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Political converts: Ideological travellers from Left to Right, 1975-1992

Introduction

This article seeks to investigate what is commonly referred to as the breakdown of the post-war consensus in the 1970s and consequent establishment of a new consensus that has lasted until this day. The term post-war consensus refers to a broad agreement between the three major political parties after the Second World War on the maintenance of a large public sector, high taxation, strong unions and government-owned industry. In the late 1970s a section of the British right challenged this consensus and between 1975 and 1992 this New Right contributed to four successive Conservative Party victories and to the establishment of a 'new consensus' with agreements on curbing trade union power, and maintaining the market economy and the Atlantic Alliance. Primarily a movement on the right of the British political spectrum, the New Right was preceded by a Labour government's abandonment of the Keynesian consensus, which was until then the predominant economic doctrine.²

This article demonstrates that this was followed by similar 'conversions' from left to right taking place, and being encouraged, during the 1970s. They took the form of publicly declared rejections of socialism or communism and the embrace of right-wing or conservative ideas among public intellectuals. The Conservative Party encouraged it to the extent that there was an attempt to create institutions that would facilitate such conversions. An assessment of such an

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² Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 504-580.

institution is the second aspect of the study. In 1988 former cabinet minister and Conservative Party Chairman Norman Tebbit founded the think-tank *The Radical Society*. Together with, among others, former Labour Party member Stephen Haseler, former Labour Party and then Social Democratic Party (SDP) MP Neville Sandelson and former Liberal Party leader Jo Grimond, he set up the organisation ‘to explore new policies for the 1990s in which Socialism is rejected’.³ Its inaugural lecture was ‘dedicated to “replacing deference”’ in society and was delivered by Norman Tebbit. Similar organisations included the *Social Market Foundation*, in which the SDP activist and future *Times* columnist Daniel Finkelstein served as director. In 1992 he led a group that SDP founder and former Labour Foreign Secretary David Owen called ‘some of the best and the brightest of the SDP members’ to join the Conservatives.⁴ After the SDP merged with the Liberals, Owen refused to join the new party the Liberal and Social Democrats and instead announced his retirement from politics. This political defection is the third aspect of this article since it was the last occasion when the Conservative Party was able to form a broad electoral coalition.

The breakdown of the post-war consensus was manifest within all three major British political parties. By linking three aspects of political conversion it is also possible to illustrate that the Conservative Party was the beneficiary of this breakdown: during the 1970s in the form of political conversions and then in the 1981 split in the Labour Party and the subsequent formation of the SDP and later the *Radical Society*. The 1992 general election was the last election in which the Conservative Party could command a broad coalition whose foundations were laid in the 1970s by the New Right. The common features of this coalition were ‘nationalism, anti-

³ Norman Tebbit, *Upwardly Mobile* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), pp. 344-45.

⁴ Michael White, ‘Former Owenites find ‘natural home’’, *Guardian*, 18 February 1992, p.2.

communism, hostility to 'subversive' elements in society and neo-liberal economics'.⁵ This forced the Labour Party to broaden its political platform into what became New Labour.

A 'Right Turn': Disillusion with Socialism during the 1970s

In 1975 the concept of political 'overload' was introduced by Anthony King, who thought people's previous overconfidence in government had created an alienation that was manifested in that 'when things go wrong people blame 'not "him" or "it" but "them"'.⁶ This was due to previous post-war expansion of the public sector in areas such as education and housing, combined with constant economic growth and an attitude manifested in Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's quote about never 'having it so good'. Finally, the government had accepted too great a burden and grown to the extent that it became impersonal, and, due to industrial unrest and economic crisis, 'overload' became 'universally accepted' in the political discourse of the 1970s.⁷ It was adopted and developed by journalists such as Samuel Brittan.⁸ Events such as the Miners' Strike in February 1974 and the following three-day week 'gave rise to a great deal of anxiety about the future of democracy'.⁹ Previously, during the 1960s, issues such as education and the permissive society had also alienated contributors to public debate who earlier had seen themselves as on the Left. In 1964 future Conservative Minister Rhodes Boyson, 'dismayed by the growth of the permissive society', resigned his membership of the Labour Party.¹⁰ He objected to what he saw as the introduction of comprehensive education for the sake of ideology by Harold Wilson's Labour Government. According to Boyson it was followed by 'reforms' that had nothing in common 'with the Methodist nonconformist self-help socialism of my father or

⁵ Ruth Levitas, 'Introduction: Ideology and the New Right', in *The Ideology of the New Right* ed. by Ruth Levitas (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 1-26 (p.21).

⁶ Anthony King, 'Overload: Problems of Governing in the 1970s', *Political Studies*, 23, (1975), 284-296 (p. 288).

⁷ Anthony H. Birch, 'Overload, Ungovernability and Delegitimation: The Theories and the British Case', *British Journal of Political Science*, 14, no. 2 (1984), 135-160 (pp.149-159).

⁸ Jacques J.A. Thomassen, '4. Economic Crisis, Dissatisfaction, and Protest' <http://doc.utwente.nl/4822/1/K4822_.PDF> [Last Accessed 2013-05-10], 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-159.

