Perspectives on Elections and Labour Governments, 1964-1970

BY

*Richard SIBLEY**

ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES ON ELECTIONS AND LABOUR GOVERNMENTS, 1964-1970

There have been many different perspectives on the Wilson years, partly because of the often controversial material which has interpreted them in the light of later events in Labour Party and British history. General elections in particular are subject to changing perspectives. This article therefore explores the years 1964-1970, and especially the three general elections of 1964, 1966 and 1970, as they have been viewed in the short, medium and long term. Whilst many analyses have focussed on the role of Prime Minister Wilson, the longer view would suggest that 1964-1970 should not be seen solely in terms of the personality, actions and failings of Harold Wilson.

RÉSUMÉ

PERSPECTIVES SUR LES ÉLECTIONS ET LES GOUVERNEMENTS TRAVAILLISTES, 1964-1970

Il existe de nombreuses perspectives différentes sur les années Wilson, en partie à cause des interprétations souvent polémiques qui les ont considérées à la lumière de ce qui s'est passé plus tard au sein du parti travailliste et en Grande-Bretagne. De surcroît, l'interprétation de toutes les élections législatives change selon la perspective. Cet article explore donc les années 1964-1970, et tout particulièrement les trois élections générales de 1964, 1966, et 1970, dans le court, le moyen et le long terme. Tandis qu'on a souvent mis l'accent sur le rôle du premier ministre que fut Harold Wilson, une perspective à long terme semble indiquer que les années 1964-1970 ne doivent pas être interprétées simplement en fonction de la personnalité, des actions et des défauts de Wilson.

* Université Paris XIII, UFR LSHS, av J-B Clément, 93430 Villetaneuse.

One of the problems facing the student of the Wilson years is that of historical perspective. Controversial, fascinating, and difficult enough to understand at the time, the years 1964 to 1970 were subsequently to be presented through the differing prisms of a more than usually substantial output of memoirs, diaries, and biographies, a vast range of mostly critical analyses from journalists, Labour intellectuals and activists, as well as several ostensibly more objective assessments by professional historians. The context of most of these writings was the defeat of 1970, followed by the disappointing performance of the 1974-79 Labour governments, and the almost fatal collapse of the Labour Party during the early Thatcher years. Harold Wilson and his governments were to be blamed for much of what went wrong with the Labour Party and the wider Labour movement in the 1970s and the 1980s, and their supposed failures were to be the basis for a fundamental upheaval in Labour organisation, policy-making and personnel. They were also part of the prelude to that other fundamental upheaval, in Britain, which was to be called the "Thatcher Revolution", as well as a point of reference for Tony Blair's New Labour. Thus, disentangling what happened between 1964 and 1970, how events were seen at the time, and the abundance of often polemical material published with the benefit of hindsight, is a major difficulty.

The three general elections of 1964, 1966 and 1970 are a particularly apt illustration of the difficulties of perspective. Quite apart from the specific problems of unravelling different views on the Wilson years, all general elections can be seen in distinct short, medium and long term perspectives. The uncertainties and the apparent certainties of the pre-election period give way to the electorate's definitive verdict as soon as the election is over. Whatever the outcome (close contest, landslide, or comfortable victory, each of which occurred from 1964 to 1970), there is a tendency to view all election results, and their consequences over the following months and years, as having been more or less inevitable. Every election is also eventually seen as just one part of a slowly unfolding pattern which becomes clear only in retrospect.[1] Each of the three elections under consideration here is, in its own way, a good example of shifting perspectives. The narrow Labour win of 1964, which put an end to thirteen years of Conservative government, reasserted alternation between government and opposition parties, and inaugurated eighteen months of tight parliamentary and government management, was unexpectedly narrow, and nearly turned out to be a fourth consecutive defeat for Labour. The very comfortable 1966 victory which gave Labour its first opportunity since 1945-50 to show what it could do with a working majority, was by no means the foregone conclusion that it was to seem after it had happened. The defeat of June 1970, followed by the turbulent 1970s which at times saw Britain on the brink of political, financial, and economic collapse, was of course a major surprise, confounding opinion polls and pundits alike, and the subject of much psephological soul-sear-

ching thereafter. Indeed all three election results were seen at the time as being much more surprising than subsequent perspectives may suggest. So, in the following pages we shall attempt to briefly refocus on each of these elections from three distinct perspectives : (1) as they were seen at the time, in the sense of the context and expectations before the election result became clear ; (2) the short to medium term aftermath, meaning how each election result impinged on the following days, months and years of government ; and (3) how each election may be seen to fit into the long-term development of British electoral politics.

The October 1964 General Election

The Conservative Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home had waited until the last possible moment before calling the election. The 1959-64 parliament was indeed the first peacetime legislature in the twentieth century to last a full term. This was because since mid-1961 opinion polls had shown a Labour lead over the Conservatives, who were therefore holding on in the hope that they could recover. During the election campaign proper the polls fluctuated somewhat, but it was widely expected that Labour would win with a large enough majority to govern comfortably. In the event the Conservative to Labour swing of 3.2 % was the largest since 1951, yet Harold Wilson had a wafer-thin majority of only four[2] over all other parties in the House of Commons : the smallest clear majority - smaller even than the majority of five won by Attlee in 1950 — since Britain's first mass electorate had voted in 1885.[3] So the immediate impression was that Labour had only just held on to its lead, and scraped home with a tiny majority which, in the oft-quoted phrase *"we don't discuss nightmares like that"*, Wilson himself had discounted when he had become Labour leader in 1963. Later, in his memoirs, Wilson was even to suggest that if the overthrow of Krushchev in the Soviet Union and China's first nuclear test had come a few hours earlier, public opinion might have been sufficiently unsettled to vote safe and return the Conservatives for a fourth successive term.[4] However, once he had become Prime Minister Wilson immediately asserted that Labour could and would govern resolutely, despite the narrowness of their parliamentary majority.

