

Labour Heritage



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Bulletin Spring 2017

Contents: John Smith, West London History Day- BECTU Project, Women's Co-operative Guild and 1918 'Coupon' Election

John Smith : a lecture given by Margaret Beckett MP, Speakers House, 7th November 2016

Early Years

John was a Highlander, and took great pride in being so. His first schooling was in Ardrishaig in Argyll, where his father was the head teacher of the village school. Much was expected of the head teacher's son. He was heard in later years to say that he was expected to get everything right, and soon learned that it was easier to do so. A passion for accuracy was something he retained throughout his life. I shudder to think what he would make of so-called 'post-truth' politics.

Senior schooling meant going to Dunoon and lodging there. Although called Dunoon Grammar School, the school was, in fact, a comprehensive, and John was always proud that he, like his daughters, had had a good comprehensive education. He attended university in Glasgow, where he met Elizabeth, and where he made many of the

friends who surrounded him for the rest of his life, - friends like Derry Irvine and Donald Dewar – all brilliant barristers and brilliant debaters. Although ultimately he became a successful barrister, John did not at first have the family money to go to the Bar. He had to begin as a solicitor. I imagine that he could have made a great deal of money at the Bar. But his natural egalitarianism, his compassion, his experience of life, especially since he first joined the Labour Party at the age of 16 – and his sense of public service and public duty brought him into politics which he regarded as wholly honourable public service.



His maiden speech paid tribute, as is usual to his predecessor, but, ignoring the convention that such speeches should be non-controversial, he then attacked the government for the inadequacy of the provision they were making for the least well-off. He was always intensely conscious of the very real difficulties experienced by his constituents. I recall him saying that if only his poorer constituents had access to even a small sum of capital, even a small amount of savings, their lives would be

transformed. I always assumed that such an idea was what lay behind Gordon Brown's proposal for child trust funds.

John had eloquence and wit, as well as passion for the less fortunate, and his talents inevitably began to be recognised and acknowledged. But he was prepared from very early in his parliamentary career to do what he believed to be right, whether or not it would be popular with the party hierarchy.

Europe

Having been elected in 1970, only a year or so later, he was one of a group of passionate Labour pro-Europeans who, believing that this was right for Britain's future, voted against a three line whip, in favour of Ted Heath's Bill to take Britain into the European Community.

He said "I am willing to give up some national sovereignty, to gain a sovereignty which will be able to do something about controlling the international companies of the future", and asserted that if we did not enter Europe, we would be unable to control them, and achieve the economic, social and political ends which are our main political objectives.

Nor was this the only early risk he took in conventional career terms. When Labour returned to power in February 1974, he was offered a ministerial post as one of the Scottish law officers, Solicitor General for Scotland. He turned it down, fearing he would be trapped and typecast as a Scottish Office Minister, or one of the law officers, rather than being in the mainstream of parliamentary life. It was a dangerous gamble, but the gamble paid off. By October 1974, after the second election of that year, he was made a Parliamentary Secretary in the Department of Energy, where he took through the Commons the Bill to set up the British National Oil Corporation, and secure for the state the reserves of North Sea oil and gas, and with them the enormous revenues which later accrued, ironically and disastrously to the

governments of Margaret Thatcher. John, all his political life, raged at the betrayal of Britain's long term economic and social interests in the frittering away of those vast windfall revenues, for which neither Margaret Thatcher nor her Chancellors has ever been held to account.

Although an unashamed right winger, John had no difficulty getting on, at Energy, with Tony Benn, for whose abilities as a departmental head he had a great deal of respect. Indeed it seems it was on Tony's recommendation that he owed his early promotion to Minister of State. His ability to get on with everyone, whatever the shade of their opinions was one of John's abiding characteristics, as Dennis Skinner, among others, testified after his death; "I come", Dennis said "from a different wing of the Party, yet we never had words in angerwe were able to remain friends."

Devolution

In 1976, after Jim Callaghan succeeded Harold Wilson as Prime Minister, John was moved to the Cabinet Office under Michael Foot - to Tony Benn's expressed regret - to turn his talents and skills to the thorny issue of devolution. He was, as Tony said, 'on the way up'. Certainly this was the kind of job where John's particular personal skills would be invaluable. Not only egalitarian, he was non-hierarchical, in his attitudes, - willing, - even eager - to hear everyone's point of view and open-minded about taking on board what he heard.

As a young man he had been a sceptic on the devolution issue, but by this time he had become convinced of the merits and necessity of taking action, which he believed to be in the interests of the UK as a whole, not just of Scotland. It is probably wise though to recall that he remained utterly opposed to the break up of the union with Scotland, which he suggested would be a 'spectacular folly'. The legislation was complex and difficult to

handle, and the Labour Party was by no means united on the issues. From the early stages of the legislation the government was forced to make unwelcome concessions, including agreeing to a post Bill referendum. After a long and tortuous passage through Parliament the Bill passed, only to be derailed by the need for a qualifying majority in the referendum. But, although, at that time, the devolution project failed, John emerged with his personal & parliamentary reputation much enhanced, due to his handling of what was recognised to have been a poisoned chalice.



Opposition

John disliked being in Opposition intensely. His view was that “You don’t go into politics to be in Opposition. Where’s the sense in that?” He told a reporter – “I want power for the satisfaction of using it for a proper purpose....I’m frustrated in Opposition.”

I said earlier that John was on the right of the party and when, in 1981, some of those who, like John, had defied the Whip on joining the European Community, left the party to set up the SDP, some may have thought that John would be with them. Everyone who knew John is clear that that was never going to happen. Elizabeth (his wife) has said that ‘it simply never occurred to him’, because he had a ‘deep commitment to the things Labour stands for.’ Ming Campbell has said that John ‘would have fought to the death for his Labour party membership card’. He had a deep tribal loyalty to the party, despite being, at that time, understandably depressed about its prospects.

Certainly speaking of that time, he once said to me that he would never have joined another party, - that if, for whatever reason, he felt he could no longer remain in it, he would simply and quietly walk away - that he would never do the Labour Party any harm.

He said, once, of the defectors “I am comfortable with the unions. They aren’t. That’s the big difference.” He was very proud to be a trades unionist – a longstanding member of the GMB, from the time when they were just the boilermakers trade union – making him, as he said, one of only two boilermakers in the House of Commons. A member of the right wing in the PLP of the day, he was always, a socialist, - driven to be so by his values by his strong faith.

