The Centre in British Politics Since 1906

Abstract: The ideological centre has been neglected, and its impact under-estimated in the writing of modern British history. This article points to the persistence of the centre's moderating influence, even at times of apparent right or left ascendancy. It also charts its under-recognized progressive, indeed at times radical contribution. This ideological dynamism emanated from centrists' especially strong attachment to innovative synthesis of objectives often held by others to be in conflict. The centre emphatically pursued social justice *and* individual aspiration; positive *alongside* negative liberties. Though, the weaknesses of the centre also merit a fuller attention. Institutionally, for most of these years, the centre has been fragmented across the parties. Intellectually, its promised synthesis of aspiration with social justice, powerful when activated, was often hesitant, and remains incomplete. Also explored is the relationship between the centre and the people. Presently portrayed as one of popular disconnect from an aloof elite, citizenry and centre have been more historically inter-twined than this suggests. Centrists have long received considerable electoral sustenance from voters. They also had an often nuanced appreciation of the contradictory 'mix' in many people, conservatism and progressivism in complex co-existence. In this way, centrist history points to the contemporary political challenge as being one of raising the sights of a collective national 'us', rather than demonising a variously targeted 'Other'.

I

The British political centre seems, to many observers, to be in a state of almost unparalleled crisis. At the heart of this lies the defeat for the 'Remain' side in the 'Brexit' referendum in 2016, in which an alliance of the political right with disaffected working-class voters, trumped

that of pro-European Labour, Liberal Democrats and liberal Conservatives. Adjoining this have been the collapse of the Liberal Democrats at the 2015 general election, the left wing Jeremy Corbyn's securing of the Labour Party leadership, the victory of Nigel Farage's newly formed Brexit Party in the 2019 European elections, and most recently the strongly pro-Brexit Boris Johnson's emergence as Prime Minister. These national developments echo a wider 'populist' trend, apparent in the popularity of Syriza in Greece, Bernie Sanders in the American Democrat Party, Marine Le Pen in France, AfD in Germany, Viktor Orban in Hungary, and, most dramatically, the election of Donald Trump as American President. Studies probe how 'across much of the West, … national populism is now a serious force'.[1] The two leading British political rivals of the 1990s, John Major and Tony Blair now unite in concern, for Major that 'the extremes of politics are rising', and, to Blair, that the centre has 'lost a radical cutting edge that we need to regain'.[2]

It will be argued here that a longer, more historical view of British politics gives grounds for believing that having previously been too complacent about the all-pervasiveness of British 'moderation', commentators may now be under-estimating its capacity for resilience. But both errors reflect that centrism, on the surface apparently omnipresent in writing on modern British history, has received far less systematic analysis than its importance merits. It is an observation historians have made before. Arthur Marwick's suggestion in 1964 that 'the exponents of political agreement' in the 1930s 'deserve some of the attention too often devoted to anti-democratic politicians and committed poets' has often been cited.[3] But by 1982, Brian Harrison, in his powerful essay on the British 'centrist theme', could still ponder: 'how is it that so prominent a feature of British political life receives so little discussion from political scientists and historians?'[4] It remains a pertinent question nearly four decades later.

Harrison perceptively explains this neglect by reference to the practical, subtle ways in which centrism often exerts its influence; the absence, for much of the century, of a powerful

centrist party to analyse; the complexity of an ideology that has fused ideas from diverse quarters; and the centrist's perceived deficiency of ideological principle, such that 'the subject … lacks romance'.[5] It is not that centrist political figures, whether centre-left or centre-right, have themselves been neglected. Numerous works of intellectual biography, or party political history have placed such figures to the fore.[6] But the focus tends to be on their contribution to the history of their particular political party, or its accompanying ideological tradition, so that the centrist element within those figures' thinking, that which stretches *across* party or ideological boundaries, is rarely disentangled. Where centrism has been considered more directly, it has often been in a tightly period-specific way. The 1930s, for instance, have been fertile terrain for exploring both specific 'middle ways', and the resilience of Britain's liberal democracy amidst continental fascism.[7] But this seemingly politically peculiar decade has been viewed in a self-contained manner, its longer-term implications for centrist history only lightly touched on. This problem also characterises the rich debate over the extent of post-war political 'consensus' between 1945 and 1970, and research on the more recent centre, especially in the form of the SDP.[8]

Political science research has also shed significant light on the centre, but often, as in the influential work of Anthony Downs, either through relatively abstract modelling, or quantitative measuring of the fluctuating strength of centrist opinion.[9] This article, contrastingly, adopts a long and historical approach, exploring what it argues is the enduring importance of centrism across twentieth- and early twenty-first century Britain. Its approach is primarily qualitative. It examines the concept of the centre in the realms of political history, ideas, assumptions and culture, and is less focused on its institutional bolsters, already well charted by Harrison, Middlemas and Searle.[10]

In attempting to define the centre, it is necessary to draw attention to both the adaptability of its meaning, and certain firm co-existing centrist constants. On the one hand,

the policy positions of the centre evolved over time, so that its ideological location depended on the values of the particular historical epoch. As Andrew Hindmoor has argued, 'the location of policies within political space is not prearranged and fixed', such that what might be considered left or right wing in one era may come to be seen as mainstream or centrist in another.[11] In significant respects, between 1906 and 1979, the centre was redefined steadily 'leftwards' in crucial areas like government economic management, state welfare provision and civil liberties, albeit that the shift was usually gradual and qualified, and the centre-*right* retained considerable hold on governmental office. After 1979, with the Premiership of the 'New Right' Margaret Thatcher, the pattern becomes more complex and contested. Harrison argues that the centre was now redefined rightwards, including under Thatcher's New Labour successors.[12] However, it will be argued here that the direction of travel was not as uniformly rightwards as this assumes.

The centre was also far from singular, or wholly united. Centrists have long been institutionally dispersed across the three main political parties. Intellectually, the centre has been divided between centre-right and centre-left. Thus, whilst this article contends this should not prevent us exploring the commonalities of what will often be referred to as 'centrists', it is with the recognition that this centre was not something tangibly located, *en totale*, in a single individual or party. Most political figures' beliefs were ideological compounds. Where this compound included a centrist element – as it often did - the aim in what follows is to extract, and observe that element. But it is also acknowledged that the achievements (and shortcomings) of the centre were part-shared with a left or right with which centrism frequently existed within the same person.

A final facet of the malleability of the centre lies in the rhetorical 'construction' of a claim to moderation to serve the purpose of maintaining political authority. Writing of early modern England, Ethan Shagan notes how 'the ubiquitous moral principle of moderation was

a profoundly coercive tool of social, religious and political power'.[13]   Applying this to twentieth-century Britain, historians have persuasively explored how notions implying moderation, like common sense, reasonableness, constitutionality, prudence or restraint, were selectively defined, to advance often Conservative, or middle class agendas, and marginalise the supposedly less 'balanced', more emotionally-driven outlooks of lower social classes.[14] Contesting this, the left has intermittently sought to appropriate the moniker of moderation for itself, Jeremy Corbyn recently claiming that 'we are staking out the new centre ground'.[15]

The centre has, therefore, been changeable, malleable and contested, indeed, its ability to adapt to a changing society has been one of its major political strengths. Its malleability was not, however, *infinite*. Its adaptability co-existed with certain indispensable defining constants. It had its inclusions and exclusions, of both ideas and personnel. Three broadly defining characteristics of centrist ideology may be disentangled. Firstly, centrists believed in 'forward', progressive social and political change, but in a way that was organic and achievable. Rejecting the view, as the Conservative reformer Harold Macmillan put it in his *The Middle Way* (1938), 'that we must be whole-hoggers or nothing', this located them *between* diehard Conservatism and a belief in immediate socialist transformation.[16] Intensely focused on seizing the opportunities for realisable social change, centrists believed this rested on their own ideology being open to revision. It also necessitated their having an appetite for the holding of governmental power.

