

# THAT WAS THEN, THIS IS NOW

## A response to

## HAROLD WILSON

## The unprincipled prime minister?

—REAPPRAISING HAROLD WILSON—

EDITED BY

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Borrowing from one of WH Auden's classifications, "This a good book and I like it."

Counting the writers of the Foreword and the Preface there are twenty four contributors to the book, including Gerald Kaufman and David Steel. Most of the voices are academic. Four years have passed since its publication just before David Cameron's referendum. And that gives me my first point of comparison. Asked why he wanted to be prime minister Cameron replied, "Because I think I'd be rather good at it." 'Adroit' is probably the word to best describe Wilson's handling of his referendum. 'Ham-fisted' is for Cameron. But before we extend the comparisons to Theresa May and to Boris Johnson let me go back to what I think are a few basics.

As Leader of the Labour Party his greatest concern was to keep it together. And yet he started out as a Liberal and worked as research assistant to William Beveridge, a great Liberal. At one point in the book it is pointed out that Wilson and Heath would have been happy working together in any government led by Lloyd George. I think that he was always a Gladstonian. But he made a conscious decision to leave the Liberals and join Labour. In doing so, and drawing upon his experience as a civil servant, he combined what I think were two strands of a Labour way of approaching government. One was to have a plan, never be without one. Plans mean structures. New organisations, departments and public bodies must be created. Remember the Department for Economic Affairs? Beset by unpredicted external events this was the failing strand.

The successful strand was, however, the implementation of an extensive list of civilising social reforms. Attlee did not do as much and no Conservative government would have countenanced them. In the book David Steel makes sure to celebrate the one with which he is most associated, Abortion Law Reform. Among the reforms was what Wilson probably regarded as his greatest achievement, The Open University. Perhaps we should count that as a 'plan' that worked.

The Labour Party of those days was full of giants. Wilson managed them. Much of his management meant manipulation, hence the accusation that he lacked principles. I like the values of Corbyn but would have welcomed some manipulation. Wilson did not hang on to power. He went perhaps too early but what is the opposite of that?

I want to make, I cannot resist, some comparisons. The most prominent and necessary comparison is with Blair. I have often argued that Blair and New Labour did government without politics. My definition of politics: the inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values. For him it was an exclusive exercise and consent was confined to very few. He did like to re-structure but the process by which he did that turned his party into an enemy. Estelle Morris as Secretary of State for Education tried to implement policies that matched the values of the Party as expressed at Conference. For Blair the comprehensive system had to be shaken up so that we got Faith Schools, Specialist Schools and Academies. To what values did he attach his changes? They were not values. They were empty advertising slogans such as Progress, Modernisation and Choice. Frenetic activity masqueraded as progress. I regret that the serious energies of Gordon Brown were not displayed within a Wilson-like government.

A warning: discussion of politicians invites labelling. Labelling hinders analysis. Applying the label 'unprincipled' to Wilson can mean that we descend into a 'Yes he was', No he wasn't' shouting match. That is why the contributors to this book have, I think, taken so much trouble to contextualise the government and the politics of the time. Nevertheless, I have a label for all of the governments since 2010. I believe them to have been engaged in what I call Social Fracking. Cameron tried to hide this with two loudly trumpeted concepts. One was Localism and the other was Big Society. They were simply a way of withdrawing support from local government. Where are they now? They had no substance.

In my response to (Sir) Craig Oliver's book UNLEASHING DEMONS in which Cameron's spin doctor tells us all about life in the innermost referendum bubble, I formed the view that it was an internal Tory Party matter and that it was all about choosing the next Head Prefect or President of Guild. The electorate were merely to be played with. Democracy? More like Shamocracy! When Wilson strove to keep his Party together it was for a purpose beyond the wish to retain personal position and power.

And then came Theresa May. Having many years ago popularised the phrase 'Nasty Party' for the Tories, as home Secretary she reinforced that title at, I believe, Cameron's bidding. That is what she brought to the job of PM and Leader of the Party. By this time the pool of Tory Talent was almost dry. To negotiate with the EU she only had the choice of indolent fools. She could have simply asked Parliament. The Referendum Act was not binding, it was advisory. Sixty three percent of the electorate did not vote LEAVE. But at this time Parliament, particularly the Commons, was becoming a hindrance to government and Mr. Speaker Bercow was not disposed to allow government to do what it liked. Unlike most previous governments it was becoming impossible to discern any social vision. Neither was there a sense that when a PM stood up to speak there was at least some residual respect in the chamber. The contrast with Wilson is simply enormous.

I shall leave Thatcher for a while. Now I want to say something about what appear to be the intentions of our current government. Its Social Fracking urges are clear for all to see. Dominic Cummings does think in terms of structure but as in de-structure. Imperfectly or not Parliament, the Civil Service and Local Government bring humanity to decision-making. Cummings wants none of that. When Wilson spoke about the White Heat of Technology he did not envisage a Cummings kind of world. Social Fracking will leave us defenceless against those with power. Government by algorithm does not appeal to me.

To some extent we live in Thatcher's world now. It was she who told us that there is no such thing as society. It was in 1962 (two years before Wilson's first administration) that C.B. McPherson wrote The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism. We tend to think that Neo Liberalism was mostly promoted by people such as Freidrich Hayak in Chicago but McPherson had been warning us about

such thinking for some time. Selfishness and greed began to mark our politics under Thatcher. By 1997 I felt that there was now a widespread revulsion against Thatcherism. In that year the Labour Party won the general election. Such a glad morning. Blair, however, was no Wilson and certainly he was no Nye Bevan. He was, as Simon Jenkins categorised him, a Son of Thatcher.

Under Corbyn it seemed that at long last we could blow the dust off concepts such as equality and fairness. I know Israeli Jews who were desperate for a Corbyn victory to counter the appalling racism and all that goes with it prevalent in their country. Wilson was plotted against, inside and outside the Labour Party. The plots against Corbyn were, however, despicable. And so to Starmer. Here are some labels. A charisma-free Blair. A narrow-minded Zionist. Because he chooses to misuse the word Semitic in the same way as the Nazis did he is, to me, an unthinking visitor of racism upon followers of a religion. A human rights lawyer? Only for certain kinds of humans. How about socialist? Nah!

I said this was a response and not a review but I began with a positive judgment and I want to end with another. For me, the book was unputdownable and valuable. You need the past to make sense of the present and you need to be constantly thinking about the present with the help of sound descriptions and judgements on the past. The Harold Wilson Story is important today. Overall the contributors to the book look favourably upon him. And I agree.

**Cliff Jones August 1st. 2020**

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