In 1984, he moved back to shadow Industry. It was in this period that he began to attain greater public prominence, to match his Commons reputation. The Westland affair, which, for those who have forgotten turned on the future of the company Westland Helicopters and whether a European or an American solution to its problems should be pursued. This matter led Michael Heseltine to resign as Secretary of State for Defence and came close to toppling Margaret Thatcher. Leon Brittan, was widely thought to have been perhaps ‘economical’ with the truth, in his statement to the House. Mrs Thatcher had been sitting at his side throughout. The whole culminated in Leon Brittan’s resignation.

Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer

John’s greatly increased media exposure, and the general view that he had handled himself well on this and other industrial issues markedly improved his standing with media, Party and public, and led to his appointment after the 1987 general election to the post of Shadow Chancellor. However it was while shadowing the industry portfolio that he seems first to have identified a theme he pursued vigorously for the rest of his life, and which has pervaded Labour’s approach to

economic policy ever since, though he is rarely given the credit he deserves.

It is easy now to forget what was then the conventional wisdom of the day. Economic success and social justice were seen as conflicting aims. It was regarded as a matter of choice – perhaps even stark choice. The pursuit of one was necessarily assumed to involve a sacrifice of the other. These then universal assumptions were beginning to be challenged in political discussion and debate.

It was a challenge that John took up with gusto, arguing fervently that, far from one having to be sacrificed to pursue the other, the pursuit of prosperity and of social justice went hand in hand, and could even be mutually reinforcing. In the John Mackintosh Memorial Lecture in 1987, he set out his view that government should promote and support growth, by investing in education and training, research and development, and regional industrial policy that drew in both public and private sectors, all of which, I would argue, is today's conventional wisdom.

Neil Kinnock

Following the loss of the 1987 General Election, Neil Kinnock took a dramatic, daring and then unprecedented step. He set up a 'Year Zero' review of all Labour's then policies and commitments. He drove home the realisation that, whatever the day to day problems which had to be managed in the House of Commons, of the early '90s, the next government would have to address, the issues of the late '90s and beyond. It may seem an obvious thing to do now, but it was a completely new approach, unprecedented then, not just for Labour, but for any British political party.

The '87 election was notable for a new ruthlessness in the Tory campaign. They had always made sweeping and ill-founded allegations of Labour profligacy, coupled with even more ill-founded allegations of inevitable

and massive increases in taxation. In '87, they had made a collection not just of every agreed policy proposal, but of every loosely worded remark, every kite-flying Fabian pamphlet, every enthusiastic speech by an ambitious young front-bencher, anything and everything that might ever have been floated as a policy idea. They got civil servants to cost them all and asserted that - on 'civil service figures' - Labour had promised spending of something like £35bn, and that we would put up income tax by 10p in the £ to pay for it. Against this background, it was decided that we had to deal, thoroughly, with a campaign which was in danger of making us unelectable.

One of the policy groups which was set up, on economic and social policy was chaired by John Smith. As the junior frontbencher shadowing social security policy I was one of that group. It was the first time I had worked closely with John. The impact of his egalitarianism and open-mindedness speedily became evident. Emma MacLennan, then a policy officer at HQ, well remembers her first encounter with him. "We were walking across Westminster Hall", she told me, "and he said he had had an idea about pensions he wanted to run by me." She responded enthusiastically, that she thought it was a great idea. He stopped in his tracks, swung round, and said "never do that again. I want to hear what the problems are. I want you to think about the downsides. I don't want to hear the downside in the Chamber."

In the policy group he was the same. He wanted to know what everyone thought - even the most junior in the room. Emma recalls one idea being abandoned when cogent objections were raised by an LSE student on an internship. We certainly needed all the input – critical and otherwise – we could get. Although it was "Year Zero", there were some inherited commitments it was impossible to abandon; a pension increase of £5per week for a single person, and £8 for a married couple,

and a £3 child benefit increase. These pledges had been made in a more carefree time.

In fact, in the early days of the policy group's work, when Nigel Lawson was boasting about Britain having superseded Germany's economic miracle, - using North Sea Oil revenues to cut income tax and pension contributions, we were struggling to persuade colleagues that even more generous pledges might be difficult to afford. Once Lawson's hubris had been followed by nemesis, one of our biggest problems was, and remained, how to finance those commitments when the economy had fallen off a cliff.

Heart attack

It was in this period when John had a major heart attack. He told me once that it is a common experience at such a time for an amazing feeling of euphoria and triumph swiftly to be followed by a period of deep depression, as the nearness of averted death sinks in. He was deeply and abidingly grateful to those who had shared the experience and wrote in great numbers to warn him what to expect. He made a point of doing the same himself, writing in the same vein, for example, to Michael Heseltine, when he had a similar experience. John made a fairly swift recovery, taking up climbing the Scots peaks known as 'the Munros'. He took over again from Gordon Brown, who had stood in for him. Typically, he was pleased that Gordon was felt to have done well, without feeling threatened by it.

Margaret Beckett Joins the Shadow Cabinet

About this time I was elected to join the Shadow Cabinet and became Shadow Chief Secretary, as requested by John. It may seem odd now, but the idea of having someone from the left of the party in such a role, and working with an acknowledged right winger, was thought extraordinary. John was, characteristically, unworried.

For the rest of the run-up to the '92 election, that is what we did, embarking, not least, on what became known as the "prawn cocktail circuit". In other words, rather than shunning private sector players, we sought and accepted contact, as Labour supporters in the business community had long urged. This meant both that we heard directly from the business community of their main concerns, and that they heard of our ideas and approach from us – neither being filtered through the Tory party, as so often in the past.

Nor did we only pursue this path within the UK. The UK was due to assume the EU presidency early in the next parliament. John and I travelled to Paris and to Brussels, with our advisers, to forge closer ties with potential EU partners. Along with Tony Blair, as Shadow Employment Secretary, we made a similar trip to Germany. Everywhere we were met with friendly interest and co-operation. I recall John saying, over dinner with our then Ambassador to the EU that "If the Berlin wall can fall, the CAP can be reformed" – something I quoted to my German colleague who was delighted, when, at DEFRA, I was negotiating major CAP reform.