Reflecting this essentially optimistic progressivism, secondly, centrists had a particular attachment to the construction of new, imaginative ideological syntheses, in which singular values, that the right or left might hold dear, could be combined. In particular, centrists were enduringly concerned with the possibilities for a mutually supportive relationship between individual aspiration *and* social justice, negative *with* positive conceptions of liberty, market *alongside* state. Most ideologies, including those further left or right were, of course, syntheses

of sorts. But centrists were especially engaged synthesisers, and were inclined to become concerned if their particular party's weighting of the values within the ideological pairing seemed to have become too dramatically uneven.

Finally, centrists laid claim to a view of politics in which respect for, and cultivation of individual human personality held particular importance. They sought to guard especially determinedly liberal values of individual freedom and equal opportunity. Believing in another synthesis, that of rights and responsibilities, centrists saw the empowerment of people as much in enabling them to become more engaged citizens, more-equipped characters, as in improving their material welfare. Centrists were, in Peter Clarke's terms, advocates of a 'moral', not merely a 'mechanical' politics.[17] For a growing number of them over the century, this entailed support for political decentralisation and democratisation. Democracy, to them, firmly meant parliamentary democracy, which was a further middle way, between the franchise restrictions of earlier decades, on the one hand, and extra-parliamentary mass mobilisation, on the other. Given the right to vote, centrists believed, the people should take ownership, and accept the outcome of the democratic decisions that produced. The humane liberal strand within centrism, alongside its commitment to engaged constructiveness, to 'voice' over 'exit', also shaped its internationalism, and later pro-Europeanism.

The adherence to such outlooks determined centrist personnel, although few were centrist on every subject. The centre's reach extended well beyond the Liberal Party, not least because, as Freeden notes, as it declined after 1918, its ideas came to infuse its main rivals.[18] Alongside Liberals, then, most 'One Nation' Conservatives, as well as Labour revisionists, possessed a firm centrist *component* within their identity, even if they were often not keen to admit – even to themselves – that they shared this terrain with others outside their party. Beyond this 'core', however, centrist membership was considerably wider. Prime Ministers like Stanley Baldwin, Harold Wilson and John Major, on the mainstream of their respective

parties, nonetheless, by often operating as a barrier to the more fundamentalist wing of their party, and by giving place and favour to moderates within their governments (Baldwin to Neville Chamberlain, Wilson, in his 1964-70 government, to Roy Jenkins, Major to Ken Clarke) often leant, at critical moments, to the broader national centre.

The centre has also enjoyed a significant temporary membership. Centrism has periodically, and sometimes pivotally, touched figures on the 'soft' left and right. One might note here Aneurin Bevan's refusal in 1957 to be sent 'naked into the conference chamber' by adopting unilateral nuclear disarmament, Barbara Castle's propulsion of designedly moderate legislation to curb trade union power in *In Place of Strife* (1969), or Conservative leader Michael Howard's promotion of Conservative 'modernizers' as a prelude to David Cameron's successful leadership bid in 2005. In sum, the influence of the centre was both wider and deeper than is generally acknowledged, or indeed realized, including even by many centrists themselves. Centrist impact has frequently been of a 'quiet', 'under-the-radar' kind. The very term, 'centrism' was long used fitfully, even apologetically, given its association, by its critics, with a dilution of ideological zeal or party loyalty. The creation of the SDP in 1981 engendered a more open discussion of the concept, but it was not until Tony Blair adopted the centrist label that it was employed seriously by a party of government. Even then, it was not until after Blair's departure in 2007, and in some ways not fully until the shock of the 2016 Brexit vote, that the 'centre', shorn of the perceived tainting of its exclusively Blairite association, and seemingly now under existential threat, has come to be spoken of much more widely, and positively, as something which might need defending, defining, and intellectually reinvigorating. But the historic paucity of a centrist *language* does not diminish the reality of centrism's considerable political presence. As Harrison observes, under-recognized amidst surface party discord, 'centrists in Britain … are more numerous than either the structure and

overt mood of political parties, or the tone of public comment in Britain make it easy to recognize'.[19]

The complexity and adaptability of the centre should not, therefore, be seen as bars to exploring its considerable influence and importance. The centre was much more than simply where the last person wanted it to be. Most in the old *Marxisant*, or later 'Bennite' left, were not, and would not, on the whole, have wished to be seen as centrist. Nor were most on the diehard, or later 'New' Right. Although the impact of Thatcherism, it will be suggested here, was at times less uniformly right wing than is depicted, her personal instincts were ultimately too conflict-seeking - too far removed from Baldwin's 1940 definition of the national character as 'the ability to see more than one side of a question, and to admit the possibility of the other man being right' - for her meaningfully to be considered a centrist herself.[20] The centre, and its claim to moderation, therefore *meant* something. Part, undoubtedly, politically 'constructed', it was far from wholly so. Peter Mandler writes of 'those long-standing stereotypes about English moderation', Selina Todd of 'the myth that the British are essentially a moderate people'. Yet, as Paul Ward argues, the fact that national identities are in part 'historical constructions' does not prevent them from being, in other important respects, 'real'.[21]

Whilst it is generally acknowledged that the centre served a politically stabilising function, less understood is its more intellectually imaginative, progressive, indeed at times radical contribution. There was more vision on the centre than is implied in Ritschel's description of it as a 'tactical manoeuvre'. Even Harrison adjudged that 'centrists lack many talents that are important in politics; sparkle, brilliance, originality, colour, and imagination'. To Bastow and Martin, the centre's ideologically reconciling aspiration diluted its claim to reforming boldness: 'doesn't radicalism require opposition to something?'[22]

The under-estimation reflects that the centre's progressivism was different in kind. Its emphasis on progress via ideological synthesis lacked the immediately tangible boldness of the nationalizing left or the marketizing right. But centrists perceived their syntheses as not mere static, zero-sum compromises between values, but dynamic chemical reactions, in which the potency of one value was enhanced by its joining with the other. Centrist inventiveness thus often lay in the synthesis itself, the radicalism a product of the very 'moderation'. Intellectual historians, focused on the value *content* within ideologies, have paid too little attention to the very appetite to create new ideological variants. To Freeden, for instance, what matters is not the very claim 'to ditch perceived ideological dualisms', but how one third way is 'different in *content*' from others.[23] Value content does matter; but so does the very aspiration to value multiplicity, an aspiration which on the centre was especially pronounced.[24] Because of this, the centre played a pivotal role in the development of that twentieth-century British political *mix* – democracy with liberty, state welfare and market initiative, rising educational opportunity alongside extended home ownership – which, for all its manifest incompleteness, has made the country both a relatively stable, *and* a relatively progressive one.

