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‘The introduction into English public life of the educated workman’: The rise of Labour in the Edwardian Mass Press

Dr. Chris Shoop-Worrall

Abstract

This paper explores how the emergent Labour Party was represented by two of Britain’s leading popular daily newspapers: the Daily Mail and the Daily Express. Focusing on coverage afforded the party during its first general elections — 1900 and 1906 — it will be argued that the response of the Conservative popular press to the rise of Labour was complex. While often hostile, these newspapers also showed considerable interest in the party’s rise and were also broadly positive to both individual Labour MPs and the movement’s desire to better represent working class interests. Adding to past works into pre–Great war political culture, this paper interrogates the complexity of Labour’s emergent place within a mass political culture that, while broadly hostile to left–wing politics, primarily catered toward an imagined ‘everyman’ who was very similar to Labour’s assumed electoral supporter.

Keywords: Labour Party, popular press, newspaper language, political identity, pre–1914 British culture

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Introduction

The mass election-time political culture of Edwardian Britain, into which the Labour Party¹ first entered in 1900, was framed primarily around the perceived wants and interests of an imagined ‘man in the street’, whose significance had grown particularly after the various reform acts of the 1880s.² This ‘everyman’ was the person whom the proposed political policies of both the Liberals and the Conservatives were increasingly pitched, on issues including tariff reform, religious education and alcohol consumption.³ This increasingly mass and masculinised election sphere was part of a wider consumer culture within which the everyman also held significance.⁴ A key component of these interconnected cultures of politics, urban consumerism, and entertainment was the daily mass press: the ‘new dailies’ *Mail* and *Express* which lay the groundwork the dominant tabloid culture of the twentieth century.⁵ These newspapers, and newspapers in general, were key conduits of political communication in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Britain.⁶ Their content sensationalised and personalised election news in ways that

¹ Throughout this paper, the word ‘Labour’ will be used to refer both to the party and, at times, to the wider movement to which the party remained connected. It is noted by the author, however, that they existed as the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) during the general election of 1900.

² L. Blaxill, ‘Joseph Chamberlain and the Third Reform Act: A Reassessment of the “Unauthorized Programme” of 1885’, *Journal of British Studies* 54/01 (2015), pp. 88–117; L. Blaxill, ‘Electioneering, the Third Reform Act, and Political Change in the 1880s’, *Parliamentary History* 30/3 (2011), pp. 343–73; M. Brodie, *The Politics of the Poor: The East End of London, 1885-1914* (Oxford, 2004); P. J. Waller and A. F. Thompson, *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain: Essays Presented to A.F. Thompson* (Brighton, 1987), p. 36; K. Rix, “‘The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections’? Reassessing the Impact of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act’, *The English Historical Review* CXXIII/500 (2008), pp. 65–97; Richard. Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury, 1881-1902: Unionism and Empire* (London, 1996).

³ L. Blaxill, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge, 2020); A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868-1906* (London, 2007).

⁴ M. Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London, 2002), p. 95.

⁵ A. Bingham and M. Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 7–9.

⁶ For more on the broader importance of newspapers, see J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), p. 78; J. Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of ‘Public Opinion’, 1867-1914*

effectively spoke to their mass readerships, many of whom were the same ‘man in the street’ sought by politicians across the political spectrum.⁷ Their communicative potential was noteworthy: Stephen Koss’s chapter on these newspapers shows Joseph Chamberlain’s intense interest in courting their support⁸, while recent scholarship by David Vessey has noted how the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) similarly saw the merits of their suffrage campaigns capturing the attention of these particular newspapers.⁹

Labour were perhaps uniquely interested in the political significance of the new dailies. Their appeal to the man in the street – an individual from whom Labour particularly sought the vote – made the daily mass press a hugely significant force. Indeed, Labour would eventually launch their own newspaper, the short-lived *Daily Citizen*, such was the perceived political importance of having a Labour-friendly mass daily newspaper¹⁰. The knowledge of the mass press’s appeal to the man in the street came with a parallel hostility from across the early Labour movement towards this ‘capitalist’ press. The fact that the *Citizen*’s birth was a decade in the making spoke significantly of the agonising across the pre-war British left about what constituted appropriate mass political communication: an issue which the party would continue to struggle with for decades to follow.¹¹

While some scholarship has explored aspects of Labour’s relationship towards and with both the popular press and popular culture pre-1914¹², little exists

(Cambridge, 2013), p. 25; Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868-1906*: pp. 26-7.

⁷ C. Shoop-Worrall, ‘Politics and the Mass Press in Long Edwardian Britain 1896-1914’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2019).

⁸ S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, 1984), v. 2: pp. 15–53.

⁹ D. Vessey, ‘Words as Well as Deeds: The Popular Press and Suffragette Hunger Strikes in Edwardian Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History* 32/1 (2021), pp. 68–92.