¹⁰ Rhodes Boyson, *Speaking My Mind: The Autobiography of Rhodes Boyson* (London: Peter Owen, 1995), p. 66.

the socialist belief of my early years'.¹¹ In 1969 he had contributed to a pamphlet entitled *The Crisis in Education*, the second in a series of so-called Black Papers that were an attack on comprehensive education, seeing it as leading to the erosion of standards. When he was introduced to the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs, Boyson found his 'economic allies' in the institute's two directors, Ralph Harris and Arthur Seldon. In 1970 they set up the Churchill Press and Constitutional Book Club with the intention, 'to propagate the ideas of the free market within the rule of law'. As its editor Boyson described how in the 1930s the Labour Party had 'occupied the moral ground of politics', but in the 1960s a development had started that would lead to a situation in which 'the state and trade unions would become no less oppressive of the individual than the worst private capitalists in the past'.¹² Boyson had therefore abandoned Labour and joined the Conservative Party. In 1970 when elected to government the party had such 'an opportunity, indeed a duty, to govern our people in such a way that they will consciously enjoy the free market in a free society that the only chance for Labour to return to power will be when the party ceases to be socialist'.¹³

The Conservative government led by Edward Heath did not fulfil the expectations of the 'New Right'. Heath lost an election called in February 1974 and a subsequent one that October. Harold Wilson formed a new Labour government and in 1976 was replaced as Prime Minister by James Callaghan. In 1975 Heath was also deposed as leader of his party and succeeded by Margaret Thatcher. She benefited from the fact that Labour's small parliamentary majority had disappeared due to by-elections when Callaghan replaced Wilson. Both also had to appease constituency parties that were increasingly left-wing and radical compared to the parliamentary party. This disjuncture manifested itself in increased ideological conflict between the right and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹² Rhodes Boyson, 'Right Turn', in *Right Turn: A symposium on the need to end the 'progressive' consensus in British thinking and policy* ed. by Rhodes Boyson (London: Churchill Press, 1970), pp. 3-6.

¹³ Rhodes Boyson, 'Prologue', in *Right Turn: A symposium on the need to end the 'progressive' consensus in British thinking and policy* ed. by Rhodes Boyson (London: Churchill Press, 1970), p. vii.

the left within the party. Leaders of the left such as Tony Benn said that the left-wing constituencies were 'keen on democracy, and care about education, planning and democratic control'.¹⁴ Stephen Haseler, the co-founder of the Labour Party fringe organisation the Social Democratic Alliance, saw the right wing of the party as having "softened" British Social Democracy and consequently made a popular appeal against Marxist advance that much more difficult'.¹⁵ With the fall of the Heath government in mind, he identified the major problem as 'whether the unions will yield up their present political power to a future duly elected Conservative government'.¹⁶ Barbara Castle also noted in May 1975 that right-wingers such as the Minister for Overseas Development, Reg Prentice, was 'shaping up to leave the party - or at least the government'.¹⁷ Other potential defectors included former Defence Minister Alun Chalfont, who saw the 'pathetic retreat over Europe' as 'a defining moment' for his decision to leave the party.¹⁸ Chalfont's resignation from the party was also due to the fact that 'the left wing, with the active support of the industrial unions, has virtually taken over'.¹⁹ Hitherto, such a position had been articulated only by institutions such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, but was now being expressed also by former Keynesians such as Chalfont, Samuel Brittan and Peter Jay. After two elections in 1974 the emphasis on such danger also 'found support amongst leading Conservative ministers like Keith Joseph and ... on the Labour side with the advent of Denis Healey'.²⁰ In 1976 this new-found bipartisan view was manifested in the severe budget implemented after the IMF had granted Britain an emergency loan. Healey saw those who resisted the cuts in cabinet and in the Labour Party as being 'out of their tiny little Chinese

¹⁴ Tony Benn, diary 13 January 1977, in Tony Benn, *Conflicts Of Interest: Diaries 1977-80* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p. 7.

¹⁵ Stephen Haseler, *The Death of British Democracy: A study of Britain's political present and future* (London: Elek Books, 1976), p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁷ Barbara Castle, diary 22 May 1975, in *The Castle Diaries 1974-76* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 400.

¹⁸ Alun Chalfont, *The Shadow of My Hand: a memoir* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 166-167.

¹⁹ Alun Chalfont, 'Time for the social-democrats to stand up and be counted', *The Times*, 23 September, 1974, p. 12; Issue 59199; col A.

²⁰ Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 354.

Minds'.²¹ Paul Johnson, former editor of the *New Statesman*, was also, like Chalfont, disillusioned with Labour's dependency on trade unions. In 1976 Johnson addressed what he saw as 'the first occasion in my lifetime when Right-wing intellectuals seem to win all the arguments'.²² 'The turning point in my loyalty to the [Labour] party' came a year later with the introduction of 'the closed shop'.²³ Labour and the unions had created a system of belief 'where conscience is collectivised' and it 'may lead to Auschwitz and Gulag' and Johnson 'did not intend to travel an inch along that fearful road'.²⁴ In 1978, when it was expected that James Callaghan would call an election in the autumn, Johnson wrote the script for what was planned to be the Conservatives' final election broadcast. The theme was the same as in Johnson's valedictory address to Labour: a warning against 'the grey and grimy totalitarian state in which the freedom under law ... simply will not exist'.²⁵ Margaret Thatcher thought the suggested broadcast was 'most moving' and that it 'contains everything I want to say'.²⁶ The passage of Johnson and other former Socialists to the right was eased by their membership of the think-tank the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), founded in 1974. Its director Alfred Sherman tried, in the words of Brian Harrison, 'to smooth the convert's path' by insisting on 'the non-party and opinion-forming status' of the organization.²⁷ This was exemplified by socialist historian Hugh Thomas, who in 1959 had edited an attack on the British establishment which he defined as essentially 'beyond democratic control'.²⁸ In 1976 Thomas had recanted his belief in socialism and the Labour Party in a similar fashion to Johnson. He thought 'the essential reason why Mrs. Thatcher wants to live in a free society is that it enables individuals to exercise greater choice' and that 'choice leads to

²¹ George Greig, 'Healey's Left Hook: "They must be out of their tiny little Chinese Minds"', *Daily Mail*, 14 February 1976, pp. 1-2.