If centrist ideas have been under-estimated on account of their 'quiet' subtlety, so too of centrist influence, obscured by centrism's cross-party spread, and its presence in the practical workings of politics, more than its louder declarations. Dividing post-1906 British political history into six phases, for two of these, centrist influence is relatively uncontested: 1906-18, the years of New Liberal welfare reform, and their wartime extension; and 1990-2016, those of post-Thatcher Conservatism and New Labour, prior to the Brexit referendum. Historians now also give more credit to the moderating achievements of the interwar years. Previously maligned *en totale* for their Conservative-led failure to tackle both unemployment and Hitler, historians now note the political skill of 'moderate' leaders like Baldwin and Ramsay MacDonald, in steering their parties away from diehard or non-parliamentary alternatives.[25] A

fourth period, 1940-70, houses the debate over the extent of a post-war 'consensus'. But it is argued here that this debate can, in important respects, be resolved, by viewing these years less in isolation, than as part of a longer pattern over the century, in which ideological consensus and disagreement co-existed. For the final two periods, those of 1970-90, and after the Brexit referendum, the case for a powerful centre seems harder to make. Yet, scholarship is increasingly suggesting qualification of even the apparent hegemony of Thatcherism in the 1980s, demonstrating that its associated 'individualism' was both more complex, and less all-conquering than is often portrayed.[26] Emerging from this still somewhat compartmentalised scholarship, is a picture of a relatively continuously influential centre, even in periods seemingly inhospitable to it. It is a pattern which also points to caution in writing off moderating influences in the immediate political present.

Reviewing the varied factors underpinning this centrist influence, Harrison suggests that 'national temperament cannot be invoked' as one of them.[27] In fact, however, the centrist outlooks explored through largely 'elite' political figures in this article could not, in a democratic century, have enjoyed the impact they did were they not at least in important part shared by significant numbers of ordinary people. In that sense, centrism must be said to form an important defining component of the wider political culture, and of the 'national character'. The relationship between centrism and the people is too often assumed to be satisfactorily explored by reference to the disconnect between a liberal political elite, and the mass of the citizenry. Eatwell and Goodwin note how 'the elitist nature of liberal democracy has … fuelled a sense among large numbers of citizens that they no longer have a voice in their national conversation'.[28] This present disconnect is real enough, yet it far from exhausts a relationship, in which the instincts of centre and citizenry were often closely inter-twined. Voters have frequently voted for centre-right and centre-left governments. In turn, centrist politicians have attached greater importance to their rootedness in 'the people' than is recognised. Just as they

saw their own 'quiet' political contribution as under-estimated, centrists perceived a similar under-appreciated constructiveness in the voters.

A fuller attention to the centre is also essential to better delineate its weaknesses. Two stand out. The first is the absence, after the Liberals' decline, of an overtly centrist party capable of seriously challenging to be the government. This institutional dispersal has not prevented centrism from exerting considerable influence. Yet, the inability, and on the whole unwillingness of those on the centre, centre-left and centre-right somehow to cohere, must say something about the persistence within the country of those divisions of class interest and ideology, which centrism theoretically existed to erode. Centrism, then, was far from all-powerful.

Secondly, if the above suggests a centre constrained by the divisions of the wider society, it also points to the limits of centrists' own nationally unifying instincts. For if the distinctive contribution of the centre lay in its frequently 'dual vision', joining social justice with individual aspiration, its weakness lay in that synthesis only extending so far. Far from themselves free from the class assumptions and doctrinal prejudices they diagnosed to their left and right, centrist syntheses tended to *lean*. Thus, even *centre*-right Conservatives tended to denigrate the state. Correspondingly, even the *centre*-left, as Lawrence Black has shown, tended to speak too reluctantly a language of affluence or aspiration.[29] In this sense, both the centre's political unity, and its progressive vitality were limited by the incompleteness of its own middle way. Given the extent to which the centre, through its distinctively 'in between' position, also captured something of the complex mix of ideological strengths and weaknesses in the nation as a whole, it might be suggested that the above failing was also a national one. Both the ways in which the country did advance through distinctive ideological middle ways, and the limits to *both* social conscience *and* individual aspiration which impeded these, were

arguably a commentary on governments *across* the ideological spectrum, and on a citizenry

which displayed this complex blend of virtues and vices, as much as their politicians.

II

Centrist influence in twentieth-century Britain is the modern incarnation of a long-established

phenomenon. Shagan charts the growing political, religious and social use of concepts of

'moderation' and the 'middle way' from the reign of Henry VIII.[30] Harrison points to the

consensus-promoting impact of the country's island status, as a shield from continental

conflicts over shifting land borders, the post-Reformation Church of England as a middle path

between Catholicism and puritanism, and the experience of the seventeenth-century civil war

as a unity-enhancing deterrent to its recurrence.[31] Further underpinned by the strength of

British trade, and the associated growth of the middle orders, this sense of a British *via media*

continued through eighteenth-century conceptions of a 'balanced constitution' between crown

and parliament. It was reinforced by the country's early nineteenth-century location of itself

between French revolutionary ardour and Austro-Hungarian autocracy, and then in the various

Victorian balances between the interests of classes and masses. The distinctiveness of the

twentieth century was that it extended middle way ideas from earlier, more narrowly

constitutional issues, into the sphere of socio-economic debates, and thereby more directly into

the lives of the populace as a whole.

In the century's first four decades, one can observe the thread of an albeit rough-and-

ready ideological centre repeatedly 'holding', amidst the raft of challenges of emerging

'modernity'. A surface glance at the period suggests dislocation and conflict: the constitutional

crises surrounding the 1909 People's Budget; one 'total' war, and the beginning, in 1939, of a

second; the arrival, in 1918, broadly, of democracy, and accompanying decline of the main

'centrist' party, the Liberals; an advancing labour movement, and the 1926 general strike; then the mass unemployment of the 1930s, and financial crisis of 1931. Yet, despite the sweeping of alternative, dictatorial models across Europe, Britain managed to sustain a distinctive fusion of relative liberal democratic stability, alongside measured social and political progress. Co-existing with the undoubted turbulence, lay the growth of what Jon Lawrence terms a more 'low-key and homely' political culture, in which centrism played a crucial fostering role.[32]

Much depended on a series of balances, between both class interests and ideals, what Ross McKibbin has described as an Edwardian political 'equipoise'.[33] In many ways, the 1906 Liberal election landslide election marks the arrival of the twentieth-century, more governmentally interventionist centre. But the party pursued a familiarly centrist dual ideological compound, 'ordered freedom', as Prime Minister (from 1908) Herbert Asquith put it. This blended the middle class-reassuring, Old Liberal requirement of the responsibility to make a contributory element under the National Insurance Act (1911), whilst satisfying the New Liberal instinct, through the social protection it provided.[34] The aim was a middle path, between Conservatism and more socialistic measures, 'a quiet, but certain, revolution, as revolutions come in a constitutional country', as expressed by David Lloyd George.[35] For all Conservative peers' resistance to the 1909 budget, after two 1910 elections, both the budget and the curbing of the Lords' power, through the 1911 Parliament Act, were passed.

The cool firmness of Asquith, positioned, again, *between* his party's orthodox Gladstonian and welfarist wings, was crucial to this, as was his calculated inertia in handling the vexed Irish Home Rule question in the immediate pre-war years. Whilst even the Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law, was more minded ultimately to compromise on the issue than his heated rhetoric revealed.[36] Even the turmoil of the First World War was accompanied by its more stable or consensual sides. Unlike in Russia and Germany, there was no serious danger in Britain of either mutiny, or a collapse of the political system. Moreover,

historians have increasingly charted the nuances of British public attitudes during the war, belligerent voices, on the whole, outweighed by a more measured, and relatively pacific patriotism.[37]