As Shadow Chancellor John was both a formidable opponent in the House of Commons, and an advocate for the less fortunate.

It should not be forgotten, at a time when a National Minimum Wage is so accepted, that John Smith was the very first Shadow Chancellor to accept the case for it. Nor was it at all a foregone conclusion. He had to take on, and defeat, substantial continued opposition from within the trades union movement.

As Shadow Chancellor, John increasingly dominated the Chamber of the Commons. It is probably impossible to convey to those who did not hear it the impact of some of his key speeches at that time. Along with serious economic analysis and counter proposals, were the kind of memorable touches that

unsettle a government and alarm its supporters. When it was common knowledge that Margaret Thatcher took more heed of her in-house advisers, Alan Walters & Brian Griffiths than of her Chancellor Nigel Lawson, John sang to him across the dispatch box the theme from the then popular Australian soap, *Neighbours*. It was cruelly appropriate. It brought the House down, and - very shortly afterwards - Nigel Lawson with it. He was succeeded by John Major, as, very soon, was Margaret Thatcher herself.

The Poll Tax and the 1992 General Election

In 1992, it became clear that John Major might go to the country straight after announcing Budget proposals. A year or so earlier there had been a sustained and hard fought battle about our proposed alternatives to the, by then wildly unpopular, poll tax. Some colleagues wanted to propose a radical and completely new system of local government taxation. Others of us feared this offered too much scope for misrepresentation.

In the end, it was decided to propose reform of the rates. Not only were they familiar to the public, but our local government team were able to spell out what the new rates charge would then be in each area, and get their figures validated and verified by independent audit bodies. It worked like a charm. Increasingly it seemed to John and I that the best answer to the usual lies about our tax plans would be to carry out a parallel exercise on the Budget. We assembled a brilliant team of sworn to secrecy number-crunching and expert volunteers, and in the few days immediately after the Budget, - using Norman Lamont's own figures for available resources and our own proposed changes, we drew up alternative detailed proposals, setting out tax bands and net impacts for the usual range of different income and family groups. We were able to show that the vast majority would be better off, and the most vulnerable the greatest beneficiaries under our proposals, with only the top 16% making a higher net contribution.

The launch of the Shadow Budget was a triumph. John looked and sounded like a Chancellor. Our plans were obviously to the benefit of the vast majority of the population, and the assembled media clearly accepted our case. Nor indeed could the Tories challenge our figures. I heard later that, after four days of the Treasury trying to find errors they could use to discredit us, their media advisers told them to forget the Shadow Budget, and return to the unfounded and untruthful propaganda allegations, on which they had already spent a small fortune in advertising. They did. The rest is history. Immediately after the election Neil resigned. It was clear that John would run for the leadership.

John Smith becomes Labour Leader, and Margaret Beckett His Deputy



There were many, including longstanding and devoted members of the Party, in their bitter disappointment, expressing freely the view that Labour could and would never now win another general election. We did not share that view, but, for the first time, Leo and I agreed that we could no longer afford the luxury of automatically supporting whoever was the candidate of the left. It had to be the best possible person and it was clear to me that that was John. So I told him we would support him, although that very much upset some of our oldest and closest friends on the left of the party.

Within a day or so I heard a BBC report that John and I were running as a team for Leader and Deputy. I was appalled. I had not the

slightest wish to be Deputy Leader and I was concerned that John would have to work with whoever was elected, and it would be a bad start if they thought they were second choice. I rang the BBC and told them the story was completely untrue. Then my phone rang. A colleague said “I heard a story about you running for the Deputy Leadership”. I explained that - no, I was not. “I heard that too,” he said, “and what I want to know is - why not?” That was the first of many such conversations. By Monday morning I had accepted what seemed to be the inevitable. Just after we reached the office, John appeared. “I came”, he said “to tell you that you’d got to run, but I hear you’ve already decided to.”

Once elected, John told me he wanted me to handle all aspects of our campaigning and to be ‘a real deputy’. I wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but I soon found out. John had a very clear view and vision. The job of the leader was to set a clear direction and vision for the Party, - to concentrate on pursuing that, and not allow himself to be diverted by day to day trivia. It was during this period that the unifying benefits of John’s approach to colleagues really came to the fore. He genuinely wanted, for example, to hear the views of all the Shadow Cabinet on policy. Genuine dialogue and debate without a preconceived conclusion were fostered, not interminably, but thoroughly. Clear and firm conclusions were reached, and decisions once made were adhered to. Reconsideration of a decision thrashed out and concluded was not impossible, but you proposed it at your peril, and had to be very sure of the necessity, and of your ground.

Black Wednesday

With the advent of ‘Black Wednesday’, and the catastrophic and expensive collapse of our membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), with interest rates rising, at one point to 15%, it had become clear that it was we and not the Government who had told the truth about the state of the economy. It was a

collapse from which their economic reputation did not recover and John was well-placed to drive the lessons home. Over the subsequent months he embarked on a substantial programme of change.

Within the party he proposed new structures, moving to a system of One Member One Vote (OMOV), rather than the block vote. He set up a Commission for Social Justice, headed by the now deceased Lord Gordon Borrie, to independently reassess the full scale and picture of the nation’s social problems, and how they might be tackled, as Beveridge had done earlier in the century. It was John who committed himself to constitutional reforms, such as a Human Rights Act, greater freedom of information and greater devolution of power away from Whitehall and, after careful consideration of a range of proposals for proportional representation, (for which he was not an enthusiast), he was prepared to commit himself and the party to a referendum on the subject.

Not long before he died, he made two important speeches identifying what he saw as the way ahead. One was a speech titled *Reclaiming the Ground* in which he spoke of his sense of a moral purpose in politics, and the need for an enabling state, linking it, for himself, to his faith. The second was addressed to the future of the EU, which he pressed to become both more outward-looking and more growth-oriented.

Sometimes since his death it has been tacitly suggested that John was a status quo man, content to wait for it to be Labour’s ‘turn’ to govern again. Nothing could be further from the truth. Dennis Skinner said he had “dragged the Labour Party from the depths of despair to the pinnacles of power.”

In preparing for this evening’s speech I had the opportunity to speak with a number of people who were close to John, none closer than his widow, Elizabeth. Elizabeth reminded me of the conclusion to the speech John gave the

night before he died: “The opportunity to serve our country – that is all we ask”.