²² Paul Johnson, 'Who's afraid of the formidable Fritz', *Evening Standard*, 5 December 1976, p. 17.

²³ Paul Johnson, 'Farewell to the Labour Party', *New Statesman*, 9 September 1977, p. 329.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

²⁵ Paul Johnson, 'Spirit of Britain', 6 June 1978, THCR 2/2/1/6 Correspondence I-J 1977-78, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, fol. 3.

²⁶ Margaret Thatcher, 'Reply to Paul Johnson', 24 August 1978, in THCR 2/2/1/6 Correspondence I-J 1977-78, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, fol. 3. fol. 1-2.

²⁷ Brian Harrison, 'Mrs Thatcher and the Intellectuals', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, no. 2 (1994), 206-245 (p. 218).

²⁸ Hugh Thomas, 'Preface', in *The Establishment: A Symposium*, ed. by Hugh Thomas, (London: Blond, 1959), p. 6.

responsibility'.²⁹ In 1979 he was appointed president of the Centre and expressed in a letter to Thatcher 'what a pleasure it is to continue to work for you from time to time' and that he was 'most proud to be appointed Chairman'.³⁰

In 1977 former Cabinet Minister Reg Prentice crossed the floor and joined the Conservatives.³¹ His decision to defect had grown out of a series of meetings between himself and Thatcher, organised by the Conservative MP Patrick Cormack; she 'was at first astounded and later enthusiastic' about it.³² Thatcher understood Prentice's political value as a sign of her broader electoral appeal, and tried personally to organise things so that he could get the nomination for a safe Conservative seat; this made him 'very grateful'.³³ However, despite Thatcher's personal involvement, his attempts to find a safe seat were initially unsuccessful.³⁴ The Conservative agents regarded 'Prentice as being a maverick character, difficult to get on with, and rather lazy'.³⁵ Thatcher's political secretary Richard Ryder suggested he might be appointed chairman of a 'Labour Voters for Thatcher Committee' in order to demonstrate his new allegiance. Patrick Cormack, who had initially convinced Prentice, saw it as a political opportunity to present a renewed Conservative Party with a broader electoral appeal. He had recognised that public debate at the time was dominated by a movement away from collectivism. Among those moving in this way were former Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt, the columnist Bernard Levin, and Professor Max Beloff who in 1973 was one of the founders of the private University of Buckingham. Among other possible defectors who were prepared to publicly endorse Thatcher

²⁹ Hugh Thomas, 'The Exhilarating Mission: Margaret Thatcher's Philosophy', *The Washington Quarterly*, 3, no.4 (1980), 125-138 (pp. 125-138).

³⁰ Hugh Thomas, 'Letter to Margaret Thatcher', July 25 1979, THCR 1/3/3 Personal letters received by Margaret Thatcher April - December 1979, fol. 2-3.

³¹ Humphrey Atkins, 'Statement by Rt. Hon. Humphrey Atkins MP, Opposition Chief Whip', 27 October 1977, Prentice 4/1 Prentice receiving the Conservative Whip, London School of Economics and Political Science Archive, fol. 1.

³² Interview conducted with Sir Patrick Cormack MP, Portcullis House, Westminster, 2010-02-10, p. 6.

³³ Reg Prentice, 'Letter to Margaret Thatcher', 16 December 1977, THCR 2/1/1/49 Correspondence with MPs and Peers 1975-78, fol. 1.

³⁴ Richard Ryder, 'Letter to Margaret Thatcher Regarding Reg Prentice', 23 November 1977, THCR 1/18/3 Selection of Margaret Thatcher's correspondence P- T August 1977-February 1979, fol. 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 2.

was former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and Foreign Secretary Lord George-Brown. In 1976 he resigned his party membership over the Trade Union and Labour Relations Bill. He saw the bill as having left him with ‘a feeling that in the Labour Party we had suddenly lost a sense of individual freedom - we had become some sort of machine’.³⁶ The *Economist* regretted his resignation and thought ‘it made the whole soft centre of the British cabinet (and of British politics) a little more alert to the defence of liberty and individualism’.³⁷ After his resignation he worked as a freelance political commentator and expressed an admiration for Thatcher ‘having a good go’ in her role as party leader.³⁸ When he sat as a cross-bencher in the House of Lords he was contacted by Thatcher for a series of meetings. Brown was ‘ready to place myself and whatever experience, know-how or just plain “gumption” I have at your disposal’. He ‘would be honoured to accept Cabinet Office’, although he would ‘continue as an independent without party affiliations’ though that would ‘not affect my whole-hearted loyalty to you in this difficult but vital task’ of forming a government.³⁹

The period of industrial strikes during the 1978-79 ‘Winter of Discontent’ saw the Conservatives gain over Labour in the opinion polls. After the Labour Government led by James Callaghan lost a vote of no-confidence on 28 March 1979 a general election was held on 3 May the same year. The previous industrial unrest had created a situation in which many people decided to vote Conservative for the first time. In the words of the editor of the *Sun*, Larry Lamb, ‘when I was finally able to bring myself to vote Tory for the first time, in 1979 ... I was quite convinced that there was no alternative’.⁴⁰ During the 1979 election campaign the paper supported the Conservatives, which it had not done during previous elections. In her memoirs, Thatcher acknowledged that the participation of Reg Prentice, who stood as a Conservative candidate for

³⁶ John Warden, ‘George Leaves The Party’, *Daily Express*, 3 March 1976, p. 1.