So ended the period of Conservative government which had begun thirteen years earlier when Churchill became Prime Minister in October 1951. Although attention was thereafter focussed on the composition of the new government, the reorganization of government departments, and Labour's first policy announcements, the most cursory glance at the voting figures showed that despite the Labour win and the size of the swing, the 1964 general election was much more a Conservative defeat than a Labour victory. For, as the table on page 36 shows, the Labour vote of 27.7 million had actually *fallen* compared with the previous general election (27.9 million in 1959), and although its percentage of the vote had risen marginally (from 43.8 % to 44.1 %), it was by far the lowest percentage poll for a winning party since 1945, indeed since 1929.

What had happened was that the Conservatives had lost nearly two million votes compared with 1959 (a drop of 6 %) — the biggest fall in one party's vote, and the Conservatives' lowest share of the votes, since 1945 — and that Labour owed its "victory" to the disaffected Conservative voters who had either abstained or switched to the Liberals. Indeed had the Liberals not fielded 149 more candidates than in 1959, the Conservatives could have won : in 18 seats won by Labour, the Liberal vote was bigger than the Labour majority over the Conservatives.

A narrow escape for Labour, a tiny majority, a decrease in actual support for the party, all of these features, though mentioned at the time, soon retreated into the background as attention was focussed on how the new government would perform. The most important consequence of the 1964 result was, after all, that after thirteen years in the wilderness Labour had once again been returned to government. A brief survey of those years since the last Labour government will help to show why this was seen as the most important feature of the 1964 result, quite apart from the understandable interest in the consequences of the election rather than what might have happened or what lay behind the result.

The Labour Party had grown steadily in electoral and parliamentary strength from its foundation in 1900[5] up to 1951 : a small parliamentary group in the days before the First World War (growing from 2 to 42 MPs), during the inter-war years Labour became the official opposition in 1922 and formed two minority governments (1924, 1929-31) ; after the electoral setback of 1931, the party played an important role during the Second World War, when several top Cabinet and government posts were held by Labour ministers. The party won its first clear majority, a landslide, in 1945, and governed under Prime Minister Attlee from 1945 to 1951 when, although losing office, the Labour Party won nearly 14 million votes, a record for one party which was to stand until 1992. There was, however, considerable recrimination against the ageing Attlee for calling the 1951 election when he did, without consulting any of his colleagues, and for then carrying on as Labour leader for another four years.[6] From 1951 to 1959 the Conservatives won three successive victories, each time increasing both their vote and the margin of victory over Labour. In the ten years from 1951 to 1961, the Labour Party was seen as being largely responsible for its own defeats and difficulties. It seemed to have lost direction, unable to define a new purpose and programme after the implementation of its long-held policies by the 1945-51 governments. For much of the period the party was divided into two warring factions, the left led by Aneurin Bevan and the "Bevanites", the centre-right led by Gaitskell. The hostilities between the two factions were both personal and political. Furthermore Labour's organisation was much inferior to that of the Conservatives, and described in the 1955 Wilson report as a "penny-farthing" machine, and a rusty one at that, in the age of the jet engine. By the 1959 election Gaitskell and Bevan had patched up their differences, and as leader and deputy leader seemed on the brink of reversing Labour's decline : support for the

Conservatives fell in some opinion polls during the first half of the election campaign, making the eventual increased Conservative majority under Harold Macmillan ("Supermac" of the *"You've never had it so good"* slogan[7]) an even more bitter pill for Labour to swallow. The Conservatives had broken a record going back to the 1820s in winning three succcessive general elections, and had moreover improved their electoral performance in 1955 (the first government party to do so since the 1860s), and again in 1959 compared with 1955. Labour's 1959 defeat lent increasing support to the view that the party was outdated, with its trade-union associations and "cloth-cap" working-class image in the increasingly middle-class Britain of the 1950s consumer society. Labour's socialist Clause IV, its retention of unpopular nationalization and public ownership policies, and the identification of the Labour left with unilateral nuclear disarmament, were all seen as electoral handicaps. The famous *Must Labour Lose ?* published in 1960,[8] concluded that the Labour Party would never win another general election unless it underwent substantial reform. From 1959 to 1961 the omens were not good : Gaitskell, who had succeeded Attlee as Labour leader in 1955, failed to persuade the party to renounce Clause IV in 1959, and in 1960 found himself in the unprecedented position for a Labour leader of being twice defeated by party conference votes against his statement of the party's defence policy and in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. This background of a ten-year period of defeats, disharmony and despair were to weigh very heavily in the reaction, by Labour politicians and activists, observers of the political scene, and the general public, to the party's victory in 1964.

UK ELECTION RESULTS 1945-1997

Date	Elec	Votes cast	Conservative	Labour	Liberal	Others	Seats	C	Lab	Lib	Oth
1945	33.2m	25.1m	10.0m (39.8 %)	12.0m (47.8 %)	2.2m (9.0 %)	0.9m (2.8 %)	640	213	393	12	22
1950	33.3m	28.8m	12.5m (43.5 %)	13.3m (46.1 %)	2.6m (9.1 %)	0.4m (1.3 %)	625	298	315	9	3
1951	34.6m	28.6m	13.7m (48.0 %)	13.9m (48.8 %)	0.7m (2.5 %)	0.2m (3.0 %)	625	321	295	6	3
1955	34.9m	26.8m	13.3m (49.7 %)	12.4m (46.4 %)	0.7m (2.7 %)	0.3m (3.9 %)	630	344	277	6	3
1959	35.4m	27.9m	13.7m (49.4 %)	12.2m (43.8 %)	1.6m (5.9 %)	0.1m (2.5 %)	630	365	258	6	1
1964	35.9m	27.7m	12.0m (43.4 %)	12.2m (44.1 %)	3.1m (11.2 %)	0.3m (1.5 %)	630	304	317	9	0
1966	36.0m	27.3m	11.4m (41.9 %)	13.1m (47.9 %)	2.3m (8.5 %)	0.4m (2.3 %)	630	253	363	12	2
1970	39.3m	28.3m	13.1m (46.4 %)	12.2m (43.0 %)	2.1m (7.5 %)	0.9m (2.7 %)	630	330	287	6	7
1974 F	39.8m	31.3m	11.9m (37.9 %)	11.6m (37.1 %)	6.1m (19.3 %)	1.8m (5.7 %)	635	297	301	14	23
1974 O	40.1m	29.2m	10.5m (35.8 %)	11.5m (39.2 %)	5..3m (18.3 %)	1.9m (6.7 %)	635	277	319	13	26
1979	41.1m	31.2m	13.7m (43.9 %)	11.5m (36.9 %)	4..3m (13.8 %)	1.7m (5.4 %)	635	339	269	11	16
1983	42.2m	30.7m	13.0m (42.4 %)	8.5m (27.6 %)	7.8m (25.4 %)	1.4m (4.6 %)	650	397	209	23	21
1987	43.2m	32.5m	13.8m (42.3 %)	10.0m (30.8 %)	7.3m (22.6 %)	1.4m (4.3 %)	650	376	229	22	23
1992	43.2m	33.6m	14.1m (41.9 %)	11.6m (34.4 %)	6.0m (17.8 %)	2.0m (5.8 %)	651	336	271	20	24
1997	43.8m	31.3m	9.6m (30.7 %)	13.5m (43.2 %)	5.2m (16.8 %)	2.9m (9.3 %)	659	165	418	46	30