¹⁰ Shoop-Worrall, ‘Politics and the Mass Press in Long Edwardian Britain 1896-1914’, pp. 180–200.

¹¹ See L. Beers, *Your Britain : Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge; Mass, 2010).

¹² D. Hopkins, “The socialist press in Britain, 1890-1910” in J. Curran, G. Boyce and P. Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History from the seventeenth century to the present*

on the ways in which Labour manifested within the pages of the mass daily press. This paper interrogates the ways in which the two founding publications of Bingham and Conboy's 'tabloid century', the *Mail* and *Express*, represented the emergence of Labour during their first two general election campaigns. Using these two periods of newspaper coverage, spanning the weeks of the elections both in 1900 and 1906¹³, this paper explores the complex place that Labour held within the pages of these mass-selling newspaper and, by extension, a significant component of the political culture in which they sought success.

On the one hand, it would seem that the hostility shown across the British left towards the new dailies, and the wider culture to which they contributed, was somewhat mutual. Both the *Mail* and *Express* featured articles critical of the party's politics, especially after their true 'arrival' onto the national political scene in 1906. Much of this criticism revolved around Labour's language of chaos and destabilisation; the emergence of this new, left-wing political movement clashed considerably with the broadly conservative outlook of both the new dailies and the consumer political culture to which they sold so well. However, this criticism was not uniform. In fact, both newspapers dedicated coverage that was receptive to much of this emergent party. Central to this positivity was the idea that Parliament was becoming increasingly representative. For example, 'working men' entered the Commons and were seen as a welcome and overdue reality. This, and an appreciation of some of the societal inequalities that Labour were struggling to overcome, underlines the complicated place which Labour occupied within this massified, masculine election culture to which the new dailies contributed so significantly.

Early Indifference

The 1900 election was the Labour Party's first ever election, as well as the first time that Britain had a socialist party competing at a national election. Their initial

day (London, 1978), pp. 265-280; C. Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester, 1990).

¹³ See Bibliography

success was modest, having had two MPs elected to the House of Commons and amassing just under 63,000 votes.¹⁴ That said, it marked a significant change in the British political landscape; in their first election, Labour won a larger share of the popular vote than John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party. Considering the later significance that can be (and has been) so easily placed on a party's first election, one would assume that there was a noticeable response at the time to Labour's electoral debut, including from two of the country's most popular newspapers.

The reality of the response, from both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* at least, was considerably underwhelming. Admittedly, the 1900 election was defined by the central issue of the Second Boer War; a pro-imperial national spirit borne out of the war was widely credited with helping the Conservatives sweep to victory, and both the new dailies' election coverage was heavily focused on the electoral importance of the ongoing conflict in the Transvaal.¹⁵ However, even considering the weight of coverage afforded the war, the Labour Party was given almost no coverage at all. Far from being a watershed moment which saw a conservative press react with intensity, the rise of Labour prompted Britain's two leading right-of-centre dailies to do little more than shrug.

The sparse mentions that were given to Labour by the two newspapers during their first election represented the party as a curious, inoffensive new oddity. Most of the attention in these newspapers focused not on the party itself, but on some of the high-profile individual members. Of particular interest was Keir Hardie, the party's founder, leader, and first elected MP. One report noted that he had earned the support of renowned businessman, philanthropist and 'Quaker cocoa manufacturer' George Cadbury, who had sent Hardie £500 to help the party to support 'the expenses of Labour candidates' in Blackburn, Manchester, and Glasgow.¹⁶ Besides earning Cadbury's support, Hardie's brief appearances portray him as a curious eccentric, assigning him the nickname 'Queer Hardie' and noting how his personality was not that of traditional members of Parliament; '(he is) the

¹⁴ D. Butler and G. Butler, *British Political Facts, 10th ed.* (Basingstoke, 2010).

¹⁵ Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, p. 26.

¹⁶ 'Campaign Items', *Daily Mail* 27/09/1900.

most erratic of Labour members... his outward oddities only faintly disguise a strong, simple, resolute character'.¹⁷

Similarly, the other mentions of Labour parliamentary candidates focus on curious aspects of their personalities, rather than on controversial or original aspects of their political leanings. For example, a candidate in Derby called 'Mr. R. Bell' was portrayed similarly to Liberal or Conservative candidates, stating that he 'loves conciliation more than controversy'.¹⁸ Another, Thomas Burt of Morpeth, was described as 'no friend of socialism' and given a background that remarks on the originality of his political background; 'he still bears on him the marks of his early life of toil at the pit mouth... teetotalism and trade unionism made him a speaker... his mates elected him secretary (of his trade union) nine years later they sent him to Parliament'.¹⁹ Far from being portrayed as revolutionaries, Labour's new and prospective parliamentary candidates were represented as relatively unremarkable new additions to the British political landscape. The above-examples of language used to portray them focuses more on personality quirks than political leanings. Any reference to personal or party ideology seems to deliberately play down any radical or controversial tendencies. Their emergence is noted, but as little more than a minor footnote on the wider issues in the election.