On the 20th anniversary of John’s death, the John Smith Centre for Public Service was created in partnership with the University of Glasgow. The Centre promotes trust in public service and empowers and attracts more people to contribute to public life. In today’s climate I am powerfully reminded both of John’s faith in the moral purpose of politics and of his respect for elected politicians.

The doctor filling in John’s death certificate asked Elizabeth what he should put ‘He was a barrister wasn’t he?’. Elizabeth at once replied: “Put ‘politician’. John was very proud of being a politician”



John Smith’s grave is on the island of Iona

Margaret Beckett’s lecture on John Smith was one of a series which took place in the Speakers House in 2016, with the theme of ‘Parliamentarians on Parliamentarians.’ It was attended by members of Labour Heritage.

The series also included lectures on Harold Wilson and Clement Attlee.

This year’s series is on policy making. Lord Willetts will be speaking on higher education on 29th March. Labour Heritage members have been asked if they wish to apply for tickets.

Labour Heritage West London History Day

The west London History Day was held on Saturday 11th February, at the Quaker Centre in Hammersmith. It was attended by over 30 people. There were three speakers, Sue Atkins on the British Entertainment History Project, Barbara Humphries on the Women’s Co-operative Guild and John Grigg on the 1918 ‘Coupon’ Election in west London and south Middlesex. The speakers have written short articles based on their talks for readers of the Labour Heritage bulletin.

The British Entertainment History Project (formerly the BECTU history project)

www.historyproject.org.uk

by Sue Malden, Secretary of the British Entertainment History Project

The purpose of the collection is to record oral history of the world of film, television, radio and the theatre. There are now nearly 700 interviews of varying length – 30mins to 20 hours! In total over 4,000 hours

Some incredibly important interviews are in the collection - Tubby Englander, TV cameraman, Anne V. Coates, film editor, Kevin Brownlow, film historian; Bernie Andrews, Radio producer; Michael Bond, author and Blue Peter cameraman, Jimmy Gilbert, BBC TV Head of Light Entertainment; Pete Murray, Radio and TV presenter, Dougie Slocombe, cinema cameraman.

We have a website with a database of all the interviews recorded so far. Currently we are checking the data here. We want to make the collection accessible, so therefore we need to transcribe and digitise all the interviews so that they can be accessed via the website.

How It Began

The BECTU History Project was started 30 years ago in 1987 when a small group of members of the film and broadcasting union - the ACTT – now part of BECTU, which has just merged with Prospect – became aware that colleagues in the industry were passing on and nothing was being done to record their experiences and personal recollections of their time in the industry. So the first recordings began in 1987 - with Eric Cross, DPO and academic .

Led by Roy Fowler our Honorary President, they decided to do something immediate and practical to rectify that cumulative loss of memory and achievement and to bring to the project their wide personal knowledge of the industry and its history. They decided to record the individual histories of men and women who had made their working lives in the industry.

Supported by the Union which gave them the resources and the autonomy to get on with the work in hand, they began to create an archive of oral history recordings by interviewing people from across the sector, from processing workers and producers to sound assistants and directors, including writers and performers.

Recordings were originally audio only, but over half of the collection's recordings are on video formats and now by and large on data files, although audio only remains an option if interviewees prefer.

Vision and Achievement

The vision of those pioneers has resulted in a unique and internationally recognised archive of nearly 700 recordings which provide an extraordinary insight into the economic, technical, aesthetic and personal histories of the key cultural industry of the 20th century. Some of them are more than 20 hours long and are social documents of our time. Interviews were originally recorded on audio tape then

various video formats and now by and large on data files. We take pride in their achievement and that of the practitioners whose memories are recorded. As our industry has grown, we have extended our recordings to new occupations and new media. We are determined to remain relevant to our time and to future generations.

What Is It?

The History Project is organised by an entirely voluntary committee open by invitation to those interested in actively participating in its work (whether Union members or not). The group meets regularly, at BECTU in Clapham, but can accommodate contributions from those who cannot always attend meetings in London – currently we are developing groups in Bristol, Manchester and Scotland.

These volunteers select interviewees and undertake the interviews. Volunteers are crucial to the continued success of the project – so we are always looking for new members to help with the interviewing, to be interviewed or to make suggestions of who should /could be interviewed, or in providing the camera and sound skills needed for the recordings, or working behind the scenes transcribing, digitising and uploading.

We work closely with the British Film Institute (BFI) who conserve copies of our interviews, and with other academic and industry groups to publicise and extend the use of the History Project archive. Our archive is unique and the majority of those whose working lives are recorded within it cannot be heard in any other place.

Our recording can be consulted by anyone with an interest in them: Students, researchers, teachers, writers or enthusiasts, and recently TV and radio producers as we are DVD producers. The use of any of our recordings must be cleared through the project team . They are often quoted in books, student dissertations and extracts are used on radio,

TV and DVDs. Listening copies can be accessed at the BFI National Library in London and increasingly online via our website. No use may be made of any interview material without the permission of the BECTU History Project which holds the copyright in the interviews.

Organisation

The group meets regularly to organise the recording of interviews. The recordings are then stored in the BFI with a backup copy in BECTU. The BFI organises access to the recordings for research purposes - answering history related enquiries for television and radio programmes, films, books, academic research, exhibitions and festivals.

We also work with the University of East Anglia, BAFTA, David Lean Centre, BUFVC and Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema at Exeter University.

The BBC also has been building an oral history collection of interviews and are working with historian David Hendy to begin curating and making the collection accessible – we will be participating with that project

How To Join Us

The History Project welcomes all offers of practical assistance

- in undertaking the interviews themselves
- or in providing the camera and sound skills needed for the recordings.
- or working behind the scenes transcribing, digitising uploading

Members of the project do not have to be or have been members of the Union, although many are. We are a broad church and we want to reflect the gender, ethnic, geographical and sectoral range of our industry in our membership.

Future Plans

We recognise that the collection has developed in an ad hoc way – reflecting those interested in the early days – male, white; so we need to redress the gender and BAME balance – so we need more input.