³⁷ ‘Solzhenitsyn’s broadcast: Swing to liberty’, *The Economist*, 6 March 1976, pp. 20-21.

³⁸ Lord George-Brown, ‘Thatcher’s year’, *Daily Mail*, 6 February 1976, p. 6.

³⁹ Lord George-Brown, ‘Letter to Margaret Thatcher’, 11 January 1979, THCR 1/18/1, Selection of Margaret Thatcher’s correspondence formerly stored in her safe “A”-“C” January 1977 - April 1979, fol. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Larry Lamb, *Sunrise: The remarkable rise and rise of the best-selling Soaraway Sun* (London: Papermac, 1989), p. 167.

Daventry, together with the assistance of ‘other converts from socialism’ in the campaign, ‘was living proof that it was Labour which had shifted leftwards’.⁴¹ But it was ‘not a victory for Thatcherism, as it was to be defined in the following decade’ which would attract further followers from the right of the Labour Party, as shown during the 1980s.⁴²

‘Mrs Thatcher had succeeded in making freedom, a classic liberal value, an asset for the Conservatives’: The Social Democratic Alliance and the Radical Society, 1987-1992.⁴³

The Social Democratic Alliance (SDA) was founded in 1975 by a group of councillors, trade unionists, and former parliamentary candidates. Its manifesto stated that the Labour Party was ‘in danger of being driven from its historic course by an intolerable dogmatism alien to socialist tradition’. Its chairman Peter Stephenson, who was the editor of the revisionist journal *Socialist Commentary*, warned that ‘there are genuine differences of opinion and the party cannot go on papering over the cracks for ever’.⁴⁴ The organisation was seen as a counterweight to the Tribune Group and was therefore endorsed by cabinet ministers such as Roy Jenkins and Reg Prentice.⁴⁵ When Prentice resigned from the Labour Government in 1976, the SDA thought he had, by doing so, ‘restored principle and integrity to the moderate wing of the Labour Party’.⁴⁶ The Labour National Agent, Reg Underhill, who had previously pressed for the expulsion of the Trotskyist entryist organisation Militant Tendency from the party, ‘thought it was possible’ that Prentice would stand against the party in a by-election and that another MP sympathetic to the SDA, Neville Sandelson, would follow his example.⁴⁷ Sandelson had organised a letter that was sent in support of Prentice to the Newham constituency party and was signed by 201 Labour

⁴¹ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 449.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴³ Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man: Life at the Heart of New Labour* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 82.

⁴⁴ Penny Symon, ‘Labour group faults leadership’, *The Times*, 18 June 1975; p. 4; Issue 59425; col B.

⁴⁵ Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 420-29.

⁴⁶ Social Democratic Alliance, ‘Press Release: SDA Backs Prentice’, Prentice 2/9 Correspondence concerning Prentice’s resignation from the Labour Party, Papers of Baron Prentice of Daventry, London School of Economics and Political Science Archive, 22 December 1976, fol. 1.

⁴⁷ Tony Benn, diary 17 January 1977, *Conflicts Of Interest: Diaries 1977-80* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), pp. 7-9.

MPs, including most of the cabinet.⁴⁸ When Prentice, in the words of Eric Heffer, proved to be ‘a Tory in Labour’s ranks’, the right of the party and the SDA in particular were discredited.⁴⁹ However, during the 1979 general election, the former chairman of the Tribune Group, James Dickens, who had replaced Prentice as a candidate in Newham, resigned his candidacy. He cited Trotskyite influence in the constituency party as his reason for doing so. This, together with the fact that he had previously been named as one of the ‘danger men’ whom Callaghan had been urged by the SDA to disown, made the SDA secretary Douglas Eden declare that they ‘found it very interesting that even a former chairman of the Tribune Group is not Left-wing enough’.⁵⁰ Sandelson, like Prentice an outspoken critic of the Left, faced a hostile constituency party and, with the mandatory reselection procedure after the 1979 election defeat, stood to lose his seat. Before the 1980 party conference Sandelson warned that such changes would create a situation where a ‘real danger now lies in a possibility that this “ungovernable” party might become the government of the country’.⁵¹

In January 1981 former Labour Ministers Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams signed the ‘Limehouse Declaration’. It was a response to the recent party conference which they saw as ‘the culmination of a long process by which the Labour Party has moved steadily away from its roots in the people of this country and its commitment to parliamentary government’.⁵² They proposed a ‘Council for Social Democracy’ and Sandelson belonged to their ‘known sympathisers’ but was omitted from the earlier plans because he was, in the words of

⁴⁸ Neville Sandelson, ‘Letter to Mr. Calcott, Secretary of the Newham North East Constituency Labour Party’, Sandelson 4/3 Prentice Letter, Papers of Neville Sandelson London School of Economics and Political Science Archive, 17 July 1975, fol. 1-2.