One potential reason why the *Mail's* and *Express's* coverage of the party's emergence seems to have been so underwhelming can be seen in how the broader idea of a worker-propelled political movement is discussed. Again, references to a wider Labour movement are scarce, but they suggest a shared understanding that a future of worker-driven politics was a long way off. For instance, a front page in the *Express* features a speech from the leading Liberal Unionist MP Joseph Chamberlain, in which he espouses the view that any new, 'Labour' members of Parliament – ones elected directly from a working-class community to represent their interests – would be like 'fish out of water' in the Commons.²⁰ Another article,

¹⁷ 'Who's Who in the Election', *Daily Mail* 5 October 1900, p. 3.

¹⁸ 'Who's Who in the Election'.

¹⁹ 'Who's Who in the Election'.

²⁰ 'Labour Members and Mr. Chamberlain', *Daily Express* 1 October 1900, p. 1.

published later in the election, speculates light-heartedly on a future where Britain has a 'worker-controlled future electorate'. It argues that a time should come when the only barrier to voting should be an age limit of 21, and concludes with an interested look forward to what types of legislation might be passed if 'the working man controlled the voting'.²¹ Interestingly, while it has a more positive view than the quoted speech by Chamberlain, this article shares the view that a worker-driven politics is still not a present concern.

Overall, the Labour Party's emergence and first presence at a British general election met with a muted response from the daily popular national press. On the one hand, there is some acknowledgement of the party's arrival onto the British political scene and how a Labour-orientated working-class politics had the potential to lead to future change. However, this future theorizing is an exception to an initial response which represents Labour and its members as odd new additions to the established political landscape. Labour's members were presented as original and unconventional, but only in relation to aspects of their personalities or the manner of their upbringing. Indeed, their politics are barely discussed and any references to ideology are framed to downplay any radical aspect of Labour beliefs. The impression left by these newspapers is that Labour, while new, were little but an eccentric, minor addition to British politics. Their emergence may well have been a matter of concern or interest for an undetermined point in the future. However, Labour was represented as a party of little concern to the readers of these two newspapers during their first general election.

Second Coming

As has been discussed, the representations of the emerging Labour party in the popular new dailies during the 1900 election placed little significance on them. At the beginning of the next – and Labour's second – general election in 1906, the initial coverage from both newspapers was similarly sparse. In the *Daily Mail* for example, the opening few days of the election contained very few articles on

²¹ 'The Working Man's Vote', *Daily Express* 11 October 1900, p. 6.

Labour, and these, similarly to those from 1900, characterised the party by the unconventional personalities of its members. In particular, a piece on the opening day of the campaign focuses on the sitting MP of Woolwich and his ‘quaint sayings’ and ‘his insistence on his absolute ignorance of Latin’.²² On the same day, the *Daily Express*’s sole representation of Labour concerned a speech by the ‘Socialist Countess’ Lady Warwick, and how local workers in the West Ham area of London ‘go and look at the lovely Countess while she is making one of her Socialistic speeches’.²³ While covering very different stories, both newspapers were again constructing Labour, its members, and socialism in general as a quirky, yet separate, addition to the British political tradition.

This approach changed dramatically after Labour began winning more MPs, with the first news breaking on January 15th 1906 that Labour had already gained seven seats in Parliament. The *Daily Mail* noted these ‘Labour successes’ and named the new members elected for Labour.²⁴ The *Express* meanwhile represented the new significance of Labour’s election successes by including them on their front-page ‘Election Race by Motor Car’: a daily cartoon which would track a political party’s progress to the ‘finish line’ at the end of the election.²⁵ Labour, missing entirely from the *Express*’s equivalent cartoon in 1900, now merited a place in the race.

This initial appreciation by both newspapers would change into a dramatic reaction in the subsequent days after Labour’s ‘arrival’ onto the main political stage. The day after the announcements, both newspapers published editorials focused on the electoral triumphs of Labour. The *Express* noted the party’s ‘astounding victories’ and how their success now posed a threat to the paper’s favoured Unionists.²⁶ This editorial echoed their front page of the same day which marvelled at the ‘astounding succession’ of Labour victories, while noting that it may well be a watershed historical moment; ‘nothing like it [Labour’s victories] has ever occurred

²² ‘Woolwich’, *Daily Mail* 12 January 1906, p. 3.

²³ ‘The Socialist Countess’, *Daily Express* 12 January 1906, p. 5.

²⁴ ‘Labour Successes’, *Daily Mail* 15 January 1906, p. 7.

²⁵ ‘Election Race by Motor-Car’, *Daily Express* 15 January 1906, p. 1.