Sources :
1945-1983 figures taken or adapted from D. & G. BUTLER, *British Political Facts 1900-1985*, London : Macmillan, 1986 (6th edn.), pp. 226-228.
1987, 1992 & 1997 figures taken or adapted D. BUTLER & D. KAVANAGH, *The British General Election of 1997*, London : Macmillan, 1997, p. 255.
Note : The votes counted as "Liberal" in 1983 & 1987 comprise the Liberal + SDP Alliance, and in 1992 & 1997 the Liberal Democrats. 1974 to 1997 : "others" include all parties in Northern Ireland.

Equally important, in the light of the narrowness of that victory, was the change in fortunes that had taken place since 1961. The Conservatives began to suffer a seemingly unending series of setbacks : economic growth ground to a halt, inflation set in, along with a balance-of-payments deficit. In July 1961 the Chancellor Selwyn Lloyd announced an unpopular "pay pause". The safe Conservative seat of Orpington was lost to the Liberals in a March 1962 by-election, and on the 14th July 1962 Macmillan sacked seven members of his Cabinet (*"the night of the long knives"*). But nothing stemmed the tide of "events" :[9] three by-elections were lost to Labour in 1962, unemployment began to rise, Britain's "independent" nuclear deterrent required a (costly) American delivery system, and there were power cuts during the severe winter of 1962-63 ; Britain's application to join the EEC was rejected by President de Gaulle in January, the Profumo scandal exploded in June, and in October 1963 Macmillan announced his intention to retire. With the three major candidates for his succession (Butler, Hailsham and Maudling) presenting themselves at the annual Conservative Party conference which happened to be in session, it came as a great surprise when the Earl of Home, whose name had not been mentioned and who was not even an MP in the Commons, "emerged" and was appointed Prime Minister.[10] Two prominent Conservatives, Iain Macleod and Enoch Powell, refused to serve under Home, and a fierce argument within the party over the Resale Price Maintenance Bill meant that the Conservatives were now seen as the divided party. In the meantime, Gaitskell seemed to have healed the divisions in the Labour Party, and after his sudden death in January 1963, the new leader Harold Wilson skilfully put Labour's divisions firmly in the past and presented an image of a young, forward-looking leader at the head of a reformed party set to modernize the British economy. Labour's manifesto was entitled *The New Britain*. Equally at ease on television and in Parliament, Wilson, the bright statistician who understood economics, made a sharp contrast with the aristocratic and diffident Sir Alec Douglas-Home (as Lord Home had become) who, in an interview no doubt intended to show him as a man of the people, had professed that he used matchsticks to help count the economic figures, a remark mercilessly exploited by Wilson. Home had no choice but to postpone the election as long as possible in the hope that Conservative fortunes would improve.

What transpired was that after over two years of a clear Labour lead in the opinion polls, as the election date drew nearer and during a lively campaign, the gap between the parties narrowed and some polls put the Conservatives ahead. Home turned out to be a more effective performer than had at first seemed likely. Nevertheless, polls published in the few days leading up to the vote did suggest a comfortable Labour victory, and election night predicitions were for a Labour majority of about thirty, making the narrowness of the final result quite a surprise. Thus at the time there were conflicting perspectives on the 1964 election result : Labour was at the same time exultant (to have at last succeeded in winning an election, after thirteen years in opposition), relieved (to have won, after the late doubts and scares) and disappointed (not to have won as easi-

ly as had seemed probable), but the party's minds were all concentrated by the narrow majority, and the urgency and difficulties of the tasks in hand. The Conservatives too were both disappointed (not to have pulled off a remarkable recovery) and relieved (to have lost so narrowly). Conservative minds were concentrated by the prospect that they had not been heavily defeated but on the contrary, given Labour's narrow majority, there was everything to play for. In the forty-eight-year-old Harold Wilson, Britain now had its youngest Prime Minister of the twentieth century.