⁴⁹ Eric Heffer, *Never a Yes Man: The Life and Politics of an Adopted Liverpoolian* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 167.

⁵⁰ John Warden, ‘Not extreme enough! Trots oust Left-winger in new blow for Jim’, *Daily Express*, 12 April 1979, pp. 1-2.

⁵¹ Neville Sandelson, ‘Letter to the editor: The Debate on Labour Party Structure’, *The Times*, 25 September 1980.

⁵² ‘Limehouse Declaration’

<<http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/uploads/LimehouseDeclaration.pdf>> [Last Accessed 2010-08-21]

Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, ‘thought to be too leaky’.⁵³ Both Sandelson and Haseler supported the concept of a ‘social market economy’.⁵⁴ During the 1970s the CPS and Keith Joseph argued the case for it in Britain but it ‘never featured in the key slogan of Thatcherism’.⁵⁵ Instead, the concept was adopted and promoted by David Owen and the SDP within the parameters of their overall task of ‘breaking the mould’ of British politics.⁵⁶ But, along with the general secretary of the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU), Frank Chapple, who initially supported the Limehouse declaration and was a member of the SDA, Haseler and Sandelson gradually became disillusioned with the new party. Sandelson was disappointed over having lost his bid to sit on the SDP National Committee and his seat in the 1983 general election.⁵⁷ When SDP MP John Horam defected to the Conservatives, Sandelson applauded the decision and declared he ‘would be considering his own future within the SDP’.⁵⁸ During the 1987 election campaign he also urged supporters of the SDP-Liberal Alliance to vote Conservative in order to keep Labour out of office.⁵⁹ He was disappointed with the planned SDP merger with the Liberal Party and discussed with Richard Ryder and Tristan Garel-Jones whether the ‘Independent’ or ‘Continuing’ SDP, set up by David Owen, needed to ‘seek some kind of relationship with the Conservatives’.⁶⁰ Sandelson promised that ‘if the Conservative leadership agrees to this procedure, then I will undertake to sell it to Owen’.⁶¹ The SDA also declared that ‘Social Democrats of all parties and none should not only accept Mrs Thatcher’s social revolution but positively and wholeheartedly support it’, since ‘as longstanding

⁵³ Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 79-93.

⁵⁴ First introduced in 1946 by the German economist Alfred Muller-Armack as consisting of ‘market freedom combined with social balance’ cited in A. M Armack, ‘The Meaning of the Social Market Economy’, in *Germany’s Social Market Economy: Origins and Evolution* ed. by A. Peacock and H. Willgerodt (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.79-102 (p. 82).

⁵⁵ Matthew Lakin, ‘David Owen, New Labour and the Social Market Economy: The Renewal of Social Democratic Politics’, [undergraduate dissertation] University of Nottingham 1 May 2009, p. 18

<http://www.smf.co.uk/assets/files/Dissertation_Lakin.pdf> [Last Accessed: 2010-08-22].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-21.

⁵⁷ Julia Langdon, ‘Jenkins men lose in SDP committee vote’, *Guardian*, 5 November 1982, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Robert Harris, ‘SDP’s Labour man defects to Tories’, *Observer*, 1 March 1987, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Martin Linton, ‘Candidates who can make a name for themselves’, *Guardian*, 14 May 1987, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Neville Sandelson, ‘Meeting with T. Garel Jones and Richard Ryder’, 21 September 1987, Sandelson 10/1 Papers of Neville Sandelson, London School of Economics and Political Science Archive, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Social Democrats we naturally support an enterprise culture which opens up unprecedented opportunities for working people and trade unionists, and is removing traditional barriers'.⁶² In order to promote this, 'an advisory panel of academics and politicians is being formed and will be announced shortly'.⁶³ So the SDA maintained 'a think-tank institute should be set up for Social Democrats of all parties' to cooperate with the Conservatives. The idea of naming the new think-tank *The Conservative Social Democracy Institute* was also brought forward because Social Democrats now needed 'to embrace the radical change which the Thatcher revolution has established'.⁶⁴ The aim of the new organisation was 'to encourage a new emerging consensus in British politics [in which] success is now less derided within our national culture'.⁶⁵ Its opening statement declared that '*The Radical Society*, whose members will be drawn from across the political spectrum, seeks to make a contribution to constructive thinking in the new individualist era.'⁶⁶

As well as Sandelson and Haseler, the original founders were former Labour Minister Lord Marsh, Norman Tebbit, Conservative peer Baroness Cox, and Frank Chapple. Thus, the connection with Thatcher was, as shown, present from the start of the Society, with prominent members being Cox, the IEA Director Arthur Seldon, and, above all, Tebbit. Many who initially joined the Society were disillusioned with the Labour Party or the SDP and attracted to the Conservative Party and to Thatcher's leadership; Tebbit and Cox, of course, had no such reappraisal to make. Another initial member of the Society was former Liberal Party leader Jo Grimond, who was invited to address the Society on the topic of 'The Individual in the New

⁶² Statement issued by Lord Chapple, Mr Brian Walden, Mr Neville Sandelson, Dr Stephen Haseler, Dr David Carlton and Mr Roger Fox of the Social Democratic Alliance, 'Social Democrats Announce Support for Thatcher's Radicalism', October 15 1987, fol. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, fol. 1.