²⁶ *Daily Express* 16 January 1906, p. 4.

in the history of British politics'.²⁷ This same sentiment was shared in the *Mail's* editorial 'Outlook', headlined 'The Rise of Labour'. Like the *Express*, it marked a decisive shift in the paper's coverage of Labour which now represented the party as a 'hurricane' that was fundamentally changing the face of British politics;

Enormous Labour polls are, indeed, the great feature at the election, and even where Labour has not won it has voted in a manner that is beginning to cause nervousness to its Liberal ally . . . Socialism, by its very essence, means the abolition of all competition . . . equal rewards for fit and unfit.²⁸

After the relative indifference shown during the 1900 campaign, both the *Mail* and the *Express* increasingly represented Labour as both the defining aspect of the 1906 election, as well as a landmark shift in the history of British politics. This shift in both papers' interpretation of the party led to a multitude of articles and editorials across the rest of the election dedicated to the party and its new MPs. Some of this new content was, perhaps unsurprisingly, fiercely hostile.

Chaotic Threat

It is interesting to note that, in the same early articles detailing Labour's historic election successes, the new dailies quickly represented Labour as a potentially damaging and dangerous new political entity. For example, The *Mail* editorial cited above appears to associate Labour with forces of chaos, from the metaphorical 'hurricane' to the latter outlining of socialism's radical stance against competition. The final quote above extends to communicate the potentially ruinous damage of Labour's anti-competitive nature; 'if the British worker cannot compete, so much the worse for them!'²⁹

The clear conclusion, that Labour's position would restrict the competitiveness of British labour both at home and abroad, represents the party as potentially ruinous both for wider British society and the very class of people it

²⁷ Ibid, p. 1.

²⁸ 'The Outlook: The Rise of Labour', *Daily Mail* 16 January 1906, p. 6.

²⁹ Ibid.

claims to represent. This association between Labour and chaos was also echoed in the *Express*, the same as the *Mail's* 'hurricane' editorial. Their own 'Matters of Moment' associated the victories of the Labour party to 'wreckage' upon the status quo, with political policy labelled as both 'fairytales' and 'insidious poison'.³⁰ Again, the choice of language used in these editorials associates Labour with chaos, and their negative impact on both the political system and those who may have, or may in future, vote for them.

These ideas of Labour-driven chaos would continue to be referenced throughout the rest of the election campaign, although the first days marked a high-point for both newspapers' sense of panic. Their successes were frequently labelled as part of a 'revolution' or 'upheaval', which repeatedly suggested a link between the party and potential political unrest. This potentially damaging impact of the party was also applied to Labour itself, with the *Mail* speculating on a future Labour split between the small pro-Liberal section of new MPs and the majority of the rest of the MPs whom 'do not trust Liberals' and whose ideological extremism threatened an irreparable split between the two factions; '[Labour radicals think] it better that ever Labour member candidates [loses] than that the cause should be degraded or obscured by weak MPs'.³¹ While no other article considering the self-divisive nature of Labour's emergence in 1906, it added to a broader representation from both new dailies that presented Labour as an unstable party, both within the wider climate of Westminster and, potentially, its own ranks.

Another persistent representation of Labour's chaotic nature came from both papers' repeated association between Labour and the Liberal Party. When again considering the initial responses of both dailies, the 'hurricanes', and 'wreckage' wrought on the election is appropriated to both Labour and the Liberals. The *Mail's* editorial on the sixteenth contends the link between both anti-Unionist parties by saying how some Liberal candidates 'are indistinguishable from Communists or extreme Socialists',³² while the *Express* also drew an immediate link between Labour

³⁰ *Express*, 16 January, p. 4.

³¹ 'The Coming Troubles of the Labour Party', *Daily Mail* 31 January 1906, p. 6.

³² 'Rise of Labour', *Mail*, p. 6.

and the Liberals, first being saying the latter were ‘aided and abetted’ by the former, and that together they were a threat to the Unionists.³³ These initial links drawn between the two parties are particularly fierce compared to the rest of the coverage, but were the first of several instances where Labour is represented directly, and negatively, in relation to its union with the Liberals.

Throughout the rest of the election coverage of the two newspapers, representations of Labour’s association with the Liberals seemed to be primarily focused on the former’s potentially damaging impact on the latter. For example, accusations of Liberalism’s pandering to Labour interests implies that the Liberals could end up regretting their partnership with the new socialists. The *Mail* for instance alluded to the idea that Labour were the real power, and that elected Liberals were ‘merely delegates’ of Labour and their trade union allies.³⁴ The fear of a trojan-horse, socialist incursion into the Liberals was continued later in the election as both Labour and Liberal victories kept growing, with a prophetic editorial that the upcoming Parliament’s true struggle would be ‘between Socialism and Protection’,³⁵ thus presenting Labour as the real force in any future non-Unionist government.