The March 1966 General Election

The eighteen months between the 1964 and 1966 elections can be seen as both the sequel to the former and the prelude to the latter. In the hours and days following the October 1964 result, Wilson quashed all talk of the impossibility of Labour governing and of the need for a coalition with the Liberals, with rapid and firm words and actions. He immediately made clear his intention to govern as if Labour had a secure majority. On his first evening in office, he stated on television that the small majority "*will not affect our ability to govern*". He made six major Cabinet appointments within hours of accepting office, undertook a reorganization of government departments (notably the creation of the Department of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Technology, the Ministry of Overseas Development and the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources,[11] the merging of some departments and the abolition of others[12]), and clearly asserted government intentions and policies over the first few days. A sense of vigour and urgency was introduced when Wilson suggested, in a phrase reminiscent of Kennedy, that his government should be judged on its "*first hundred days*" in office. Rarely, it seemed, had an election result so quickly changed the landscape and pushed pre-election hopes, fears and doubts firmly into the past. Eighteen months later when Wilson instigated the next general election, despite the fact that "*no party in Britain had ever attempted to govern alone with such a precarious majority*", it was "*at a time entirely of the Prime Minister's own choosing*".[13]

In the event the Labour government had both to be less ambitious than Wilson's initial pronouncements had suggested, and more cautious, if not conservative, in the face of economic and diplomatic developments. The government's position was at times delicate, given the reality of a tiny majority (down to only two in autumn 1965), a handful of backbench Labour MPs who had doubts about some of Labour's main policies (most notably the re-nationalization of the steel industry), and substantially more than a handful who expressed concern at the government's reaction to what turned out to be far more serious economic difficulties than had been expected, at support for American policy in Vietnam, and at Wilson's handling of the Rhodesian crisis. In fact, from the start it was obvious that Wilson would have to go to the country fairly soon in order to try and achieve a proper working majority. That Labour governed with such apparent ease for eighteen months was quite remarkable, for at the time there was more

or less continuous speculation about the imminence of a dissolution.

In retrospect, there seem to have been four phases, corresponding to shifts in the opinion polls which themselves both reflected how government and opposition were performing, and affected the perceptions of those performances. The first phase began after the 1964 October election with Labour 12 points ahead of the Conservatives in the November Gallup poll, a lead which was quickly cut as the government reacted to a serious economic situation and a sterling crisis that threatened to deteriorate : there were announcements of 15 % import surcharges, an increase in the bank rate, income tax, petrol duty, and National Insurance contributions, and new capital gains and corporation taxes. The defeat of Patrick Gordon Walker, Labour's Foreign Secretary, at the Leyton by-election in January 1965 forced the minister's resignation and reduced Labour's Commons majority to only three : this demoralized Labour supporters, intensified rumours of an imminent dissolution, and made a rapid Conservative return to government look distinctly possible as they led Labour in the polls as early as February 1965.

The next phase lasted three months. In February 1965 the Conservatives briefly held a small opinion poll lead over Labour. In his April budget, Callaghan increased duties on tobacco, beer and spirits (though election pledges to increase pensions and abolish prescription charges were fulfilled). There were severe defence spending cuts, increased postal charges and vehicle licence fees, and restrictions on hire purchase and credit. The Prices and Incomes Board was set up in February, with norms defined for both, alienating trade unions and industrial leaders and turning out to be well below the actual increases in both wages and prices. In May 1965 the government only just got parliamentary approval for its White Paper on the re-nationalization of steel, after a tense debate in which two Labour backbenchers (Donnelly and Wyatt) had threatened to rebel. The Steel Nationalization Bill was effectively postponed. The controversy over steel gave the impression of a bitterly divided Labour, and in May the party suffered severe losses in the local elections and began to trail consistently in the opinion polls. This third phase lasted from May to September 1965. In July there were cuts in spending on local government and building programmes (though projected spending on houses, hospitals and schools was to be maintained). Also in July 1965, Sir Alec Douglas-Home retired from the Conservative leadership, and with the new election procedure in place (instead of the customary "consultations"), Edward Heath narrowly defeated Maudling to become Leader of the Opposition. There was talk of a Lib-Lab coalition or pact, and in August for the only time the polls indicated that the popularity of the Leader of the Opposition was greater than that of the Prime Minister. The long-running controversies over Vietnam and Rhodesia and pressure on the pound continued to undermine confidence in the government, and at the Labour Party conference in early October there was a revolt against the government's White Paper on immigration. The government's parliamentary majority had been reduced to two by the

end of the summer recess. But already the fourth, final phase had begun, although it is not clear just why opinion shifted. Wilson seemed to be handling Rhodesia skilfully throughout the second half of 1965 (this was an issue that divided the Conservatives under their new leader), and in September 1965 George Brown's "National Plan" was announced. Despite talk of wage restrictions in October 1965, and defence cuts leading to a ministerial resignation in February 1966 (Christopher Mayhew), the popularity of both the Prime Minister and his party suddenly surged ahead of Heath and the opposition in September 1965 and a very comfortable lead in the polls was maintained throughout the next twelve months. Major policy reviews and legislative proposals were beginning to come through : rate rebates for people on low incomes, the creation of the Land Commission, the structures for national and regional planning and development, earnings-related benefits, and a housing target of half a million new homes a year.

So the government survived despite the constant predictions of its downfall and of an election forced upon the Prime Minister. Few had believed that Wilson would in fact be able to determine the date of the election when, in June 1965, he had asserted that he had no intention of going to the country before the end of the year. A resounding Labour by-election success at Hull in January 1966 doubtless helped to convince Wilson that the time was ripe for a general election. It was announced for March 31st, and throughout a one-sided election campaign the only question seemed to be just how big Labour's safe majority would be. Labour was well ahead in the polls, Wilson far in front of Heath on almost every measure of popularity and competence, and seemingly able to outmanoeuvre the Leader of the Opposition on almost every issue and occasion. With the now familiar pipe, quick wit and outward calm, Wilson appeared at once reassuring, sharp, and reliable. In contrast Heath appeared somewhat shy, lacking in self-assurance and unable to impose a grip on his own party. In terms of policies, at every positive proposal put forward by Heath, Wilson simply reminded the voters that the Conservatives had been in power for thirteen years and asked why they had not implemented what they were now promising.