⁶⁴ Neville Sandelson, 'Notes on Proposal For Institute Linking Conservatives and Social Democrats', in *Ibid.*, fol. 1-7.

⁶⁵ 'Statement: The Radical Society', April 1988, in Sandelson 10/1, fol. 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 1.

Society' while its inaugural lecture was given by Tebbit on the topic of 'The New Consensus'.⁶⁷ Tebbit, who had retired from the government, chose to be involved with the Society because 'political debate outside the narrow confines of parliamentary party struggles is much needed'.⁶⁸ He asserted that the Radical Society 'could provide much of the competition to the Government which it was not getting from the opposition'.⁶⁹ His inaugural lecture was advertised as helping the Society in its intention 'to enlarge political thinking beyond conventional party politics', with the fundamental instincts being 'to put liberty before equality under minimal government'.⁷⁰ The post-war consensus had turned the Conservatives, 'always blessedly non-ideological and non-doctrinaire', into a party 'almost without ideas'. It had created a vast array of 'sectional interests', which since 1979 had been confronted by the Thatcher government 'in a way that had been unknown for years'. The government had 'confronted not only trade unions but Tory industrialists and middle-class vested interest groups too'. So, due to 'a radical' and 'populist' Conservative Party, 'the bastions of class privilege, intellectual snobbery, producer monopolies and cartels are falling'. It was replaced by a 'new consensus' which 'those in the Labour Party's pragmatic or office-seeking wing' argued must be accepted. Finally, Tebbit hoped that '*The Radical Society* will originate and disseminate the ideas to carry forward the open, non-deferential, competitive and responsible society we have seen coming in the last decade'.⁷¹ Conservative MPs such as Chris Patten, who served in the government as Minister for Overseas Development, were also approached to join as patrons. Patten, although happy to deliver a lecture to the Society, thought that 'Groups aimed at stimulating new thinking of this kind function best at

⁶⁷ 'Radical Society: Programme for 1988-89', in Sandelson 10/1, fol. 1.

⁶⁸ In his autobiography he developed the argument that 'the struggle of Labour moderates still within that Party to bring its policies into the late twentieth century suggests that Haseler and Sandelson have touched a responsive chord'. However, it was also assumed that, in the words of *The Economist*, he used the society as a platform 'while he waits for Mrs Thatcher to ask him to take over the Tory leadership', since he had vowed 'to keep pushing the Government away from "woolly-thinking consensus"'

⁶⁹ James Naughtie, 'Tebbit claims control of Tory conscience', *Guardian*, 26 April 1988, p. 3.

⁷⁰ 'Preface to Norman Tebbit's Inaugural Lecture', Sandelson 10/6 Radical Society 1988-1991, October 1988, fol. 1-2.

⁷¹ Norman Tebbit, 'Inaugural Address to the Radical Society: The New Consensus', Chatham House, 25 April 1988, Sandelson 10/ 6, fol. 1-13.

arm's length from Government'.⁷² With the Society's political affiliation in mind, Haseler suggested its agenda should be developed in order not 'to lapse into the obscurity of another fringe organisation'. As someone who previously wanted the SDP to embrace 'the lasting legacy of Thatcherism' by 'pushing radical economic and social change to its outer limits of possibility', he also urged the society and the politicians associated with it to embrace constitutional change.⁷³

During the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool in 1989, the Society held a fringe meeting at which John Major was the main speaker in his capacity as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.⁷⁴ In his lecture he outlined six questions politicians should consider when deciding policy as they were essential 'for the Conservative Party and all genuine radicals to put ... into practice in the 1990s': 'Will it enlarge freedom and extend opportunity, will it make producers and providers more accountable and responsive to consumers and will it help those who want to become less dependent to take more responsibility for their own lives'; 'will it improve life for the worst off in society, will its effect be environmentally sound and last, but not least, will it enable individuals to make the maximum contribution to society'. His conclusion was that 'our appeal as radicals is unashamedly populist' with the core message consisting of a will to let people choose for themselves.⁷⁵ Major had followed Tebbit in presenting a personal manifesto on how to strengthen the radical appeal of the Conservatives, and thus also proposed himself as a candidate to succeed Thatcher. The continuous links with the Conservative Party worried Sandelson, who in 1989 had resigned as president of the Society. He feared they would alienate non-Conservative members, and in a letter to Arthur Seldon said that it was never the intention to align the society 'to any political party' which now seemed to be the case with 'recent meetings

⁷² Chris Patten, 'Letter to Neville Sandelson', 10 February 1988, Sandelson 10/1, fol. 1.

⁷³ Stephen Haseler, 'Why the Tories are not radical enough to further Thatcherism', *Independent*, 30 October 1987, p. 1.

⁷⁴ 'Conservative Party Conference: Details of Fringe Meeting being held during the Conference', Blackpool 1989, Sandelson 10/10 Miscellaneous papers related to The Radical Society 1987-1991, fol. 1.