The *Express* shared a similar opinion of the two party relationships, arguing that Labour, not Liberalism, would play the greater role in a future government and that a ‘solid phalanx’ of Labour members had ‘forced their way into the Liberal ranks’.³⁶ Between evocative portrayals of militarized Labour infiltrating their ranks to the neo-criminal language of ‘aided and abetted’, the representations in both newspapers showed Labour to be just as damaging to their Liberal allies as to their Unionist opponents. This idea would continue to be explored throughout the election in both newspapers, with the ‘menace’ of Labour and their socialist policies frequently being associated to the eventual election-winning Liberals. For example, a particularly dismissive note in the *Mail* that declared that ‘oil and vinegar would

³³ *Express*, 16 January, p. 4.

³⁴ ‘The Outlook: Revolution of 1906’, *Daily Mail* 18 January 1906, p.6.

³⁵ ‘The Outlook’, *Daily Mail* 22 January 1906, p. 6.

³⁶ ‘Solid Labour Phalanx’, *Daily Express* 18 January 1906, p. 5.

readily mix than the ideals of [Labour MP] Philip Snowden' and the Liberals³⁷, as well as updated summaries of the new Commons numbers with Liberal and Labour MPs combined (along with the Irish Nationalists) into the 'Parliamentary' column against the Unionists.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the initial shock shown in the new dailies' representations of the emergent Labour successes in 1906 quickly developed an antagonistic element. As two leading press supporters of the Conservatives, it is perhaps unsurprising that aspects of their coverage represented Labour in variously negative ways. What was remarkable was the speed of transition between coverage of Labour's minor oddities to its newfound revolutionary, negative impact on British politics, its supporters and its Liberal allies.

Both the *Mail* and the *Express* were undeniably hostile towards Labour after their growth in influence during the 1906 election, and in this regard Labour were justified in the hostility they would, in turn, show to these particularly popular daily newspapers. However, the hostile representations were one of several ways in which these newspapers represented the party after its surge in the polls during the 1906 election. The hostility was noticeable, but generally subsided to reveal a more complex portrayal of the party which showed an interest in, and indeed levels of appreciation for, their membership and parts of their political message.

'A most salutary influence'

Labour's surge in popularity in its second-ever contested election was met with some hostile words from both the *Express* and the *Mail*. Interestingly however, the majority of the negative representations of the party focused on its potentially negative impact within the narrow confines of the Houses of Commons. Whether in relation to Labour's potential to harm Parliament, its Liberal allies or the Labour party itself, the majority of their more negative representations in the new dailies were restricted to their place in Parliament. Very little coverage across either newspapers focused on the potentially negative impact of Labour on the everyday

³⁷ 'The Outlook: Hushing it up', *Daily Mail* 23 January 1906, p. 6.

British public, besides the initial fear over the party's position 'against competition' and a brief mention by the *Mail's* early editorial of the party's attitudes against public houses and a supposed plan to ban betting news inside pubs³⁸. Conversely, the representations of Labour and its impact on British life outside of Westminster were broadly positive.

After the early outrage shown in both of the newspapers' early editorials, the *Mail* and the *Express* shifted to positively representing an aspect of Labour's emergence: the increased representation of the working classes. The day after their 'insidious poison' editorial, the *Express* ran another editorial dedicated to Labour, appreciating that 'it is right and proper' that the working classes had direct representation in Parliament and that Labour were well-placed to best voice their interests:

every class of the community should be represented in Parliament . . . we have more in the Labour men than to believe that they would permit themselves to degenerate into mere money-making politicians.³⁹

The appreciation of working-class representation in the Commons was twinned with a portrayal of the new Labour members as people who would honestly work for them in Parliament, undistracted by other potential perks of the role in the House of Commons. A very similar sentiment was shown in the *Mail's* Outlook the next day. While the newspaper's opinion on Labour's future plans ('whether for good or evil remains to be seen') created a certain degree of doubt, it agreed with the *Express* on matters of representation and the honesty of the new members;

It cannot be suggested that labour will be unduly represented . . . [many elected] have been bona-fide working-men... frankly, we much prefer these workers to a good many, who [hitherto] used the House of Commons as a road to money-making.⁴⁰

Across both newspapers, Labour was represented as a positive influence both for the wider electorate and for the moral fabric of the Commons. While occasionally

³⁸ 'The Outlook', *Daily Mail* 7 February 1906, p. 6.

³⁹ 'Matters of Moment: Labour and Liberalism', *Daily Express* 17 January 1906, p. 4.

⁴⁰ 'Revolution of 1906', *Mail*, p. 6.

appearing alongside sentiments expressing mistrust or outright antagonism to the party, there was a shared understanding of Labour as a collection of politicians who would represent the British lower classes better, and less corruptly, than any other political group striving for their support. Admittedly, this more positive aspect of the party's portrayals in the new daily press did not ever become a full endorsement, as high levels of mistrust were also associated with the party's wider plans for the future of Parliament's stability and the industrial way of life. It was, however, an undoubted acceptance, or possibly even a degree of admiration, of some of the party's potential positives.