When the result was finally declared, Labour had 363 MPs and a majority of 96 over all other parties (see the table on page 34). The party had won its biggest vote since 1951, and a 3.8 % increase compared with 1964. The net swing towards Labour was 2.7 %, and was nationally uniform throughout all the regions. For the first time since the war the main opposition party made not a single gain against the national trend. The Conservative result — in terms of votes, share of the vote, and seats — was their worst since 1945. The impact of the Liberals on the overall outcome was negligible, with few seats won or lost by the two main parties due to the presence or absence of a Liberal candidate, although the party did push its number of MPs up to 12, the highest figure since 1945, and gained one seat from Labour, Colne Valley.[14] Short-term explanations for the result tended to focus on the two main party leaders, on the Conservatives' failure to successfully distance themselves from the image of the tired

party of 1961-64, and on the perhaps simplistic view that Labour had now proved it could govern and deserved a chance to do so with a proper majority (*"You know Labour government works"* had been a Labour election slogan). The swing towards Labour, compared with 1964, was highest among women, the under-30s and the over-65s. Butler and Stokes were later to focus on a new variable combining demographic with historical factors : the idea of generations or "cohorts" amongst the electorate, a feature which for the first time was favouring the Labour Party.[15]

So the election result was not a surprise in the context of the expectations of the previous few months. In retrospect too, Labour's sizeable victory has sometimes been presented as inevitable. In other words, the uncertainties, the real possibility that Labour would stumble and the Conservatives stage a rapid recovery - all distinctly on the agenda from October 1964 until early 1966 — were soon forgotten. The titles of the election manifestos of the two main parties did seem to underline just how hamstrung the Labour government had been by its lack of a majority : Labour's *Time For Decision* expressed not dissimilar sentiments to the Conservatives' *Action Not Words*. But some credit was surely due to the Prime Minister, his party and his colleagues, for achieving a result that had not really been at all inevitable. One is however reminded of a remark made by Harold Wilson, just before the 1964 election, about what would today be called party management : he had said that the Labour Party was like a stage-coach that should be kept moving as fast as possible, never mind in what direction, for if the driver allowed it to stop the passengers would all get out and start arguing over which way to go. Was it not the lack of direction that by 1967-68, and even more after 1970, the critics of Harold Wilson were to seize upon as the fundamental failure ?

The June 1970 General Election

Labour celebrations and the new confidence brought about by the 1966 election were to prove short-lived. Secure parliamentary majorities tend to encourage the fissiparous tendency, and Britain's fundamental economic weaknesses were soon not just to dominate the headlines and government (un)popularity, but to absorb almost all the energy of Prime Minister and government. Though the details are complex, an overall view of the next four years is simple. In a matter of weeks the government was plunged into an economic and financial crisis that forced drastic measures and sapped confidence. From 1967 to 1969, the government broke all records of unpopularity and recovery seemed impossible. After the *In Place of Strife* traumas in 1969, which saw the Labour government, party and movement profoundly divided within themselves, Harold Wilson and Labour did, however, apparently stage a dramatic recovery and seemed set to record their third successive victory, fulfilling Wilson's declared intention of making Labour the "natural party of government"... far away indeed from the old days of the 1950s. What happened at the June 1970 election is now deeply ingrained in the lore of electoral history : opinion polls, experts and Prime Minister were all coun-

founded by the British electorate, who returned Edward Heath and his Conservative Party to government, after an interlude of less than six years. Why ? Had the polls been wrong, or was there a real last-minute swing against Labour, due to the publication of unfavourable balance-of-payment figures two days before the vote, or the demoralizing effect (notably on some significant strata of Labour's traditional electorate) of the three goals scored by Germany the preceding weekend in the Mexico World Cup, reversing a 2-0 first-half England lead ?[16]

The main tasks of the student of the Wilson years are, as David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky noted on the opening page of *The British General Election of 1970*, "*to see why Labour went into the depths of public disfavour ; to show how it recovered ; and then to examine ways in which the Conservatives won after all.*" A brief summary of the ground that has to be covered in order to answer these questions should include the following elements :

From 1966 to 1969 :

- Throughout these years, the government struggled with Britain's economic weaknesses. Rejecting the Labour left's solution of nationalization (though the steel industry was finally re-nationalized in July 1967), the government tried to restructure the British economy, and solve what was perceived as the central problem of the balance of payments, by encouraging improved management and increased productivity, essentially through a process of indicative planning (a solution which failed both in terms of results, and of highly unpopular statutory restrictions on both prices and incomes : a six-month "wage freeze" July 1966-January 1967, followed by "severe restraint" from February 1967 and renewed prices and incomes control early in 1968). Devaluation of the pound, so long resisted by a majority of the Cabinet (but not unanimously : George Brown in particular had long been in favour of devaluation to stimulate exports), was finally announced on November 18th 1967 after great pressure, and therefore universally perceived as a consequence and a sign of the failure of government policies. It was seen as a personal reverse for Harold Wilson, who had resisted the option of devaluation until there was no choice. Similarly, so many very unpopular economic, financial, regulatory and fiscal measures had been adopted in the face of necessity or crisis, contrary to rather than part of stated long-term policy : in addition to devaluation and restrictions on prices and incomes, the controversial new Selective Employment Tax announced in April 1966, the July 1966 measures which failed to save the pound (spending and investment cuts, restrictions on credit and foreign currency for holidays abroad, surcharges on drinks and petrol, increased postal charges) and provoked the resignation of Frank Cousins from the government and George Brown from the Department of Economic Affairs, further spending cuts in January 1968 (defence, education, health, with the reimposition of prescription charges and a postponement of the promised raising of the school-leaving age) followed by yet another deflationary budget in March 1968 (further increases in the duty on tobacco, spirits and petrol, in pur-

chase tax and car tax, and a special levy on high incomes) and again in 1969 (increases in corporation and selective employment tax). The unemployment figures were often unfavourable, with the highest summer unemployment figures for twenty seven years recorded in 1967, and a steadily rising rate from 1.2 % in the first quarter of 1966 to 2.6 % by the second quarter of 1970 (all this despite, or perhaps more accurately because of, the government's efforts). With only two exceptions (late 1966 and early 1967), the balance of payments figures were consistently unfavourable in 1966, 1967 and 1968.