After the war, the centre's resilience against the left was manifested in the collapse of the Triple Alliance (1921), and the General Strike (1926), and in the firm weddedness of Ramsay MacDonald and Clement Attlee, leaders of by now the country's second strongest party, Labour, to parliamentary methods, and to the pursuit of a national, not merely sectional appeal. On the centre-right, the inter-war years' single most influential political figure, Stanley Baldwin, pursued a modernised Conservatism, his 1924-9 government giving key posts to the former Liberal, Winston Churchill (Chancellor), and the reforming Minister of Health (Neville Chamberlain). Cautiously accepting the earlier Liberal governments' expanded state, his economic policy, as Philip Williamson demonstrates, was not so uniformly 'orthodox' as sometimes depicted. He allowed Churchill to adopt more relaxed rules on what constituted a balanced budget, and saw off 'anti-waste' and *rentier* arguments for dramatic social service retrenchment. His administration brought in the Contributory Pensions Act (1925), the Central Electricity Board (1926), and the equalisation of the franchise for women (1928).[38]

Baldwin then managed to defeat the right wing campaign for Empire Free Trade, manifested by supporter Alfred Duff Cooper's victory in the Westminster St George's by-election (1931), and rhetorically sealed by Baldwin's put-down of the campaign-leading press barons, Beaverbrook and Rothermere, over their 'power without responsibility'.[39] He also resisted diehard imperialist opposition to autonomy for India in 1935, as did he firmly insist on the abdication, in 1936, of the increasingly Nazi-sympathizing King Edward VIII. For all the flirtation of the *Daily Mail* with Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, the dominant public and political reaction to it, most marked in response to the violence at the Union's 1934 Olympia Rally, was, as Lawrence shows, 'revulsion', mixed with a grounded sense of the

movement's limits. 'Mosley won't come to any good', reflected Baldwin in the rally's aftermath, 'and we need not bother about him'.[40]

What factors underpinned this centrist influence? First is the centre's modernising adaptivity, its determination, given its concern, as Baldwin put it in 1933, that 'this post-War world is full of pre-War minds', to 'reconcile … to the age in which we live'.[41] Crucial to this was thought to be *breadth*, of both social representativeness and ideological vision. Baldwin's sustained national appeal lay partly in his 'unusually eclectic opinions, sympathies and personas – industrialist, paternalist, employer, countryman, bookman, "common man", "broad church" Christian'.[42] This inclusivity of social influences and mind-sets chimed with the centrist appreciation that, especially in this volatile and transitional political age, parties should seek broad coalitions of electoral support. But it also linked to a determined ideological breadth, an attentiveness to multi-dimensionality of purpose, in which the right balance between preserving established societal modes, and moving 'forward' could be struck. Centrists were optimists, caveated optimists certainly, but optimists who believed in the enlightenment harmonization of ideals. It was at their core to take political values 'which to the thoughtless are antinomies', and demonstrate that they 'have become complementary', that 'each is only capable of rising to the fullness of its integrity by admixture with the other'.[43] Their pursuit was, therefore, of an avowedly multiple vision, one populated by 'and', not 'or'. Baldwin captured this breadth of aspiration (and, it might be said, of early-century achievement) well in a speech of 1935: 'True to our traditions, we have avoided all extremes. We have steered clear of fascism, communism, dictatorship, and we have shown the world that democratic government, constitutional methods and ordered liberty are not inconsistent with progress and prosperity.'[44]

This outlook expressed itself in two specific intellectual syntheses in these early century decades. The first, political, was the effort to join acceptance, and encouragement of the new

democracy of 1918, with an 'educative' emphasis on the realism and restraint on which stable politics rested, and consequently the avoidance of democracy lapsing, as increasingly in Europe, into demagogic dictatorship. As the middle way authors of *The Next Five Years* publication put it in 1935: 'leadership and democracy are not incompatible, and … the surest foundation for creative leadership is an educated democracy'.[45] MacDonald, too, was concerned to politically 'educate' the labour movement, to tame any instincts for unworldly idealism, or trade union 'direct action', in favour of 'Parliament as the embodiment of the civic life of the community, … [and] public opinion as the only creator of social change which is to last'.[46] Echoing his rival party leaders' conception of the political challenge as dual, not singular, MacDonald set himself against both 'old habits' and 'revolutionary enthusiasm'.[47]

Political stability would be reinforced by the advancement of a second, socio-economic policy synthesis, in which more generous state welfare provision would support, not stifle individual responsibility. As leading New Liberal thinker, Leonard Hobhouse expressed it in 1911, it would be 'the function of the State to secure the conditions upon which mind and character may develop themselves'.[48] Whilst the enhanced social provision which this entailed was broadly accepted by Conservative governments in the 1920s, by the 1930s, many on the centre called for a further step-change towards government socio-economic 'planning'. This was, again, defended, in the face of the discontents of mass unemployment, in centrist terms of an updated political and social equilibrium, a better 'balance in our economic life', as Macmillan put it in 1934.[49] The 1930s' National Government moved steadily, though incompletely, in this direction. Yet, the individual responsibility part of the equation also remained important, even in more 'advanced' centrism, such as that of the Liberal economist John Maynard Keynes. He sought, he explained in 1929, 'a society in which most of the existing inequalities … are removed'.[50] Yet, equally, one must 'give encouragement to all exceptional effort, ability, courage, character. I do not want to antagonize the successful'.[51]

The second factor underpinning centrist influence is that of institutional and social structure, including the electoral system. In some ways, the British first-past-the-post voting system disadvantaged the centre, empowering those parties with large, class-based appeal. It often provided governing party majorities, which reduced the need for right or left wing parties to engage in the post-election bargaining with centrist parties, at times required in the hung parliaments, produced by proportional representation, on the European continent. Yet, as Downs explains, in a two-party system, parties often 'become more moderate … in an effort to win the crucial middle-of-the-road voters'.[52] The inter-war Conservatives and Labour sought to appeal to former Liberal voters, some admirers even suggesting that Baldwin offered a 'fuller and finer conception ... of real Liberalism' than the Liberal Party itself.[53] The dispersal of centrists across parties, as opposed to their concentration in a single, more exclusively centrist party, also meant that, whatever the governing party of the moment, centrists of one sort or another were always present within it. In this sense, as Harrison reflects, 'the alternation in power of two parties … is a centrist educational process far more comprehensive for a society than the proliferation of irresponsible fundamentalist groupings confronted by a governmental centre'.[54] Further ideologically-steadying ballast was provided by intermediate social institutions, like the civil service, universities, BBC, and civic and voluntary associations, often serving, as Helen McCarthy has explored, 'to constrain … the possibilities available to those who might have wanted to describe … society in more polarizing terms'.[55]

Thirdly, the tempo of history has assisted the centre. The frequent swings rightwards and leftwards since 1906 have often been less sharp than it appears. The ideological colour of the governing party of the moment does not give a full indication of the nation's political or social character at that time. Historical change operates at once more powerfully, slowly and steadily than is captured by the rotation of four- or five-year governments. Even those in power for longer often managed to be so by accepting the innovations of their predecessors. This has

particular implications for the notion of the twentieth- as the 'Conservative century'. Seldon caveats his own use of the label, noting that the Conservatives' repeated *electoral* success depended on substantial *intellectual* borrowing from the new 1906 Liberal settlement, and then from Labour's of 1945.[56] Reinforcing this sense of the again 'quietly' moderating force of history, Keynes observed in 1925 that although there was a Conservative government, the party's 'old battle-cries', on subjects like the Church, the landed interest and the glories of empire, were 'muffled or silent'.[57]

If centrism derived influence from the 'macro' processes of historical change, it also, fourthly, drew sustenance from the more 'micro'-level operation of policy. Accepting of an evolutionary view of change, centrists were usually willing to engage with policy detail and constraint. The century's increasingly complex administrative machinery often favoured centrist ministers, willing, as one later to be archetypally 'insiderist' centrist, the young Conservative R.A. Butler, put it 'to wield a pruning knife rather than an axe'.[58] Perhaps above all, a sense of patience, that 'rarest and most difficult of all the virtues', thought the notably resilient Asquith, enabled centrists to keep on going, exhibiting what Baldwin described as a peculiarly English 'staying power'.[59]