'Gone is the Club'

As a collective party, Labour was represented in complex ways to the readers of the new dailies. Praise of their honesty and of overdue and deserved working-class representatives in Parliament were counter-balanced by persistent descriptions of the party as a disruptive force to their parliamentary colleagues and the British political tradition. Interestingly however, the majority of the coverage of the Labour Party in the *Mail* and the *Express* was not dedicated to the party itself. The most frequently occurring representations of Labour in the 1906 election focused on individual members; the MPs, old and new, whose collective integrity both newspapers positively represented.

The most noticeable focus in the new dailies was an interest in the employment backgrounds of Labour MPs. This manifested itself in sections in both newspapers that detailed members of the House; short descriptions of sitting MPs, challengers and the newly-elected. To understand the curious uniformity of the two papers' profiles of Labour politicians, it is important to know the diversity of terms through which both Liberal and Conservative politicians were discussed in the same articles. For example, on January the seventeenth, the *Mail* ran a 'Who's Who' column, providing brief details of a host of new faces in Parliament. The ways in which Liberal or Unionist politicians were described varied considerably; 'forty-two

years of age', 'an architect', 'a Londoner by birth and education', 'a Tariff Reformer', 'was born in 1845', 'a Fellow and lecturer of Merton College, Oxford'.⁴¹

The key words or phrases that were used to primarily define Liberal or Unionist candidates showed differences from person to person: age, education, upbringing, employment and particular political beliefs were all used to describe them. In stark contrast, Labour candidates or returned MPs were principally defined most often with reference to their engagement in hard physical labour, very often with reference to their early beginnings in said trades. The *Mail* also summaries from mid-January contained, among others, the following Labour returns;

Mr. Enoch Edwards, after a defeat at last election, has gained Hanley for the Labour Party. He is fifty-four years of age. He entered a colliery aged nine . . .

Mr. George Wardle, Labour member for Stockport, worked in a factory from the age of eight and became a clerk on the Midland Railway when fifteen.

Mr. Charles Duncan, the new Labour representative for Barrow-in-Furness, is an engineer and trade-union organizer

Mr. W. C. Steadman (Central Finsbury) is a Labour member . . . a barge builder by trade

Mr. Thomas Glover, St Helens Labour representative . . . At nine years of age he was working in the mines.⁴²

Where Liberals or Unionists were just as much defined by education and politics as by their employment history, Labour politicians were primarily represented as politicians defined by their connections to industrial labour. The *Express*, on the same day, was compounding this manifestation of the same Labour members as people defined by their pasts in hard employment in their 'Who's Who' equivalent called 'The Polling';

Finsbury Central, W. C. Steadman . . . apprenticed in the barge-building trade

⁴¹ 'Who's Who in the New House', *Daily Mail* 17 January 1906, p. 7.

⁴² Ibid.

Barrow-in-Furness: Charles Duncan . . . apprenticed to the engineering trade

Birkenhead: Henry Vivian . . . a carpenter and joiner by trade

Hanley, E. Edwards . . . at nine entered colliery.⁴³

This attention to the manual employment backgrounds of Labour politicians was repeated throughout the election;

T. Summertail: son of a miner, started work as grocer.⁴⁴

G. N. Barnes: apprenticed as an engineer.⁴⁵

J. R. Clynes: cotton-factory boy.⁴⁶

W. Crooks (Woolwich): has been a workhouse lad.⁴⁷

J. Seddon (Newton): apprenticed to the grocer trade.⁴⁸

The difference between Labour and non-Labour members is starkest when the briefest of summaries were printed side by side with a double election in Sunderland of a Liberal and a Labour candidate, describing the former as a Fellow of Trinity College and the latter as having 'started work at seven'.⁴⁹

The potential reasoning behind the consistent identification of Labour candidates by their industrial backgrounds is varied. On the one hand, there was the reality that the vast majority of Labour politicians did not have the same lavish educational or professional backgrounds often cited in descriptions of Liberal or Unionist candidates. This reality however cannot adequately explain the curious consistency with which both newspapers categorized Labour politicians by their labouring pasts, as non-Labour candidates sharing significant traits (for example, an excellent university education) were not treated to the same uniformity. It is possible that the new dailies' fixation on the pasts of Labour members was an extension of the representations of individuals from 1900, which highlighted curious

⁴³ 'The Polling', *Daily Express* 17 January 1906, p. 1.

⁴⁴ 'Who's Who', *Daily Mail* 19 January 1906, p. 7.

⁴⁵ 'The Polling', *Daily Express* 19 January 1906, p.1.

⁴⁶ 'Labour Successes', *Daily Mail* 15 January 1906, p. 7.

⁴⁷ 'The Polling', *Daily Express* 18 January 1906, p. 1.

⁴⁸ 'Who's Who', *Daily Mail* 25 January 1906, p. 4.

