th August 1945.

“A Speech To the Trades Union Congress” 12th September, 1945.

“A Speech To The House of Commons on the Second Reading of the National Insurance Bill” 7th February, 1946.

7. Conclusiones

A la luz de lo anteriormente mencionado, hay suficiente evidencia para argumentar que no hubo un consenso total entre el partido conservador y el laborista. La principal contribución de este estudio sobre el consenso de posguerra es hacer hincapié en el papel fundamental de la ideología, que otros autores han considerado menos relevante. No obstante, el alcance del análisis del presente trabajo fin de grado es limitado, tanto por la extensión del período analizado (el debate historiográfico general se extiende por muchos más años que este estudio: desde el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial hasta la llegada al poder de Thatcher, donde los consensualistas arguyen que el consenso se derrumbó) como el marco geográfico. Algunas recomendaciones para ampliar el campo de análisis podrían ir encaminadas a buscar elementos de divergencia de los dos partidos políticos en los años previos a la guerra (los cuales generalmente han sido considerados bastante pacíficos en el Gabinete de Guerra), como manera de demostrar que el consenso fue un espejismo. Otra línea de investigación podría contrastar las diferencias entre el Blatcherismo y la Tercera Vía en oposición con el “Bustskellism” (si en algún momento existió) y la ideología de Attlee. Finalmente, comparar las políticas de posguerra en Reino Unido con las implantadas en otros países, en concreto Nueva Zelanda o las que adoptaron el modelo nórdico de bienestar puede ser útil para examinar este debate en un contexto más amplio.

El partido laborista emprendió en 1945 una serie de cambios sin precedentes en la política interior. El hecho de que el partido conservador aprobara las leyes que implementaban estas reformas ha sido una forma usada por los historiadores para justificar la existencia de consenso. Pero la política, tal y como se ha demostrado en este estudio, no es sólo una cuestión de implementar políticas. Es también una batalla de

ideas y de valores morales. Y en este sentido, como se ha podido observar, Attlee y Churchill no pudieron diferir más.

En el momento en el que Churchill ganó las elecciones de 1951, tuvo que hacer frente a una importante limitación. Muchos británicos estuvieron de acuerdo con la agenda política marcada por Attlee para las próximas décadas. El relato histórico y político de un partido conservador que anhelaba seguir el camino de Attlee, como muchos consensualistas proponen, se desmorona cuando se descubre que Churchill sólo accedió a salvaguardar este nuevo *status quo* en nombre de la estabilidad y del rédito electoral. Él no reconoció públicamente al electorado conservador que no había ninguna posibilidad de volver a la Gran Bretaña de entreguerras. Pero sus más profundas convicciones y el pensamiento conservador eran incompatibles con eso. A través de sus discursos y programas políticos, el lector percibe ese velado matiz de contrarreforma, expresados en sus vituperios contra el socialismo. Éstos no se plasmaron en grandes reformas que desmantelaran las de Attlee – al menos no entonces. Por ende, el consenso político pareció ser solamente un mito.

Las fuentes señalan que fue un mito por muchas razones. Attlee apoyaba el colectivismo; Churchill defendía la creación de la democracia de la clase propietaria. Attlee creía que el gobierno era la única institución en la que se podía confiar para el pleno empleo; Churchill entendía que la empresa privada podía ser el motor de la creación de riqueza y empleo. Ambos tenían distintos conceptos de lo que significaba la “verdadera alma de lo británico”. ¿Cómo podemos hablar de consenso, si no pudo haber un acuerdo entre ellos sobre estas cuestiones?

En efecto, Attlee y Churchill visualizaron dos maneras de cómo debía estructurarse la sociedad británica. Sus discrepancias pueden resumirse en una sola palabra: ideología. Descentralización, monetarismo y libertad individual eran todas

cuestiones subyacentes que el partido conservador sacó a relucir. Incluso si hubo compromiso en algunas áreas, como en la defensa del NHS y del sistema educativo, Attlee y Churchill buscaron dar su propia seña de identidad en el gobierno de esos ministerios y sus leyes. En muchas ocasiones, las actitudes puramente posibilistas y pragmáticas influyen en los partidos políticos, pero sus impulsos ideológicos explican muchas de sus políticas y desavenencias. La conclusión que se puede extraer es que el consenso fue un espejismo: un recuerdo y anhelo sentimental de aquellos que vivieron con estupor las medidas radicales de Thatcher en los años 80. *Ex professo* olvidaron que durante los años 40 y 50 el Reino Unido había sido el campo de batalla de una lucha ideológica que se manifestaría en su totalidad en las décadas venideras.