- Unemployment and many of the economic and financial measures led to deep feelings of hostility to the Labour government on the part of Labour's core electorate, trade-unionists, with several headline-catching strikes, and demonstrations by the unemployed. The January 1969 draft White Paper *In Place of Strife* and the Industrial Relations Bill aimed at reforming trade unions, piloted by Barbara Castle with the support of the Prime Minister, ironically led to prolonged strife in the Cabinet, Parliamentary Labour Party and the labour movement as a whole, with much bad feeling between government and unions. In June 1969 the proposed reforms had to be abandoned in the face of Labour and trade-union opposition.

- The government's decision to apply in May 1967 for British membership of the EEC did not have the wholehearted support of either the Labour Party or the general public ; there was indeed substantial opposition to this policy, and de Gaulle's second veto on the British application, on 28th November 1967, was seen as a humiliation for Wilson and the Labour government.

- Defence cuts and the July 1967 announcement of an end to Britain's world role with the withdrawal of forces from "East of Suez", after the Defence White Paper of February 1967 had re-asserted the government's intention to maintain a British presence East of Suez, seemed to be the result of adaptation to British economic weakness rather than part of any coherent and deliberate strategy.

- Much of the government's foreign policy attracted hostility from the Labour left, or the predominantly conservative media, or both : continued support for the USA in Vietnam, including the bombing of cities in North Vietnam and the widespread use of napalm and chemical weapons ; efforts to find a compromise with the rebel Smith regime in Rhodesia ; policy over Biafra and the Nigerian civil war, overseas aid, and the question of arms sales to South Africa.

Labour remained clearly ahead in the opinion polls throughout 1966, and until April 1967, and the shock of a by-election loss to the Welsh Nationalists at Camarthen in July 1966 seemed to have no general significance. But after losing the marginal Glasgow Pollock to the Conservatives (where the SNP made inroads into both the big parties' votes) and almost losing the supposedly ultra-safe Rhondda West to the Welsh Nationalists in March 1967, there were heavy losses in local elections in April and May 1967 ; the party lost ground in the opinion polls and fell behind the Conservatives in April. The pattern of by-election losses, sweeping defeats in local elections, and ever-

worsening poll figures was to be repeated in 1968 and 1969. The Conservative lead in the opinion polls reached double figures in the autumn of 1967, was over 25 % in the spring of 1968, and remained in double figures (from 15 % to 21 %) until autumn 1969. In by-elections from 1966 to 1969 Labour lost sixteen seats out of the thirty one it had to defend (whereas in all the years from 1900 to 1964 the party had only lost fifteen seats in by-elections). Between September 1967 and June 1968, Labour lost some of its very safest seats with swings bigger than any since the war.[17] The Scottish and Welsh nationalists were a particular threat to the Labour vote in some of its formerly strongest heartlands. In a word, the Labour government was put on the defensive almost as soon as the March 1966 election had been so convincingly won, and its unpopularity became so deep and long-running as to seem irreversible. This both reflected the depth of hostility to the government, and inhibited its political will to take more unpopular measures that, according to Treasury and press advice, further deflation demanded.

Amidst all this gloom for the Labour government, there were some successes but these were mostly to be recognized only in retrospect and seemed to have no positive impact on Labour's standing in the opinion polls : the creation of the new Civil Service Department and the streamlining of the Ministry of Defence, more effective methods of public expenditure accounting, reforms of parliamentary procedure and committees, education and transport legislation, the modernization of moral and social legislation (homosexuality, abortion, divorce, censorship, Sunday entertainments, the abolition of capital punishment, race relations).

Then from 1969 to 1970 the government's position and that of the Prime Minister improved dramatically. Gallup polls showed a reduction in the Conservative lead to single figures in the autumn of 1969 and spring 1970, and Labour moved ahead for the first time for over three years in May 1970. The balance of payments figures moved into surplus in the first quarter of 1969 and stayed in the black until the general election. In January 1970 the foreign currency restrictions were withdrawn and in Roy Jenkins' 1970 budget two million people were removed from the lower income-tax bracket. When attention began to focus on the Conservative opposition, Edward Heath was still having difficulty in maintaining a united party and in improving the public's perception of his own performance. Labour morale improved when the local elections at last showed substantial gains for the party, and it was in the context of this belated but welcome recognition of the Labour government's efforts that Wilson called an early election for June 18th 1970, nine and a half months before the parliament had run its full term.

Expectation of a third successive Labour victory was almost universal, with Edward Heath apparently alone among leading Conservatives in believing that he could win. But on election night the first result, from Guildford, showed a substantial increase in the sitting Conservative's majority. In the following minutes three more results confir-

med the swing to the Conservatives, and it was obvious to everyone that the Labour Party was going to lose. Such a prospect would have surprised no-one a year earlier, but in the light of the government's apparent recovery it was a sudden shock, and the worst reverse in British electoral history for the opinion poll organizations.[18] Compared with 1966 Labour made a net loss of 76 seats, the Conservatives a net gain of 77. With 330 Conservative MPs, Edward Heath was to have a comfortable majority of thirty over all other parties. Once again the Liberals had little impact on the overall result, and ended up with the familiar "taxi" of 6 MPs. For the first time ever, a Scottish Nationalist MP was returned at a general election. The net Labour to Conservative swing was 4.7 %, the biggest since 1945. For the first time there was evidence of a significant regional difference in voting, with hints of the Scotland-Wales-North of England/South and South-East of England divide that was to be a feature of the 1980s, with the dividing line somewhere in the heart of England, in the Midlands. This is an oversimplification, of course, for it is partly an urban/suburban-rural distinction, with the economy and a more complex social stratification lying behind what look like regional patterns of voting. With approximately the same number of votes as in 1959 and 1964, the Labour share of the vote was its lowest since 1935. Wilson's hopes that the first-time voters, especially those benefitting from the recent lowering of the voting age to 18, were dashed, whilst Butler and Stokes had to hurriedly revise their view that Labour now had a built-in "generational" electoral advantage.[19] Very significantly, however, the Conservative vote was also down, in both absolute and percentage terms, compared with the three victories of the 1950s.