What Have We Learned – a well run oral history collection needs to

- Be clear about the purpose of the collection
- Get written consents from interviewees, interviewers and transcribers
- Use a disclaimer
- Know how it will be stored and accessed
- Decide where to license the use or make freely available?
- Chose and understand the different recording formats – dealing with legacy formats and Future proofing
- Produce guidelines for the interview questions
- Produce rules for fields for the database
- Produce rules for transcribing – use of time codes etc
- Manage volunteers
- Find the skills that are needed
- Find funding
- Develop partnerships with similar archives
- Maintain the equipment to record
- Consider how to deal with photos and other artefacts

Contact BECTU History Project

admin@historyproject.org.uk

Useful organisation – the Oral History Society

<http://www.ohs.org.uk/>

The Women's Co-operative Guild

Meet Mr and Mrs Wise. For Mrs Wise the Co-op is more than just a shop. Her husband is a trades unionist and understands why workers must stand together to protect themselves. Unity is strength. In a sense the Co-op is the housewife's trades union. It protects the consumer from exploitation, from shoddy goods and excess prices. It does this because it belongs to Mr and Mrs Wise and the rest of the Co-op customers. They own the stores. Between them they get the profits when the divi is paid out. They elected the directors and its members decide policy.

(London Co-operative Society recruiting leaflet, 1955)

More than Just A Shop

For many the Co-op was seen as just a shop and the divi. It has a membership of millions and is the sometimes hidden third wing of the labour movement, with a political message of social ownership, which it can demonstrate in practice. At times it had more members than the trades union movement. Much of the life beyond the shop was conducted in the guilds, the most successful of which was the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG). There were also men's guilds, mixed guilds, and youth guilds but they were not as popular.



The WCG was formed in Hebden Bridge in 1883 with 40 members. Like the Co-operative

movement as a whole, its original heartland was in the North of England. By 1900 it had 6,400 members, by 1920 44,539, and it peaked at 87,246 in 1939. By the 1950s it was in decline, and in 1983 had only 13,000 members.

The Co-op had a special appeal to working class housewives. Wives of railwaymen, miners and engineers, were not part of the workforce for most of their lives. Their full time job was running the home and the household budget. For them good food at fair prices was very important. They were the women with the baskets. The Co-op movement had done for women, what the unions had done for men. It raised them from obscurity into national politics. Branches of the WCG brought working class women together to discuss politics. In the WCG they received a political education, and learnt skills such as chairing meetings. Many would go on to play a role in local councils.

In the interwar years (1918-1939) the WCG, like the Co-operative movement as a whole experienced its largest growth in London and the south east of England, where the population was growing. The London Co-operative Society (LCS) was formed in 1920, based in Stratford and Edmonton. It was joined by the West London Co-operative Society in 1921. Based originally on groups of railway workers, the membership of the LCS took root in working class communities across the city. New working class communities built on the fringes of London in the 1930s had little access to shops and they were far away from town centres. The local co-op shop was important for them. They also had more disposable income than those in the north of England. So Co-op shops branched out beyond groceries, and department stores selling furnishings, gardening equipment and offering even mortgage and travel services were opened.

Life in the WCG

However the social and political life of the co-operative movement was not neglected and many new branches of the WCG were set up. Branches met weekly, in the afternoon, to accommodate women with children. The average attendance was 50. Political discussion centred on issues such as health, education and maternity provision, but also peace and disarmament. There were many social events such as whist drives, tea parties for children, flower arranging and visits to the seaside. The WCG in Perivale, West London, campaigned for a maternity hospital, in which they were successful. One of their leading members, was a local councillor, Olive Davies, who trained other women to play a full role in the Guild. The Acton WCG, together with the local Labour Party Women's Section, organised a march to the Acton cenotaph in 1936, to lay a wreath of white poppies, in the name of peace. Attended by 150 women, it was followed by a peace play at a local church hall, and a political discussion.



The largest annual event was the Co-op fete, held on International Co-operators' Day, and in Acton this regularly attracted over 24,000 people, the largest event in town. The contribution of the WCG was a pageant of

costumes from around the world, as a demonstration of internationalism.



Co-op Fete in Acton Park in 1955.

Courtesy of the Bishopsgate Institute, which holds the archives of the London Co-operative Society

Politics

The Co-operative Movement had, until 1917, no links with any political party, but the WCG had already developed close links with the Women's Trades Union League and the Women's Labour League. The Labour Party appealed to these women on the issues of housing, maternal and infant welfare and education. In 1918 some women got the vote for the first time, those over 30. The WCG ran classes for women, on how to use their vote. It also encouraged its members to stand for local council and as Poor Law Guardians. Although there were few women MPs at this time, many more were elected as councillors. Members of the WCG were often also members of the Labour Party Women's Sections (LPWS), which were formed in 1918. These were to reach a membership of 250,000 by 1939, half of Labour's total membership at the time. Women members were keener to support issues such as birth control and family allowances, than their male comrades. The WCG also favoured abortion rights and easier divorce laws at an early stage. Both the WCG and the LPWS supported equal pay for women, and the right of both married and single women to work.



Women members at the Acton Co-op Fete 1955, courtesy of the Bishopsgate Institute

Today we live in a changed world, with women in the workforce for most of their lives, and 50% of the membership of the TUC. This social change was already being seen during World War 2 and beyond. The LPWS went into decline, its existence questioned by many women members of the Party. When it was relaunched in the 1980s it was more concerned with the gender balance amongst party officers, than with winning women to the socialist cause. However the political issues of the day – energy prices, housing and the NHS indicate that the political priorities of the WCG, and the Co-operative Movement to represent us as consumers, are still of key importance.

1918 'Coupon' Election in west London

By John Grigg

Wartime Coalition and Liberal Splits

The Liberals won the 1906 general election by a landslide. They lost their overall majority in 1910 but retained office with the support of the Irish Nationalists and the small number of Labour MPs. Another general election was due in 1915 but the start of World War 1 postponed that election and in 1915 the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, formed a war-time coalition with the Conservatives and Labour. In 1916 Lloyd George, who of course was also a Liberal, ousted Asquith and formed a new coalition. Thereafter there were two Liberal Parties in the House of Commons – the Coalition Liberals led by Lloyd George with about 160 Liberal MPs and the official Liberals loyal to Asquith with about 100 MPs who formed the opposition in Parliament. This split was the major factor in the demise of the Liberal Party and the rise of the Labour Party.