As the above implies, finally, centrism was about an outlook, a character, as much as an ideology. Centrists themselves certainly thought so, believing the ideological waywardness of right or left wing figures often stemmed from flawed personality, with Mosley, the protean Churchill, and Lloyd George considered prime examples. The latter two were centrist at certain moments, yet highly unpredictable at others. Lloyd George was 'incapable of loyalty', wrote Asquith in 1917, with 'incurable defects … of … character'.[60] Churchill, he thought, lacked judgement and restraint, appearing to 'talk and write too much'.[61] Supporters and opponents, alike, however, generally thought the service-imbued Baldwin 'a good man'.[62]

In this vein, perhaps the single most defining centrist word was 'constructive', a claim to set aside the starkest of animosity (class or personal) in order to *build*. The young Labour revisionist, Evan Durbin, who had a recurring interest in political psychology, wrote intriguingly in the later 1930s of the 'constructive' and 'destructive' forces in both socialism and Conservatism. Socialists exhibited 'the desire to build a better social order', yet also '"class hatred"'. Conservatives displayed 'constructive economic enterprise impulses', but also housed 'the "shoot them down" brigade'. Politics, he advocated, should harness this constructiveness from wherever it came. Baldwin, too, spoke passionately of a contrast between politicians of 'rhetoric' and those of 'wisdom and constructive power'.[63]

If these first forty years of the century established many of the characteristics of centrist strength over the century as a whole, they also showcase what were to be its enduring weaknesses. Flowing from the 1916 Liberal Party split, the dispersal of the centre across parties was greater by the end of this period than the beginning. The pattern of a binary party politics of competing class-based parties was by then firmly established, the upholder of which, for all its adversarial solidification by the majoritarian electoral system, lay more profoundly, in the very real class division of society, albeit with its many shadings. Freeden's description of how, after 1914, 'the increasing intrusion of power, struggle, and class into social relations found liberalism unequipped to cope', has much application to the persistent problem faced by the ideological centre ground more widely.[64] Centrists have long been aware of this. Their 'insiderist' tendency to enjoy high office has sat strangely alongside a certain feeling of alienation from a two-sided political game. As Edward Wood (later Lord Halifax) complained in 1918, 'it is difficult to paint democratic posters in other than broad and simple colours', a regret echoed at the century's opposite end by aspirant political 'mould'-breaker, SDP leader Roy Jenkins, bemoaning 'the resilience … of the Conservative/ Labour duopoly'.[65]

Externally constrained by society's wider divisions, the centre's institutional dispersal also reflected its own internal intellectual divide. If the broad direction of travel in the more than one hundred years since 1906 has been towards a narrowing of the right-left gap – and thus of the divide between *centre*-right and *centre*-left - the erosion has been steady, not rapid, and the division remains profound. It distinguishes a centre-right, which valued both social justice and individual initiative, but the latter notably more, and a centre-left which also sought a synthesis, but whose articulation of the individual initiative part (or accompanying 'affluence') was frequently the less wholehearted. Thus, Baldwin was, for all his unifying side, as Williamson reminds us, simultaneously very much 'a *Conservative*'.[66] If his economic policy was not so rigidly orthodox as it could appear, it was still more restrictive than, both in hindsight it needed to be, and than more radical centrists like Lloyd George were beginning to argue for. The extent of 'rectitude' in both his 1923 American debt settlement, and the 1925 restoration of the gold standard, was, Williamson concedes, 'misconceived in under-estimating both changes in the international economy and the flexibility of the British economy'.[67] He remained consistently nervous of the disincentivising effects of what was a still small state social service provision, and his party frequently caricatured a situation of 'officials everywhere … appalling taxation'.[68]

The centre-left echoed - in reverse - these 'leanings' of ideology and class interest. The description by the Fabian Sidney Webb, in 1923, of the 'sinister dominance … of the private interests of the owners of great masses of wealth' was emblematic in this respect.[69] A notable determination to appear as a national, and not merely class-based party was accompanied by a discomfort, still, in articulating the more positive aspects of capitalism. An emphatically non-Marxist pluralism, sat confusingly alongside a marked economic reductionism. 'At the back' of other contests over power, wrote Attlee in 1937, has been 'the desire to use that power for economic ends'.[70] Both social democrats, and some New Liberals, too, were relatedly arguably

too denigrating of an expanding, socially mobile suburban middle class, whose early-century drift to the Conservatives was unlikely to be halted by their opponents' assumption of its malevolence. 'Politically it [suburbia] is a greater burden on the nation than the slum', wrote Hobhouse in 1904, those 'feverish [suburban] hordes', concurred fellow Liberal thinker Charles Masterman.[71]

If the above illustrates the division between Labour centrists and Conservative ones, the Liberal Party housed aspects of the disagreement within itself, in the debate over the merits of the Old and New Liberalism. Indeed, this split Liberal mind often afflicted individual Liberals. The frequent ideological oscillations of figures like Churchill, Keynes and William Beveridge showed, as Jose Harris observes, how 'idealist visions of … "positive liberty" coexisted, often in the same person, with the view that "liberty" meant leaving the private citizen largely free to do what he or she liked'.[72]

Centrists thus shared, albeit often in milder form, the doctrinal, class and party polarities of the wider society. This was continually to impose limits on the intellectual, and thus the institutional unity of the centre across the century. The centre sustained a duality in which, as David Cannadine puts it, British political parties were 'transcending the division of society, even as in other ways they embodied it'.[73]

Moderation and dogma, class interest and disinterestedness, progressive innovation and conservative inertia, co-existed on the centre. In these contradictions, the centre might be seen to offer an especially illuminating mirror of such very double-sidedness in the nation as a whole. For centrism was a phenomenon more grounded in the wider society, more connected with 'the people', than stereotypes of it in terms of a merely aloof liberal elitism convey. This is not to dispose of the elitist charge altogether. There was something in both the over-confidence in centralised London governance, and the sheer chutzpah, of the young Labour revisionist Douglas Jay's well-known 1937 reflection that on certain welfare issues 'the

gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves', that made it unsurprising that it emanated from that common breed, the centrist intellectual.[74] From a different, but similarly dismissive patrician centre-right perspective, Baldwin worried repeatedly in the first half of the 1920s about 'the emotions of the ignorant mob'.[75]

Yet, possessive of often finely-tuned political instincts, and a sense that apparently 'high' political decisions in fact often stemmed from something deeper in the values of the organic social whole, centrists usually attached a high importance to the outlooks and values of the people, and would place a recurring confidence in them. They understood, sometimes better than their rivals, that, in a democratic age, the people *were* the body politic. The 'real source' of democracy, noted Durbin, was 'the existence of a tolerant disposition – a relatively friendly (loving) character in the people'.[76] Similarly, for Baldwin, 'the responsibility for progress rests not only on the Government, but on every man and woman in the country. The Government can go no faster in progress than the people will allow them to do'.[77]

Discarding both a perceived socialist romanticisation of the people, and a Conservative under-estimation of popular capacities, centrists were distinctive in the sense in which they reflected society back to itself as a *mix* – a people *between* vice and virtue, 'forward' and conservative impulses. The English character was 'contradictory often', thought Baldwin.[78] 'The material of politics is human nature, its motives honourable and base, its appetites for power and for service, its passions, its prejudices'.[79] For liberal women's citizenship campaigner Eleanor Rathbone, in similar vein, if the English were 'the most conservative of mankind, they are also the most fundamentally fair-minded, kindly and humane'.[80] Reading the character of an electorate as a multi-layered contradiction, one which centrists half-knew they displayed themselves, gave them a particular connection with the people.   This engagement with the citizenry as a mix, deserves more attention within historiographical

debates over whether voters were apathetic or engaged, conservative or radical, highlighting that location between those polarities.[81]