⁷⁵ John Major, 'Speech to the Radical Society', Blackpool October 1989, Sandelson 10/9 Papers relating to the Radical Society 1989-1992, fol. 1-6.

held at a Conservative Club with Conservative audiences addressed by Conservative MPs'.⁷⁶ However, Sandelson had not ceased to support the party and offered to its Director of Presentation to publish a collection of 'a dozen or so contributors giving their reasons as to why they would find it impossible to vote Labour at the next General Election'.⁷⁷

'Labour has not changed enough': The support of the Continuing SDP for John Major during the 1992 general election.⁷⁸

According to Anthony King, Margaret Thatcher, prior to becoming Prime Minister, 'did feel herself to be an outsider and did think of herself in those terms'.⁷⁹ There was 'every sign of a sense of distance - including psychological distance - between herself and many of those with whom she had to do business'.⁸⁰ As a result, she cultivated a style of confrontation that initially appealed to those traditionally non-Conservative such as the founders of the Radical Society. During her premiership the perception of her as candid and refreshing was, however, replaced by the impression that she was hectoring and stubborn. This resulted in her being forced to resign in 1990, a decision at the time seen as having originated from the 'wisdom of the crowds', since the Conservative Parliamentary Party held the opinion that the party would lose the next election with her as a leader, whereas this forced resignation was later seen as a mistake.⁸¹ Concerning her successor, David Owen, the leader of the 'Continuing SDP', nourished the hope that he or she would 'continue with the counter-revolution' and do so 'in terms which most SDP supporters approve'.⁸² Owen was seen as having 'staked out his claim to the slice of political territory wedged between the left of the Conservative Party ... and the extreme right of the

⁷⁶ Neville Sandelson, 'Letter to Arthur Seldon regarding the future of The Radical Society', Sandelson 10/10 Miscellaneous papers related to The Radical Society 1987-1991, 22 March 1991, fol. 1.

⁷⁷ Neville Sandelson, 'Letter to Harvey Thomas, Director of Presentation Conservative Central Office', 22 October 1990, in *Ibid.*, fol. 1-2.

⁷⁸ Hugo Young, 'Interview with David Owen', 14 February 1992, in *The Hugo Young Papers: Thirty Years of British Politics – Off the Record*, ed. by Ion Trewin (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 341.

⁷⁹ Anthony King, 'The Outsider as Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher', *British Journal of Political Science*, 32, no.3 (2002), 435-454 (p. 444).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁸¹ Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 23.

⁸² David Owen, *Time to Declare* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 784.

Liberals and the SDP'.⁸³ When the Continuing SDP was disbanded in 1990, his followers agreed to 'let the corpse of the SDP get cold'. Ideologically they felt themselves closer to the Conservatives than the newly-formed Liberal and Social Democrats. They therefore 'formed a club called Fellow-Travellers, but refused to join a party led by "That woman"'.⁸⁴ A significant step was taken by the Conservative Party to accommodate the Continuing SDP when the political leadership changed with the departure of Thatcher.

In his first statement as Prime Minister, John Major promised 'to build a country at ease with itself'.⁸⁵ Initially Major also approached Owen to establish positive relations in parliament. Thus he agreed with Thatcher who previously had expressed the opinion that Owen's 'natural home was the Conservative Party'.⁸⁶ Right-wingers in the party such as Alan Clark also thought of him as a suitable Foreign Secretary.⁸⁷ Furthermore, Major also tried to widen the appeal of the party by emphasising that, unlike his predecessor, he 'disliked "isms"' and 'liked people'.⁸⁸ Chris Patten, who was appointed Party chairman, supported this strategy when he discussed dates for a general election in a paper published in January 1991. Under the heading of 'target groups' the main problem was identified as being that 'the latest polls suggested that the main shift in votes since the last general election had been a switch from Liberal Democrat to Labour'.⁸⁹ The Conservative election manifesto was therefore designed to be 'effective policy, not ideological confrontation', with an emphasis on the counter-revolution approved by David Owen.⁹⁰ Major hoped for his endorsement at the general election and it was also speculated that Owen would be

⁸³ Crewe and King, *SDP*, p. 423.

⁸⁴ Michael White, 'Children of the Gang of Four', *Guardian*, 14 April 1997, p. 45.

⁸⁵ Sara Hogg and Jonathan Hill, *Too Close to Call: Power and Politics – John Major in No. 10* (London: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 3.

⁸⁶ Woodrow Wyatt, diary 4 June 1990, in *The Journals of Woodrow Wyatt: Volume Two 1989-1992* ed. by Sarah Curtis (London: Pan Books, 2000), p. 305.

⁸⁷ Alan Clark, diary 11 April 1994, in *The Last Diaries: In and out of the Wilderness* ed. by Ion Trewin (London: Phoenix, 2003), p. 137.

⁸⁸ Hogg and Hill, *Too Close to Call*, p. 83.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

⁹⁰ John Major, *The Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 300.

offered a place in the cabinet where he would serve as a ‘Social Democrat’.⁹¹ But when the Conservatives denied the existence of the offer, Owen regretted the failure of ‘an honest attempt ... to break the convention that politicians of different parties cannot co-operate’.⁹² Therefore, despite the fact that the Conservatives had ‘successfully blunted their ‘cruel image’ by replacing Margaret Thatcher with someone seen as more ‘caring’, Maurice Saatchi suggested that the party should fight the election ‘on the old economic battleground’.⁹³

On 11 March 1992 John Major announced an election to be held on 9 April the same year. During the election campaign the Conservatives were often behind Labour in the opinion polls. According to earlier Gallup polls ‘Major was widely regarded by the British voter as being caring, trustworthy, competent, likeable and as someone who listened to reason’.⁹⁴ This was important for David Owen, who was worried that Labour’s Neil Kinnock ‘might become Prime Minister’, a view shared by those of his supporters who had refused to join the Liberal Democrats.⁹⁵ Previously, they had found ‘the Tory triumphalism of the 1980s distasteful’ and could therefore not have joined the party.⁹⁶ However, they still recognised that it ‘seemed that again and again, the Right was more, well, right’.⁹⁷ On 17 February twenty-two leading SDP activists had joined the Conservatives, allowing Major to claim that ‘the Tory Party was now the “natural home” for former Social Democrat supporters’.⁹⁸ It put pressure on David Owen, and it was widely anticipated that he would follow the activists into the Conservatives. The reason he would do so was thought to be the Maastricht Summit, which he had described as a ‘most outstanding

⁹¹ Derrick Hill, ‘Dear Doctor: Are you ready to join a Tory Cabinet’, *Daily Express*, 1 March 1991, p. 8.