Towards the end of the war in 1918 a general election was inevitable and the Lloyd George Liberals and the Tories decided to continue with the Coalition. Labour pulled out of the coalition. Lloyd George recognised that with the Liberal Party in disarray and with Asquith as the official leader he was vulnerable without Tory support. The Tories recognised that Lloyd George was very popular as the man who won the war and feared they could not win alone. A general election was called. Lloyd George and the Tory leader, Bonar Law, decided who would stand as a Coalition candidate in each constituency and the selected candidate was sent a letter of endorsement – that came to be called 'the Coupon'. The phrase 'coupon' was coined by Asquith referring to the war time ration books. Lloyd George and Bonar Law were rationing out parliamentary candidatures. Most of the

selected candidates were Conservatives because the Liberal Party was in disarray because of the split.



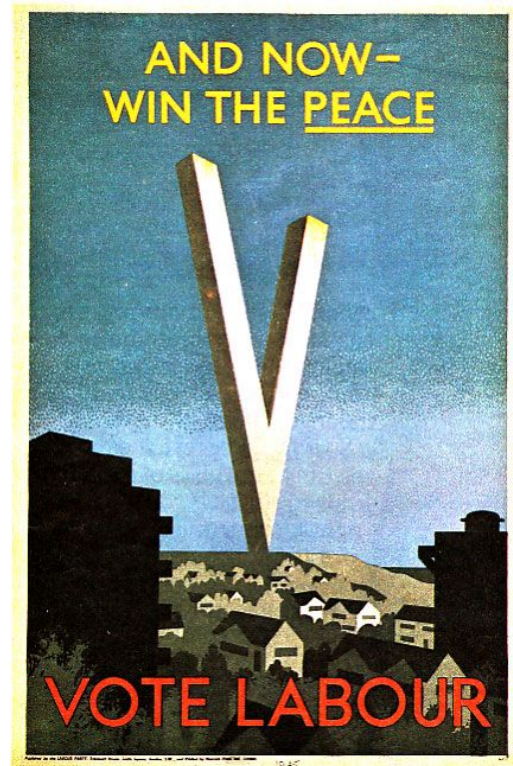
This election was the first where all men over 21 had the vote and for the first time women, but only those over 30 with property qualifications. There was a redistribution of boundaries. In this part of Middlesex there had been two seats – now there were three and the former Hammersmith seat was split and became Hammersmith North and Hammersmith South.

At the election the Coalition argued that a coalition government had won the War and should continue in the national interest after the war. Its election manifesto included tackling unemployment and the housing shortage, expansion of education and creating ‘a land fit for heroes’ – a phrase that came to haunt Lloyd George in future years. Further commitments emerged during the campaign such as a minimum wage for agricultural workers and rent controls – and an increasingly hard line on punishing Germany for the War. The Asquith Liberals emphasised the essential need for free trade to achieve a healthy economy. A constant message of Asquith was that the election had been called in haste and many men serving in the forces were disenfranchised.

Labour’s Manifesto

Labour’s manifesto *Labour’s call to the People* was a socialist one calling for the nationalisation of land, the mines, railways,

shipping, armaments and electric power, a capital levy and a heavily graduated income tax to finance a housing drive and health provision, and a minimum wage.



All parties stressed generous treatment of servicemen returning from the war and to varying degrees, supported the establishment of a League of Nations, Home Rule for Ireland and steps towards more self government in India. However anti-German feeling and the personality of Lloyd George, the victorious war leader, became the increasingly important factors as the election campaign developed. Early in 1918, before Lloyd George and the Conservatives had finalised a decision to run jointly as the coalition, the Conservatives began to select candidates. They were quick off the mark.

What Happened In West London And South-West Middlesex?

In January 1918 the *Chiswick Times* reported that Colonel Grant Morden would probably stand as the Tory candidate for Brentford and Chiswick. This was denied a week later by the Tory Chairman in Brentford. However in

April it was announced that he had been chosen as the Tory candidate. There was controversy among the Brentford and Chiswick Conservatives over their candidate. Part of the problem was rivalry between the Chiswick Tory Party and the Brentford Tory Party. Some Conservatives said the selection had been made in a high handed manner

Grant Morden was a Canadian businessman. He had been a pilot in the War but his main contribution to the war effort came later through his company - Cellulose Ltd – that produced a vital part for aircraft. He was under investigation for war profiteering and that was a source of discontent among some local Conservatives some of whom, it was said, wished to be the candidate. But he must have been cleared of the charges because after he won the seat he remained an MP till 1929.

There were also complaints that a local man had not been selected. Grant Morden lived in Ivor in Buckinghamshire. Prominent among the local Conservatives protesting about him was Chiswick Councillor Bovill who organised a meeting of what was supposed to be all Coalition supporters. It was a disorderly meeting, some people saying Grant Morden ought not to be opposed, but the outcome was the setting up of a small committee, from which some people resigned, to find an alternative candidate. A shortlist was drawn up. A man was selected but he withdrew and the only remaining person on the shortlist went forward as an Independent Coalition candidate. That was Mrs Oliver Strachey – known as Ray Strachey. She was one of the first score or so women to stand for Parliament in this country.

The local Liberals, who seem to be going along with the idea of a Coalition candidate, said in November that they were willing to cooperate but could not accept Grant Morden. They complained they had not been consulted by the Conservatives. In the event Grant Morden received the Coupon and was the official Coalition candidate.

Labour Candidates in Brentford and Chiswick, and Twickenham

What was the Labour Party doing while all this was going on? In March and April Divisional (Constituency) Labour Parties (DLPs) were formed in the west London divisions under the new constitution. Until then membership of the Labour Party was through a trade union, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Fabian Society or the British Socialist Party (BSP). Now people could join DLPs as individual members. Local branches of the above organisations could affiliate. That is the situation today of course although the ILP and the BSP no longer exist.

These new DLPs took a while to sort out their selection procedures but in October William Haywood was selected as the Labour candidate for Brentford and Chiswick. He was a 40 year old a designer and press agent and a member of the Amalgamated Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers, Engravers and Process Workers. He was born in East London and attended an elementary school and evening classes at such places as Toynbee Hall. He was keen that every workman should have an opportunity of a good general education. He had travelled widely, served in the 1st Royal Dragoons, and during a dock strike in Hamburg was once imprisoned for six weeks before the War.