Exhibiting what Lawrence terms the political 'wish both to speak for the people, and to change them', centrists like Lloyd George, Baldwin and MacDonald, saw themselves as national educators as much as politicians, as, later, would the likes of Wilson, Major and Tony Blair.[82] Neville Chamberlain noted Baldwin's ability to 'raise us above ourselves'.[83] Contrary to portrayals of the centre as merely managerialist and technocratic, this is evidence of its 'moral', not merely 'mechanical' politics'. 'Liberty is not merely a privilege to be conferred', emphasised Lloyd George, 'it is a habit to be acquired'.[84] But, crucially, undertaking this educative role rested on an underlying centrist confidence that the people themselves possessed the requisite, if somewhat hesitant, constructive 'decency' to make this educative effort worthwhile. Centrists, for all their nuance, were recurring optimists. 'I have confidence in the character of our people', insisted Baldwin in 1926.[85] 'Never allow yourself to be ensnared in sombre and paralysing generalities and shallow pessimism', advised Asquith in 1927, the year before his death. 'This is not a wholesome mood, nor is it, in my judgement, in the long run, justified by reason or by experience.'[86]

This was a centrist confidence in them which the people often reciprocated. Asquith, his biographer notes, was a 'servant of the State, rather than a tribune of the people', yet one who, in part because of his measured detachment, 'inspired confidence amongst uncommitted opinion in the country'. Baldwin's later skill in political communication, through radio and film, had, as often noted, its propagandist side. Yet, as Williamson concludes 'the medium was not the [only] message'. It was effective because listeners detected that it simultaneously held 'a deeper purpose', and from this connection came Baldwin's, as it did other centrists', 'unusual ability to create receptive audiences'.[87]

III

The most fundamental charge against the centrism of the 'consensus' years of 1940-1970 – and indeed of the centre more generally - is that it lacked an essential moral depth. Firstly, as a supposedly purely pragmatic compromise, it lacked the principled vision of a qualitatively different society, supposedly more evident on left and right. Secondly, because of its top-down, technocratic approach, the consensus failed to establish societal depth, a rootedness within the values of the people. A certain shallowness is thus seen to characterise the centre, explaining the rapidity with which the consensus was able to unwind by 1979. The leading New Right thinker Keith Joseph's *Stranded On The Middle Ground?* (1976), one of the century's most direct critiques of centrism, argued that this British centre was in fact no longer properly centrist, because of the 'left-wing ratchet' of an ever-expanding state. Moreover, centrism was essentially an elitist 'compromise between politicians, unrelated to the aspirations of the people', and, ultimately, 'not related to any vision of society'.[88] On the left, writing as early as 1960, Richard Titmuss criticised the fashion for 'political consensus' and 'professional neutralism' in contrast to the 'radical and outspoken' approach of the 1930s, and Tony Benn later echoed this rejection of 'the stale policies of consensus'.[89] But the critique found its most systematic exposition from within the centre's own borders, the Labour revisionist, then SDP thinker, David Marquand arguing, in his *The Unprincipled Society* (1988), that 'Keynesian social democracy took a new road in economics, but not in politics or ethics'. Failing to break with Victorian liberal utilitarianism, it became 'a philosophy of social engineering, rather than of persuasion', which neglected that 'an active state needed active citizens'.[90] This also seemed to chime with the findings of revisionist historians, who, conscious of a seemingly diminished centrist influence by the 1980s, now began to question whether there had even ever been a real centrist consensus during the 'consensus era' itself.[91]

Whilst these years did shed fresh light on the centre's still unresolved dilemmas, elements of this critique lack a sense of historical proportion. As Harrison points out, the consensus debate too often treats the 1940-70 period as unique in its consensual characteristics, under-estimating existing centrist influence *before* 1940, and important continuing elements of consensus *after* 1979. By normalising 1940-70 within this wider pattern of more continuous centrist influence, one can observe significant consensus co-existing with profound limits to it, as was the case in the years before and after.[92] The time of the viewing point is also important. Judging 1940-70 through hindsight draws attention to unresolved ideological divisions. Yet, assessing 1970 from the standpoint of 1939, the collective achievement, over little more than a generation, in constructing an enabling state, whilst preserving individual freedom, and a still capacious private sector, seems more marked than the shortcoming. Often proceeding at the level of policy detail, sceptical accounts of the consensus can, as Searle notes, obscure, macro-level agreement on such fundamentals as parliamentary democracy, a welfare state, full employment, a broadly mixed economy, and an internationalist, generally, but not uncritically pro-NATO foreign policy.[93]

But reconciliation of the consensus debate positions is also possible at the level of detail. Rollings, for instance, shows that the shift in the Attlee government's economic policy from socialist planning and direct controls to a more centrist, Keynesian approach of demand management, marked by Dalton's 1947 budget, and Wilson's 1948 'bonfire of controls', was less total, and more gradual than supposed. But he does not disagree that *some* such shift took place.[94] He also shows that the balance of Conservative government priorities in the 1950s, as between low inflation and low unemployment, leant towards prioritising the former. Moreover, he notes that the extent of ideological disharmony between Prime Minister Macmillan and his Chancellor Peter Thorneycroft on public spending levels, culminating in the latter's resignation in 1958, traditionally seen as a victory for pro-spending, consensus outlooks, has been

exaggerated. But, again, he does not dispute that full employment had become a more important Conservative consideration than it had been, including in the decision not to proceed with Operation Robot in 1952, the introduction of full sterling convertibility and floating exchange rates, likely to lead to higher unemployment. Nor, of course, does he contest that Thorneycroft *did* resign in 1958, and that, thereafter, amidst Macmillan's fear of recession, the government's 1959 budget was highly expansionist.[95] As Seldon cautions, the polarised wish-lists of the activists of competing parties must be differentiated from the more centrist policy of the party leadership, just as the speculative schemes of a party in opposition often differed from what that party, when in government, actually did.[96] Iron and steel, and road-haulage aside, for example, the 1951-64 Conservative government embarked on little actual de-nationalisation, for all their theoretical advocacy of it.

The charge that the centre lacked moral idealism, and imaginative vision is also misplaced. Under-noticed because centrists disdained over-dramatic declarations or promises, their idealism and innovation were nonetheless evident, both in the ambitious sophistication with which they forged new ideological fusions, and no less in the firm determination with which they saw them through. Centrist values helped ensure that a newly active state would be adjoined to, not replace a vibrant market; that new forms of welfare provision came alongside a continued, indeed heightened emphasis on popular engagement, opportunity and responsibility, through both extended education, and encouragement of the private accumulation of property (housing) and saving. In classically centrist ideologically harmonizing terms, the epoch-defining Beveridge Report (1942) suggested that enhanced social 'security', 'can be combined with freedom and enterprise and responsibility of the individual for his own life'.[97] Reflecting four years later, as this synthesis of liberalism and social democracy was coming to practical fruition under the 1945 Labour government, Beveridge opined that it was this very 'combining' process itself which made the British

political model successful.[98] Moreover, his was an explicitly 'moral', not merely 'mechanical'

vision: 'we must never destroy the free spirit of man in order to feed his body'.[99]

This 'radical moderation' underpinning the new 1945 settlement also proved able

imaginatively to revise itself, to reflect, by the late 1950s, the emerging politics of 'affluence',

fuelled by rising incomes, home-ownership, and educational expectations. To the relatively

paternalist earlier conception of state welfare was now added a new, meritocratic emphasis on

social mobility and opportunity. It is well-established that the Conservatives embraced this

meritocratic message, further broadening their social base. But the extent to which the centre-

left also evolved, in the 1960s, to *combine* its traditional egalitarian appeal with this more

thrusting aspirational ethos, should not be overlooked. Ideals of advancement through merit

and self-improvement had long shaped social democracy. The party's leading thinker of this

era, the revisionist Tony Crosland, was not, as sometimes written, an opponent of meritocracy.