⁹² Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 791.

⁹³ Hogg and Hill, *Too Close to Call*, p. 125.

⁹⁴ Cited in David Broughton, ‘The Limitations of Likeability: the Major Premiership and Public Opinion’, in *The Major Premiership: Politics and Policies under John Major, 1990-1997* ed. by Peter Dorey, (London: Palgrave, 1999), pp.199-217 (p. 205).

⁹⁵ Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 790.

⁹⁶ Daniel Finkelstein, ‘I’d never voted Tory. But changing was easy’, *The Times*, 5 May 2010, p. 2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁸ Will Stewart, ‘A Major step for SDP gang’, *Daily Express*, 18 February 1992, p. 4.

achievement'.⁹⁹ In 1991 SDP MP and former Labour Minister John Grant predicted that 'Owen's rhapsodical endorsement could yet tip the balance in the handful of marginal seats that could well decide the outcome' of the election.¹⁰⁰ Finally, in an article in the *Mail On Sunday*, Owen called the election 'dispiriting', saying that this led him to attach 'more weight to personality and to a politician's actual record' when he had decided to endorse John Major.¹⁰¹ He warned the Conservatives not to rule out a deal with the Liberal Democrats, with cabinet seats for Paddy Ashdown and former Liberal leader David Steel. The major reason for not voting Labour was that 'Mr Kinnock's record of misjudgement means that he does not deserve to become Prime Minister' and therefore those that lived in marginal seats were urged to vote Conservative.¹⁰² He would vote for the Liberal Democrats in his own seat, which was a Labour-Liberal marginal, because he wanted proportional representation. But since he also wanted 'this country well-governed' he endorsed John Major as Prime Minister.¹⁰³ When Major won the 1992 election he had been able to gather the same kind of non-socialist coalition as had Thatcher in the 1980s.

Conclusion

After the 1992 general election defeat John Smith replaced Neil Kinnock as Labour leader. Kinnock had begun a process of modernising the party, continued by Smith and his successor Tony Blair. The ultimate result was 'New Labour' and their general election victory in 1997. 'New Labour' was seen as a non-socialist party, non-dogmatic in nature, and it followed the consensus on the market economy to such an extent that 'the language of the market came to an increased prominence in both Labour's internal discussion and its policy agenda'.¹⁰⁴ This, along

⁹⁹ Chris Buckland, 'Kinnock is a pushover on Europe: Owen to boost Major', *Daily Express*, 4 April 1992, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰⁰ John Grant, 'Doctor offers first aid', *Guardian*, 22 April 1991, p. 23.

¹⁰¹ David Owen, 'Comment: Keep Kinnock out of No. 10', *The Mail On Sunday*, 5 April 1992, p. 15.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Nicholas Assinder, 'Why I'm backing Major, by Owen', *Daily Express*, 6 April 1992, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ewen Green, *Thatcher* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), p.15.

with the fact that Neville Sandelson re-joined Labour in 1996, can be regarded as a result of the ‘new consensus’ that had been established by Thatcher.

Bringing together the three different aspects of political conversions from left to right between 1975-1992 illustrates why the New Right managed to gain the political initiative which New Labour in turn managed to seize from them. The Right filled the vacuum of ideas created when the Keynesian consensus was abandoned. Therefore, it is arguable that converts were attracted to Thatcherism due to the fact that the right had already gained the initiative. In the 1970s and 1980s this was manifested in that Thatcher attracted political converts to her cause and in the attempt to preserve and develop that radicalism in a political think-tank. Along with the suspicion of the Labour Party, John Major was able to capitalise on this during the 1992 general election. An architect of New Labour, Peter Mandelson, has stated that the voters saw ‘no choice at all’ between ‘a dogmatic, ideologically pure socialism or a Prime Minister, even a Tory Prime Minister, who had allowed them to buy their council houses’.¹⁰⁵ This was also assisted by the fact that the Conservatives appeared to be welcoming new supporters and not rejecting them. When John Major replaced Thatcher as Prime Minister he renewed this impression. Peter Hennessy described the period from when Major assumed office in 1990 until his election victory as ‘the high days of Major’s consensual, consultative style’, also reflected in the fact that it was the last election for thirteen years where the Conservatives attracted ‘converts’.¹⁰⁶ Without the breakdown of post-war consensus in the form of governmental ‘overload’ and industrial unrest, intellectual disillusionment with Labour would not have occurred and the Right would not have been seen as an alternative.¹⁰⁷ Finally, ‘New Labour’ accepted the hegemony established by the Right and then emulated the coalition that had benefited both Thatcher and Major.

¹⁰⁵ Mandelson, *Third Man*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 444.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

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