Further west was the new Twickenham Parliamentary Division that included Hounslow, Isleworth and Heston. Labour's candidate was the Reverend Humphrey Chalmers. He was up against Joynson Hicks MP, who later became Home Secretary and is most famous for defeating Winston Churchill in a by election. Chalmers was a Baptist minister from Scotland. In 1916 he had contested North Ayrshire as a peace and independent Labour candidate. In Twickenham he had to contend with attacks that he was a pacifist and a conscientious objector, (which he wasn't because he had never been conscripted), and that he was pro-

German. As a member of the Union of Democratic Control, set up by Ramsay MacDonald and others, he had favoured a negotiated peace instead of pressing on with the war in 1916. In 1915 he had refused, although he had been requested, to use the pulpit for army recruiting purposes. He was an ILP member and lost in a straight fight by over 14,000 votes to 2,800.

The Liberals had had a candidate who withdrew, and the 'Silver Badge Party' was rumoured to be putting up a candidate at one time. That was the political party name for the National Federation of Discharged and Mobilised Soldiers and Sailors.

Acton Candidates

Another seat where, like Brentford and Chiswick, there was discontent within the Conservative Party with their chosen candidate, was Acton. It was a unique seat because it was the only one in the country where the parliamentary boundary coincided exactly with the local authority urban district boundary.

In the spring of 1918 the local press reported that Sir Harry Brittain had been adopted as Tory candidate for Acton and Councillor Boissonnade adopted as the Liberal candidate. Also in April the Acton Labour Party announced it would contest the seat and the candidates' short list consisted of Councillor Arney, a teacher, Councillor Carter, who reported to be of the Pacifist section of the ILP; and Robert Dunsmore who was secretary of the local British BSP and who had a few leather goods shops in the town. In June they were still sorting out the method of selection but by the end of that month Robert Dunsmore was selected.

Some Tories in Acton were questioning the method of selecting Sir Harry Brittain. They said he was selected by members of a defunct executive committee that was dissolved at the beginning of the War in 1914. They also

thought a local man should stand and County Councillor Eydmann, described as a staunch Conservative and founder of the Conservative Club, said he was going to stand as an Independent candidate. Then another Conservative, Councillor Charles Gee, said he would stand because he opposed Eydmann's 'vigilante views.' So there were three Conservatives with their hats in the ring in Acton. Boissonnade was the Liberal candidate, Dunsmore was the Labour candidate, and a sixth man, George Pike, a railway porter at Acton Main Line Station, said he would also stand and appealed for funds. He had often stood for the local council and was a councillor in 1904. He was a Labour man but there is no record of him ever being a member of the Party. He said he would not have stood if Councillor Arney, rather than Dunsmore, had been the Labour candidate.

Meanwhile Harry Brittain, the official or unofficial Tory candidate, was all over the place in Acton visiting factories, allotments and attending various functions. This was despite him saying he would not do anything political until the War was over. Eventually his selection was endorsed by a wider meeting of Conservatives, some of whom protested that non-members were at the meeting. Eventually Eydmann and Gee, the two other Tories withdrew. George Pike fell by the wayside because he failed to raise sufficient funds for his deposit. Ultimately when he lodged nomination papers they were invalidated through lack of the £150 deposit.

That left the Liberal, Boissonnade fighting to be the official Coalition candidate. The dispute between the two was referred to the Coalition whips at Westminster who said the local people should sort it out. They failed to do so and Harry Brittain said he was standing as the Coalition candidate, come what may. Boissonnade insisted he was the Coalition candidate and there was a big Liberal election meeting in Acton Town Hall. However, the

Tories were in a strong position. They were united in their support for the Lloyd George Coalition, whereas the Liberals were split. Some were actually working for Britain. Suddenly the local Liberal Executive and Boissonnade decided to withdraw. To split the Coalition vote might let Labour in and that would be disastrous. Harry Brittain received the Coupon. So, despite all the excitement. Acton ended up with just two candidates – Sir Harry Brittain (Conservative Coalition) and Robert Dunsmore (Labour).

During the campaign Dunsmore complained that the Coalition had borrowed almost the entire Labour programme. He held meetings in Acton Market Place. At one meeting he said he was an individualist and also a socialist. Only through socialism could individuals find free expression. But like other Labour candidates he had to cope with demands that all Germans and Austrians should be deported and Germany should pay for the war ‘until the pips squeaked’ There were demands to ‘hang the Kaiser.’ *The Chiswick Times* commented that there was little to choose between the candidates in their feelings towards the Kaiser, the only rivalry being that some would pull the knot tighter.

God and the Devil!

In Chiswick Grant Morden, like the other Coalition candidates attacked Labour’s dangerous revolutionary policies and said Labour was going to confiscate people’s savings. This was a reference to Labour’s proposal for a capital levy to pay for the cost of the war.

At one meeting Grant Morden was described by a clergymen as a ‘God fearing man raised by God.’ At another meeting Joynson Hicks said Grant Morden was the man for him because “he could smoke, drink and swear like the devil” . Commenting on these quotes the Reverend T. S. Stevens in a letter to the *Chiswick Times* wrote of this Coalition

candidate ‘God and the Devil! – this is coalition indeed.’

Other events were happening as well as the general election. There was the flu pandemic. Figures vary but it has been estimated that between 50 and 100 million people died worldwide, reducing the world population by between 3% and 5%. In two weeks in the autumn alone the *Acton Gazette* reported that 61 people in Acton had died from the epidemic. There was industrial unrest, a railway strike and a strike by women bus conductors for equal pay – they won and the police went on strike for union recognition and higher pay – and they won as well.



Women tramworkers strike for equal pay in London in 1918. Hayes Peoples History blog

Labour’s Idealism

The Labour Party which, unlike the Liberals, put up candidates in all the seats, was up against it. An idealism in the speeches came out. George Lansbury supporting Haywood at a meeting spoke of building a new and better society. Dunsmore spoke of the time when co-operative fraternalism will replace economic antagonism. Westcott, the Labour candidate in Hammersmith North spoke of the Labour Party laying the foundations of the new world.

But they were overwhelmed by the popularity of Lloyd George and even more so by questions and heckling at meetings demanding

deportation of all Germans and that Germany should be made to pay the total cost of the war. Haywood had to answer questions about what he had done during the War and he said he had tried to enlist seven times but had been rejected on medical grounds. He had served as a special constable. Although the Liberals stood down in the Middlesex seats in favour of the Conservative Coalition candidates, they put up candidates in the two Hammersmith seats. They emphasised their agreement with much of the Coalition programme and even supported nationalisation of the railways and other industries. They were suspicious of Lloyd George's modification of the Liberal total faith in free trade.