Rather: 'equality of opportunity and social mobility … need, not to be played down, as some

sociologists would have us do, but to be combined with measures … to diminish … the injustice

of large inequalities'.[100] The point was again one of constructive synthesis, as the rhetoric of

'modernisation' driving Wilson's 1964-70 government further illustrated. His 'Britain of

opportunity', as he put in 1965, would *both* erode privileges *and* enable the 'keen and thrusting'

to advance.[101] This was the archetypally *centre*-left pursuit of two desirables reconciled, not,

in the main, Joseph's alleged left-wing 'ratchet'. Wilson, memorably, thought progress would

come through the jettisoning of outdated attitudes across society, on both sides of industry,

requiring the people to show restraint and responsibility, not simply be the passive recipients

of state largesse. If this outlook was evident in the call for greater union responsibility in *In

Place of Strife* (1969), it was further (and more successfully) manifest in now Chancellor

Jenkins's insistence on a belt-tightening national effort to stave off the balance of payments

deficit, so as 'to prove our competence as a Party of economic management', one of head as much as heart.[102]

Centrists were also to the foreground in many of the boldest policy initiatives of the consensus years. If greatest credit for the creation of a centrally-coordinated, comprehensive National Health Service in 1948, goes to the left-wing Aneurin Bevan, it was the centre-left Attlee who had the perception, in appointing him, to channel the governmentally constructive side to that romantic rebel, and who intervened to support Bevan's radical new system over Herbert Morrison's more localised alternative. Butler was central to the Conservatives' acceptance of the welfare state, Macmillan to the large-scale housing programme of the early 1950s. It was Crosland who introduced the secondary school comprehensivisation *Circular 10/65* in 1965. Jenkins, as Home Secretary, drove much of the 1960s' liberalisation of the country's moral and legal code, just as he would also lead the 1971 rebellion of Labour MPs, which gave the One Nation Conservative Edward Heath the Commons majority to take Britain into the European Community in 1973.

Yet, the heart of centrist idealism did not lie in such grand structural and legal changes in themselves. For all the technocratic and statist means adopted in the consensus years, its centrist politicians continued to believe that progress ultimately rested on the character and values of the people, and the ends of policy were often expressed in terms of enabling the citizenry. Centrists explicitly contrasted their 'ethical' approach to that of a right and left they saw as privileging too much a debate over economic systems. To Macmillan, the 'extremes' of both individualism and collectivism 'are wrong, being based on a materialist philosophy and without moral foundation'.[103] Real social advance, reflected Morrison in 1953, required 'the quality, the ability and the public spirit' of millions.[104] 'Governments', declared even the supposedly archetypally elitist Jenkins, 'are to a large extent the servants and not the masters of the nation'.[105] Moreover, this was no bad thing, as 'people … are often more perceptive

than some politicians realise'.[106] Marquand under-estimates the 'moral politics' of the consensus years, during which ordinary people's ambitions, and consequently responsibilities, were encouraged to grow to a level in many ways higher than before the war. Both the Conservative emphasis on home-ownership, and that of the newly resurgent later 1950s' Liberal Party on decentralisation and community politics, were directed in important part towards the cultivation of responsibility (individual and social), and the encouragement of independence of character. As a leading collection of Liberal essays expressed it in 1957, the policy 'to spread wealth, ownership, power and responsibility as widely as possible' was 'set … on creating conditions favourable to the development of personality'.[107]

Above all, centrist 'moral politics' expressed itself in the rapid educational expansion of the later 1950s and 1960s. Constituting the centre's alternative radical dynamic to the right and left focus on economic systems, education offered to raise minds, not just redistribute materially. A recurring centrist priority, later evident under New Labour, education also epitomised the centrist synthesis of rights (to opportunity) with responsibilities (to seize it). Thus, Crosland's call to see education 'as of far greater significance to socialism than the nationalization of meat-procuring or even chemicals', sheds symbolic light on the underlying centrist outlook, beyond the narrow specifics of educational policy itself.[108] 'The ultimate ideal of Soc.[ialism]', he had jotted in 1950, 'seems to me essentially a _moral_ & _not_ a material one'.[109]

Education, like much of the centre's approach, pointed to a 'quiet', subtle form of progressivism. But if this has led to this progressivism's under-estimation, it did not lessen the passion behind it. For all his careful empiricism, Beveridge, for instance, 'temperamentally … belonged with the "zealots" and "stormy reformers" of the high Victorian period rather than with the "mandarin stereotype" of the modern civil servant'.[110] The apparently dry Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell, too, revealed the centre's tendency to rouse when most under threat, in

his emotional call for the party to 'fight, and fight again' against unilateralism in 1960. Aware of the right's and left's recurring charge that they lacked fixity of purpose, centrists vigorously and repeatedly contested it. As Macmillan expressed it in 1957, whilst his belief in 'one nation' was 'not doctrinaire … [but one of] common sense', that 'does not mean that we do not have strong principles'.[111] Centrists believed 'radicalism' was too often misread for angry or rhetorically uplifting claims, which lacked genuine constructive intent. Criticising, in the aftermath of Labour's third successive election defeat in 1959, what he saw as the left's obsession with nationalisation, Jenkins warned that 'by being cluttered up with dogma, which in fact you don't advance very courageously or vigorously, you reduce your cutting edge, not increase it'.[112] 'Moderation', he later reflected, must not be 'a euphemism for compromise, for muddle …, [it] should be extremely sharp'.[113]

None of the above is to under-estimate, either continuing centrist weaknesses, or the limits to the country's overall political consensus. The division between centre-right and centre-left remained profound. Even the most insistent Conservative advocates of a middle way, like Macmillan, continued to caricature the state, in terms that seemed far from 'moderate': 'social services fall like manna from heaven'; Britain could not exist on a 'sloppy socialised basis'.[114] Conversely, yet correspondingly, for all Wilson's mid-1960s' cross-class appeal, there were limits to the centre-left's ability to sustain an appeal to the affluent voter. The avowedly moderate Michael Young's influential *The Rise of The Meritocracy* (1958) was emblematic in this regard. Penetrating in its critique of an ultra-competitive society, the book was hardly, in its dystopian portrayal of social mobility *en totale*, 'balanced'.[115] In often disdaining consumerist 'gadgets', or new media like television, the problem for Labour, as Black pinpoints, was not with legitimate critiques of materialist excess, but in appearing sweepingly condemnatory about affluence altogether.[116] The centre, then, continued in part to sustain the doctrinal and class divides it simultaneously critiqued. In doing so, it contributed

to the familiar shortcomings of the consensus era: the continued salience of industrial conflict; at times indulgently binary debates over economic systems; and the lack of an agreed long-term, national strategic direction.