⁴⁹ 'The Polling', *Daily Express* 19 January 1906, p.1.

eccentricities of the likes of Keir Hardie. In place of 'Queer Hardie', there was a consistent interest in MPs with pasts in manual labour. Edwardian Britain's Parliament was populated largely with members of the higher classes: peers, newspaper proprietors, industrialists, and lawyers.⁵⁰ Therefore, an influx of men who had worked in coal mines as children represented a curious break from the norm – a quirk to tradition that made these new members stand out from the rest. By consistently highlighting working pasts, the new dailies were partly continuing this image of Labour as a curious new phenomenon, potentially intended to provoke a wry, almost amused response from readers.

Another potential interpretation of the new dailies' representations of Labour members as people defined by their pasts is that it shows considerable admiration of their emergence onto the political scene. These men, some of whom had to go to work from as young as seven, had now entered into the elite of British political life against considerable personal odds. Their individual stories represented triumphs over adversity; proverbial rags-to-riches narratives that correlated with the new dailies' broader interest in emotive, human-interest news content that appealed to their mass, lower-class audiences. Rather than, or as well as, being a representation of curious backgrounds for British parliamentarians, these newspapers' focus on employment pasts presented Labour members as everyday success stories to be respected and admired.

This latter interpretation is further supported by the fact that both newspapers dedicated longer profile articles to particular Labour politicians, which explicitly championed their rise from difficult upbringings. In the *Mail*, the article 'A New Style Labour Member' focused on the new West Ham MP Will Thorpe. Much was made of his journey from relative poverty to the Commons, and he is positively shown to have worked his way from the bottom to the top;

Seventeen years ago . . . a day labourer. Today, he is a member of
Parliament.

Proved himself a born captain . . .

⁵⁰ J. A. Thomas, *The House of Commons 1906-1911* (Cardiff, 1958).

Born to misery . . . (parents) brickfield workers . . . endured the burden of toil.⁵¹

His transformation from the 'urban slums' to a 'representative of starvation' is shown to be something to be admired, even despite the article's explanation that his life had led to him becoming 'a Socialist of the most extreme type'. Indeed, in this context, the Labour man's radical politics are presented as an understandable, if not agreeable, response to his personal history.⁵² His past is a story of respectable, positive success, even in spite of politics wholly against those of these two newspapers.

The *Express* shared this positive depiction of Labour members and their industrial pasts with their 'Romance of Labour', a story about J. T. Macpherson who, having 'served as a boy at sea', had become an MP after his union had helped him pay his through a degree at Ruskin College, Oxford.⁵³ Again, the 'romance' comes from an individual who had reached Parliament, via one of the world's best universities, having started life as a child labourer. He, like other Labour MPs, was represented as a personal success story. His journey was chronicled quite succinctly in the same newspaper a few days later;

At twelve, cabin boy.

At eighteen, Middlesbrough steel smelter

At twenty-one, founder of Steel Smelters Society

At thirty-two, Oxford Graduate and MP.⁵⁴

When discussed in the new dailies as a collective, Labour politicians were categorised as honest and potentially simple characters who would do their best to represent working people. When discussed as individuals, Labour was represented as a group deserving of respect and interest due to their shared pasts overcoming hardships to enter Parliament. Often with reference to their histories working as

⁵¹ 'A New Style Labour Member', *Daily Mail* 19 January 1906, p. 6.

⁵² This would not be unique to the two papers' coverage of Labour, as the broader issue of British socialism was discussed in dedicated articles elsewhere in the election coverage (See 'What Labour Wants').

⁵³ 'Romance of Labour', *Daily Express* 20 January 1906, p. 1.

⁵⁴ 'Labour MP's Romance', *Daily Express* 23 January 1906, p. 5.

children, Labour politicians were represented most strikingly as successes of hard work against personal adversity, to the point where disagreeable politics were contextualised and possibly even appreciated. Labour, both as a party and as a group of people, was shown by the *Mail* and the *Express* to be a fresh addition to political life that carried with it an emotive, positive story of triumphing against difficult beginnings.

‘What Labour Wants’

In contrast to their broad political aims, the new dailies represented Labour’s politicians as broadly positive additions to the British political system. On occasion, the emphasis on personal triumphs over difficult starts in life was used as understandable context for any radical politics they may fight for in any future Parliament. This appreciation of the potential roots of socialism was not unique to profiles of individual MPs. Indeed, both the *Express* and the *Mail* dedicated significant coverage during the 1906 election that represented Labour, and socialism more broadly, as a cause driven by righteous discontent with existing realities of British life.

The most notable example of this came in the *Daily Mail* and its two-part long article ‘What Labour Wants’, written by a Mr. Bart Kennedy. Published on the seventeenth and eighteenth of January, its stated wish was to explore what the working man wanted, drawn from a series of interviews with ‘hard, strong-faced men of labour’ who, after everything, wanted nothing but ‘to live’. In its retelling of their stories, it paints an evocative picture of a horrific, lower-class existence;

[these men] did the dread work in the blackness of the earth... starving with their wives and family on a few shillings strike pay. Wives suckle their babies from their almost dry breasts.