In Hammersmith North the National Party, that wanted total revenge on Germany including the denaturalisation and deportation of all former Germans and Austrians, pushed Labour into fourth place.

Conservatives Win on a Low Turn-out

The coalition Conservatives easily won all the seats. The turnouts were low – less than 50% in some cases. The *Chiswick Times* summed things up on January 3rd 1919 :

‘The issues before the electorate were quite simple. The trial of the ex-Kaiser, the payment in indemnities, and the making of a “hard peace” were probably the prime questions that moved electors and particularly the women, to vote for the supporters of Mr Lloyd George. Candidates suspected of any tenderness for the enemy paid the penalty. Where they all vied with each other in their denunciation of the Germans, the voters preferred to trust the Coalition nominee. Whatever the difficulties awaiting the new government in domestic politics, it has a clear field in respect of its policy towards the enemy.’

It commented on the lack of interest taken in the election : ‘Many municipal elections have furnished more excitement. The crowd that

awaited the result in Richmond was ludicrously small. The campaign was practically lifeless, the women voted in good numbers and there was almost an entire lack of demonstration. The increase and broadening of the franchise has been counterbalanced by a corresponding decrease in the display of feeling.’

The result nationally was a massive win for the Coalition candidates who won 473 seats. Labour however increased its number of MPs from 37 to 57 at the expense of the Liberals who won only 36 seats (that's the Asquith Official Liberals – Lloyd George's coalition Liberals won 127 seats.) Labour's gains were in the Northern and Midland industrial areas. Chiswick candidate William Haywood was not at all down in the mouth and was rather bucked up at the way his party had scored generally all over the country.

But Labour lost its leading parliamentarians Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Henderson and Philip Snowden because they were to varying degrees seen as either against the war or not tough enough against the Germans. William Adamson became the chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party but curiously Asquith remained Leader of the Opposition. Labour hadn't yet grasped the principle of a leader. Of the 57 Labour MPs 49 were sponsored by trade unions. The Parliamentary Labour Party was virtually a trade union national branch. And this of course was the decisive time when Labour replaced the Liberals.

See page 19 for full list of election results in west London and south west Middlesex in 1918

General Election Saturday 14th December 1918. Results announced Friday 27th December

Acton

H Brittain (Con Coalition)	11671
R Dunsmore (Labour)	4741

Brentford & Chiswick

H Grant Morden ((Con Coalition)	9077
W Haywood (Labour)	2620
R Strachey (Ind Coalition)	1262

Ealing

Sir H Nield (Con Coalition)	13710
A H Chilton (Labour)	3610

Hammersmith North

H Foreman (Con Coalition)	5785
E Young (Liberal)	2542
J C Walker (National Party)	2075
C R Morden (Labour)	2045

Hammersmith South

Sir W J Bull (Con Coalition)	8592
T A Robertson (Liberal)	2555
J T Westcott (Labour)	1958

Spelthorne

Sir P E Pilditch (Con Coalition)	12423
F E Horton (Labour)	2418
A W Leonard (Independent)	1143

Twickenham

W Joynson Hicks (Con Coalition)	14015
Rev H.Chalmers	2823

Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics, by Ed Balls, Hutchinson, 2016, £20 Reviewed by Archie Potts

Ed Balls enjoyed a charmed life until he suffered defeat in his Morley and Outwood constituency at the General Election, held on 7th May 2015. His defeat provided the ‘Portillo moment’ of the campaign. Instead of being appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Labour Government, as widely expected, he lost his seat as the Conservatives returned to power with an overall majority. Furthermore, in the wake of the election the New Labour project, in which Ed Balls had played a prominent role, came to an end with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Party.

This then is Ed Balls’ autobiography. Political autobiographies vary in quality from Alan Johnson’s superb two volumes to other autobiographies that have ended up remaindered in bargain bookshops. However this is not a conventional autobiography in which he starts with his birth and writes his way year by year to the present. It is structured around themes in his life and this works well.

Here is the autobiography of a ‘Brownite’, a man who was a leading member of Gordon Brown’s economics team. As a member of this team he argued strongly and successfully against Britain adopting the euro, and was the architect of the tax credits system that relieved the burden of poverty on many families. Although he concedes that there were tensions between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown he believes these to have been exaggerated and has little to say on the subject. However he has some anecdotes to tell on what it was like to work for Gordon Brown, the man responsible for New Labour’s economic policy. Brown was clearly on top of his job at the Treasury but he proved to be difficult to work with in government.

Ed Balls was born in Norwich in 1967 the son of a university lecturer. He attended a fee-paying school in Nottingham, read Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford, followed by the award of a Kennedy scholarship at Harvard. He returned to Britain to become a journalist on the *Financial Times*. He published a pamphlet advocating the granting of independence to the Bank of England that caught the attention of Gordon Brown. He was invited to join the Brown team, and in 1997, when New Labour came to power, he became Chief Economic Advisor to Brown. A year later he married Yvette Cooper, who was Labour MP for Pontefract, and in boundary changes he became MP for Morley and Outwood. When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in 2007 he appointed Ed Balls Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, with a seat in the Cabinet.

A major omission in this book is any explanation on why he lost his seat in the General Election of 2015. He admits that the expenses scandal had done great harm to the reputation of MPs and he explains how he and Yvette got caught up in a joint property claim. This was eventually sorted out and it was shown that the couple had operated within the rules. More damaging to Ed Balls was the revelation that he had claimed for the purchase of a Remembrance Day wreath. He explains that this was due to a clerical error and he repaid the money. It is also worth taking a closer look at Andrea Jenkyns, the Conservative candidate who defeated him. Ed Balls is generous to her, writing that they agreed not to indulge in personal attacks during the campaign and she kept her word. Andrea Jenkyns was a Yorkshire lass from a humble background. New Labour grandees parachuted into safe Labour seats underestimate such candidates at their peril. Ed Balls was warned by Labour MPs in neighbouring constituencies that his seat was at risk but he chose to tour the country speaking in marginal constituencies instead of paying attention to his own constituency.