Various short or long term explanations have been put forward for what turned out to be one of the big surprises of British post-war electoral history :

- The Labour government had for too long taken too many unpopular measures, notably economic and financial, largely under the pressure of British economic weaknesses. There had simply not been time for the improved economic indicators of 1969-70 to have a big enough impact on opinion. In particular, the abstention of many potential Labour supporters in 1970 explains the defeat : some Labour supporters had become demoralized or indifferent after three years of a government performance which fell far short of their expectations. 1970 saw the beginnings of what was to become, in the 1980s, a serious erosion of working-class support for Labour. Turnout fell by over 4 %. The apparent two-way swing from Labour to Conservative was in fact a triangular process, with former Labour voters abstaining and the Conservatives recovering the support of those who had abstained in 1966.[20]

- The lack of direction and strategic purpose for which Wilson and his government were later to be criticized, reflected the fact that most Labour ministers concerned themselves above all with departmental issues, whilst Wilson himself tended to be preoccupied with meeting each crisis as it occurred. To what extent this was the fault of Wilson himself (his strategy, his beliefs and policies, or his personality), of the whole

government and the Labour Party, or of the structures of British government, is open to debate.

- There was a lot of conflict between senior Labour ministers — perhaps no more than in any other government, but more publicly expressed and often over fundamental strategic and policy matters : economic and financial strategy, devaluation, trade-union reform, the Common Market, Vietnam, Rhodesia and South Africa.

- After an initial honeymoon with the press, relations between Wilson and the media were to deteriorate and be clouded with mutual suspicion from mid-1966 onwards. Press hostility to Wilson and his government was more muted in 1969-70, perhaps too late to have a big enough impact on public opinion.

Problems of strategy and management seem to explain Labour's failure, yet again, to win two successive working majorities. If 1964 had been more of a Conservative defeat than a Labour victory, it is arguable that 1970 was much more a Labour defeat than a Conservative victory. After only six years in office Labour was, yet again, back in opposition. How was this electoral see-saw to look in retrospect, as part of the history of voting and elections in Britain ?

The long-term view

In a previous issue of this journal we presented "a long-term perspective" on British elections from 1885 to 1997.[21] In the long run the three elections of 1964, 1966 and 1970 were to fit into a framework revealing an extraordinary stability in British electoral history. They were to form part of what looks in retrospect like a clearly two-party system, particularly marked from 1885 to 1910 and again from 1945 to 1970. However surprising or unpredictable they may have seemed in the light of the preceding months and years, the three elections in question strongly reinforce certain features of this stable long-term picture. The two big parties shared on average over nine out of ten votes cast, though at 87.5 % in 1964 the two-party vote was at its lowest of the sixteen elections when the two-party system worked best. Conservative and Labour took most of the seats in the House of Commons. Above all the 1964, 1966 and 1970 elections were to underscore the importance of a regular swing, of balance and alternation between the two parties. Labour's 1966 victory mirrored exactly, in terms of votes and seats for the two parties, the 1959 Conservative win. 1964 showed that after all Labour *could* win... and 1970 that it could lose again ! So in the event there was, despite the doubts beforehand, a change of government in both 1964 and 1970, and at this latter point the two parties had each governed for exactly twelve and a half of the twenty five post-war years. As usual the winning party's lead in the country was exaggerated in the Commons, and when in 1964 the government did not have a satisfactory working majority, an early election was called after eighteen months, at the Prime Minister's convenience, resulting in a comfortable working majority. The election results provided stable and coherent government in the sense that the latter was not defeated

(though the short-term view certainly queries just how stable and coherent the government really was), and if there was a concentration of power in the Cabinet, and particularly in the hands of the Prime Minister, the period does show that whilst a British executive leads and is not controlled by Parliament or by the opposition, it is controlled by the electorate every four or five years, and on a day-to-day basis by its own backbenchers, the only group that can threaten it effectively enough to change policy.

On the other hand, there were signs of changes to come during the much less stable 1974-97 period. If in 1966 the swing of voters was more or less uniform throughout Great Britain, in 1970 swing was a regional rather than a national phenomenon, with the emergence of distinct electoral scenes in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and strong regional differences in England, and an accentuation of the division between "two nations" : urban and rural-suburban Britain. The deep inroads into Labour's popularity from 1967 to 1969, and the relatively low share of the vote by the winning party in both 1964 and 1970 (we have described both elections as defeats for the loser more than victories for the winner), and the low turnout in 1970 (at 72 % it was six points below the average turnout from 1950 to 1979) were the beginnings of a deep disillusionment and a suspicion that the British political and government process was not as legitimate as often assumed. Likewise, the decline in the proportion of the electorate (as opposed to voters) supporting the two big parties continued steadily from 1951 to 1970.[22] The volatility of the electorate from 1967 to 1970 was on a scale unknown since the 1920s. Furthermore, in the medium-to-long term, the elections of 1964 and 1966 were to be the only two between 1950 and 1997 which gave Labour a parliamentary majority, and seemed to be in fact only a brief remission in a largely affirmative answer to the question "Must Labour Lose ?".

So at the time the years 1964-70 saw many swings not just among the voters but in the moods of both government and opposition, with alternation between exciting times and periods that seemed very depressing. They were mostly rather depressing years for the Liberal Party, which in 1970 had only six MPs, the same number as in 1951, 1955 and 1959. But there were signs of the Liberal revival which was to come in the 1970s, most notably in the obvious disillusion with both major parties that the 1970 election figures revealed. However, in looking back on the Wilson years from the perspective of Blair's New Labour, a year and half into yet another Labour government born amidst huge expectations, after many years in the wilderness and determined to establish the "radical" party as the party of government, it is our conviction that the most fundamental questions about the Wilson years relate to the long-term place of conservatives and radicals in British democratic politics : why has the "radical" party of the left ***never***, since 1885, won two successive working majorities ? The terms of the question and the debate it raises may need a lot of clarification, but the failure of the high tides of 1906, 1945 and 1966 to be maintained for even one more election does suggest that we need, in analyzing elections and politics, the exercise of power, the role of perso-

nalities and the scope for institutional change, to look beyond the failings of Harold Wilson for an explanation of Labour's 1970 disappointment.[23]

NOTES

1. See R. SIBLEY, "A Long-Term Perspective", *La Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, vol. 9, n° 3, novembre 1997, "Les élections générales de 1997 en Grande-Bretagne", pp. 199–220.