Treated worse than the beasts in the fields.

Their wrongs cry out, no voice, no pen can fully put their case.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ ‘What Labour Wants’, *Daily Mail* 17 January 1906, p. 6.

In addition to these dramatic representations of suffering workers, Bart Kennedy portrays the owners of these businesses as nothing less than villains;

The people who own the mines have gradually pressed them [the labourers] down below the bare living point.⁵⁶

. . . making the worker produce more wealth than it ever did before, and at the same time it is giving him less in proportion for his labour

You (the owner) are going on in a way that will bring England down about our ears.⁵⁷

This extraordinary account of striking workers and profit-driven owners vividly represents an unsustainable divide between the richer and poorer elements of British society. Taken in the context of the broader coverage of the party and its members, it articulates the cause of the Labour party as one entirely justified by the current conditions facing workers. One of the party's principle aims – to fight for better conditions for workers – is one that would directly tackle the 'evil' shown so evocatively in this article.

Interestingly however, the second part of this article concludes that 'evil though the present system, it is better than it would be under Socialism'. This conclusion is sound and asserts the writer, because the current evil lies in the haplessness of authority, which would only increase under a socialist government. This conclusion, while strikingly brief in the context of the longer two-part article, correlates with the broader attitudes shown across the two newspapers towards Labour's political ambitions. Labour and socialism are never shown positively; they are frequently associated with instability and neo-revolutionary disorder. What is interestingly though is that these two newspapers, which clearly and consistently represented Unionist politics as the best course of action, represented the conditions that Labour's politics sought to address as a significant concern to its readers. The newspapers did not represent Labour's motivations negatively and at times actively agreed with them on issues that politics needed to address. The party's solution was not represented positively; their intentions often were.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ 'What Labour Wants (Part II)', *Daily Mail* 18 January 1906, p. 6.

This balance between the rejection and appreciation of Labour's political aims was particularly pronounced in the *Mail*. For example, the twenty-third of January saw a column in the *Mail* written by recently-elected Labour MP Philip Snowden, in which he focuses on the party's aim to 'transfer large profits from private pockets to public utility... (and) enable better conditions to be given to the workers'.⁵⁸ On the one hand, sub-headings stating that Labour is a party that will 'Tax the Very Rich' and instigate 'The Overthrow of Capitalism' suggests the potentially revolutionary intentions of Labour, but it is countered by Snowden's assertions that any future policy would be 'not quite so blood-curdling as it sounds'. It is interesting that the input of the newspaper – the sub-headings – often contrasts with the actual content of Snowden's writing; it is the heading, and not the Labour MP, who mentions anything tangibly proving an attempt to overthrow the existing capitalist system. This article, like the Kennedy article, touches upon the struggle between wealthy owners and poor workers, and represents Labour as a party fighting against an undisputed wrong. Also, particularly due to the sub-headings, the more positive representation of Labour's motivations are countered with language portraying the party as a force of revolutionary harm.

The *Express* also echoed these same sentiments, though less frequently than its rival. Most notably, on the nineteenth of January, an editorial discussed 'Labour on its Trial' and the 'colossal experiment' of a socialist party in Britain. It, in contrast to the evocative longer reads in the *Mail*, represents the duality of Labour's politics very concisely;

we say, give Labour its chance. If it succeeds, well, good.

If it fails, _____!⁵⁹

That brief editorial summary gets to the crux of this curious complexity at the heart of the representations of Labour's politics. The party had won its place in the Commons. Now, it was time to see how they planned to solve issues that were of undeniable concern to British society. If their solutions proved a success, then it

⁵⁸ 'The People's Party: Which Will Tax the Very Rich', *Daily Mail* 23 January 1906, p. 6.

⁵⁹ 'Matters of Moment: Labour on its Trial', *Daily Express* 19 January 1906, p. 4.

would be of benefit to all: in particular, to the many people who resonated with the imagined 'man in the street' sought by political parties, the mass press, and the surrounding popular culture of the period. However, as demonstrated by the concluding pause, it was clear that any Labour success, according to these newspapers, was both undesirable and rather unlikely.

This dichotomy teases out the fascinating and often contradictory place of Labour within the new dailies: two fundamental and widely consumed components of the election culture of early twentieth-century Britain. This new political party was, for many, a hostile and radical entity that clashed with much of the political and popular cultures into which they entered. However, their perceived connections to the everyman who was such a dominant part of those same two overlapping cultures meant that, for the hostility, there was also considerable admiration and support shown by the new dailies toward this 'chaotic' new addition to the electoral landscape of Long Edwardian Britain. While it would take until 1912 for Labour to have a mass daily newspaper for their own, they had already provoked a diverse and contested presence within Britain's most popular daily newspapers during their emergent years as a political party.

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