2. Five if we do not count the re-elected Conservative Speaker.

3. There had of course been several elections where no party had a clear majority over all others.

4. Harold WILSON, *The Labour Government 1964–70 : A Personal Record*, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1974, p. 23.

5. Known as the Labour Representation Committee from 1900 to 1906, it adopted the name "Labour Party" in 1906.

6. Within the Labour Party there was considerable disappointment at the failings of the 1945–51 Labour governments, and it was perhaps only after the Wilson years of 1964–70 that 1945–51 came to be seen as Labour's "high tide", a period of solid achievements under the quietly effective Attlee : the Welfare State, nationalization of strategic sectors of the economy, and independence for the nations of the Indian sub-continent.

7 This was not an official Conservative slogan, but a remark made by Macmillan when visiting a factory during the campaign.

8 Mark ABRAMS, Richard ROSE, Rita HINDEN, *Must Labour Lose?,* Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1960.

9. Asked what influenced the destinies of a nation and its leaders, Macmillan was said to have replied "*Events, dear boy, events...*".

10. It was reported at the time that the Cabinet preferred Butler, Conservative backbench MPs Maudling, and constituency parties Hailsham.

11. Three of these four new ministries were all to be failures : the DEA was wound up in 1969, the Ministry of Technology in 1970 and the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources in 1967.

12. Among the departments that Wilson abolished were the Admiralty, the Air Ministry and the War Ministry. New government posts also included, for the first time, the arts (in 1965).

13. Both statements made on page 1 of BUTLER & KING, *The British General Election of 1966*, London : Macmillan, 1966.

14. The only Labour loss must have been particularly galling for Wilson : his family had lived in the constituency when he was a child and it was here that, in hospital with appendicitis at the age of seven, Harold had urged his parents not to stay too long visiting him in case they should be too late to go and vote for the Labour candidate, Philip Snowden, in the 1923 general election.

15. D. BUTLER & D. STOKES, *Political Change in Britain* (see below, note 23), the first edition of which concentrated on this feature as a built-in electoral advantage for Labour for some decades to come, a view that had to be revised in the second edition after Labour's defeat in 1970.

16. The latter is a perfectly serious suggestion : World Cup victories and defeats do have a significant short-term impact on something vague but real like "national mood", which is then identified with national leaders. But in the case of June 1970, there is the important question of the differential electoral impact of England's defeat on support for the government in England itself and in Scotland...

17. Including Dudley (a swing against Labour of 21.2%), Walthamstow West (18.4%) and Leicester South-West (16.5%).

18. In 1945 the Gallup Poll had accurately predicted a Labour victory, but amidst the general expectation of a win for the Conservatives under the wartime coalition leader Churchill, no-one had taken any notice.

19. Cf. note 15 above.

20. The thesis that Labour abstentions were an important factor in 1970, which many polls seemed to demonstrate, is discussed - and dismissed - by Michael Steed in BUTLER & PINTO-DUSCHINSKY, *The British General Election of 1970*, London : Macmillan, 1971, pp. 390ff.

21. Cf. note 1 above.

22. 1951 : 80%, 1955 : 74%, 1959 : 73%, 1964 : 67.5%, 1966 : 68%, 1970 : 64.4%.

23. The following sources have been consulted for this article (with a special debt to the Nuffield *British General Election* series, the *Times Guides to the House of Commons*, and the invaluable reference work *British Political Facts 1900–1985*) :

ABRAMS, M., ROSE R., & HINDEN, R. *Must Labour Lose?* Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1960.
BUTLER, D.E. & BUTLER, G. *British Political Facts 1900–1985.* London : Macmillan, 1986.
BUTLER, D.E. & KING, A. *The British General Election of 1964.* London : Macmillan, 1966.
BUTLER, D.E. & KING, A. *The British General Election of 1966.* London : Macmillan, 1966.
BUTLER, D.E. & PINTO-DUSCHINSKY, M. *The British General Election of 1970.* London : Macmillan, 1971.
BUTLER, D.E. & STOKES, D. *Political Change in Britain*, 1st edn. London : Macmillan, 1969; 2nd edn, London : Macmillan, 1974.

BUTLER, D.E. *British General Elections since 1945*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1989.
COOK, C. "Labour's Electoral Base", pp. 84–107 *in* C. Cook & I. Taylor (eds.) *The Labour Party : An Introduction to Its History, Structure and Politics,* London : Longman, 1980.
CREWE I. "The Labour Party and the Electorate", pp. 9–49 *in* D. Kavanagh (ed.), *The Politics of the Labour Party*, London : Allen & Unwin, 1982.
CREWE, I., DAY, N. & FOX, A. *The British Electorate, 1963–1987 : A Compendium of Data from the British Election Studies*, Cambridge : CUP, 1991.
KINNEAR, M. *The British Voter : An Atlas and Survey since 1885*, London : Batsford Academic (2nd edn.), 1981.
LAPPING, B. *The Labour Government 1964–70*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1970.
PELLING, H. *A Short History of the Labour Party*, Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1972(4th edition), 1991 (9th edition).
STEEL, D. "Labour *in* Office : The Post-war Experience", pp. 128–162 *in* C. Cook & I. Taylor (eds.) *The Labour Party : An Introduction to Its History, Structure and Politics,* London : Longman, 1980.
The Times Guide to the House of Commons, 1964, London : Times Books.
The Times Guide to the House of Commons, 1966, London : Times Books.
The Times Guide to the House of Commons, 1970, London : Times Books.
WILSON Harold. *The Labour Government 1964–70 : A Personal Record*, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1974.
WORCESTER, R.M. *British Public Opinion*, Oxford : Blackwell, 1991.