Centrism could lapse into conservatism or inertia. Macmillan's 'property-owning democracy' of the 1950s, became the establishment lethargy of the early 1960s. Wilson's dynamic social modernisation ended in later 1960s' economic crisis management. Even the intellectual revisionists now short of new ideas, the government, Jenkins admitted, had become 'too much concerned with material things'.[117] The centrist emphasis on 'practicality', whilst often an ally of its particular brand of idealism, could degenerate into utilitarian excess, both virtue and vice evident in Keynes's claim that 'it is fatal for a capitalist government to have principles', and that 'it must be opportunistic in the best sense of the word, living by accommodation and good sense'.[118] Lauding education as the pathway to redemption, centrists were inclined to under-estimate the enduring power of class, and other social structural obstacles, to impede that opportunity for many. A certain centrist complacency, alongside constructive optimism, was evident in Crosland's confidence that capitalism had been tamed, or One Nation Conservative Lord Hailsham's belief, as early as 1959, that 'privilege has been abolished'.[119] The centre's nonconformist zeal could jar with, much as it also drew benefit from, its governmentalist insiderism. Butler's preference for a 'constructive rather than iconoclastic attitude' points to limits to the centrist's willingness to question and rebel.[120] Personifying the internal conflict, Jenkins, rebellious political gambler, yet establishment man, mused intriguingly on 'the question of how much I was truly at ease with power'.[121]

Less afflicted than the right by a weddedness to the past, or than the left by adherence to an overly-theoretical future, centrists exhibited the advantages, yet also the drawbacks of a focus on the present. For Keynes, 'it can seldom be right … to sacrifice a present benefit for a doubtful advantage in the future'.[122] This gave the centre an admirably sharp focus on actually

existing possibilities, whilst also rendering it vulnerable to an over-reverence of social 'modernity', and to seduction by the glossiness of intellectual 'newness'. There was something in Wilson's charge, that Labour revisionists over-esteemed 'brand new chromium-plated policy based on "new thinking"', an excess more strongly manifested later in New Labour's at times undiscriminating embrace of 'globalisation'.[123]

These strands of utilitarianism or inertia, do not contradict the earlier evidence of an idealistic centre. Convention and vision co-existed on the centre: it stood *between* the dream and the day-to-day. The double-sidedness is captured by the well-known passage at the end of Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956), envisaging a more informal, leisured and egalitarian culture of 'not only higher exports and old-age pensions, but more open-air cafes, brighter and gayer streets at night'. It is amongst the country's most powerful futuristic political imagery. Yet, the relative brevity of this visionary passage, at the end of a book brimming with more immediate sociological and economic concerns, also hints that the centrist sense of a better future was tinged with haziness.[124]

Yet, it was a haziness arguably shared by the people. That centrist position between dreamy ideals and daily 'muddling through', seems a further instance of the centre capturing the people's own unresolved mix. If the centre could be excessively satisfied with *status quo* pragmatism, it was a lethargy echoed across the wide spectrum of social outlooks which centrism encompassed: 'business liberalism', labourist trade unionism, paternalist Conservatism, narrow civil service empiricism, or the abstract wanderings of the self-satisfied intellectual. As Crosland depicted in his second major book, *The Conservative Enemy* (1962), then, the complacencies and conservatisms of British politics – and of the people – took a range of different forms, and lay *across* right, left and centre in different ways. This points to an insight of centrist history being that political and social shortcomings cannot always be solely attributed to a single governing party, or class, but often reflected, as Crosland observed, 'deep-

seated national failings', that were collectively shared.[125] More positively, the same might be suggested of the country's accomplishments. The cross-class 'Blitz spirit' (however caveated) sustained the creation of the welfare state. The national appetite for a new post-austerity 'freedom', underpinned the 1950s' emphasis on consumption, home-ownership and renewed domesticity. The 1960s' 'white heat' captured a *zeitgeist* well beyond just Labour. In a profound sense, both the epoch's heroes, and its villains were 'us', not 'them'.

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IV

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Assessments of the British centre since 1970 have often placed the accent on decline. Historians of social democracy point to its tendency to be 'on the back foot'.[126] Assailed, initially, by a strengthened left, led by the charismatic Tony Benn, it was then confronted by the repeated electoral success of the newly assertive Conservatism of Margaret Thatcher. Her marketization agenda was, Ewen Green suggests, also 'wholly at odds', with the earlier One Nation Conservative 'emphasis on social association'.[127] Appraisals of the century's first new centrist party, the SDP, have also been sharply critical, declaring its record 'one of failure'.[128] After Thatcher's fall in 1990, whilst centrist influence seemed restored, critiques now charted its lost idealism. New Labour's supposed acceptance of her neo-liberalism meant the party had, in Eric Shaw's influential account, 'lost its soul'.[129] Now, following the 2016 Brexit vote, both centrist vision *and* influence appear on the wane. A much-publicised research pamphlet, *Dead Centre*, enunciated 'the weakness of the traditional "centre ground"'.[130]

However, this picture significantly under-estimates both the persistent (albeit sometimes defensive) political influence of the post-1970 centre, and its continued intellectual vibrancy. Any national retreat from the politically 'balancing' instincts of the 1950s and 1960s was less comprehensive than sometimes presented. New Conservative Prime Minister Edward

Heath 'U-turned' in 1972, amidst rising unemployment, away from his government's tougher 'Selsdon Man' approach, towards renewed government intervention. This reflected both that a still Attlee-settlement-schooled public was not yet ready for such a rightwards shift, and that Heath was more a modernising One Nation technocrat, than an outright exponent of *laissez-faire*.[131]

Correspondingly, the 1974-9 Labour government was less driven by its left-wing than appearances suggest. The leftward shift amongst party activists was not echoed in the Cabinet, where pragmatic labourists, like Wilson, Jim Callaghan, and Denis Healey still dominated. Benn's defeat in the 1975 European referendum enabled Wilson to demote him from his powerful Industry post, and, as Chancellor, Healey began a policy of expenditure cuts and wage restraint. Michael Foot's election to the leadership in 1980 undoubtedly marked a more pronounced leftward shift. Yet, this continued the customary pattern of a party moving to its 'extremes' only when most remote from securing office. There followed a steady shift back to what new leader Neil Kinnock lauded as 'a practical and common-sense creed'.[132] As Andrew Thorpe has observed of Labour's swing left in both the early 1930s and early 1980s, 'the surprising aspect is less that there was a swing to the left, than the fact that it was so shallow, so partial in its effects, and so short-lived'.[133]

It is the apparently sharp governmental swing rightwards from 1979 which presents the century's most demanding challenge to the assertion about a persistently influential centre. But historians are increasingly questioning the totality of this shift. Thatcher was constrained by One Nation Conservatives in the Cabinet, and parliamentary party, as well as opposition forces within local government. As for earlier periods, the values of the immediately preceding, in this case more collectivist and liberal era, were not dismantled overnight. 'Thermostat' studies show how public opinion on desirable government spending levels expressed itself as the inverse of the government's position, softening policy excess.[134] Strong public support for the

NHS was reflected in Thatcher's relatively buoyant spending on it, whilst she also did little, in practice, to reverse the legal liberalisations of the 1960s. Brooke has rightly drawn attention to the 'contradictory' character of the decade: 'social democracy persisted against or even alongside neo-liberalism'.[135]

Middlemas ponders intriguingly how far post-1970 politics witnessed 'a new departure or merely a variation in the old search for balance', to serve a more aspirational public.[136] Developing this, Richard Vinen has argued that given the leftwards shifts in state and union power in the 1970s, Thatcherism operated as a 're-balancer' of this disequilibrium, restoring elements of the consensus as it had operated before 1970. 'In 1983', he suggests, 'it was Thatcher's Conservative Party that defended the pre-1979 consensus – revolving around the American alliance, nuclear weapons and the EEC. It was Michael Foot's Labour Party that attacked it.'[137] Thatcher's cautious and practical side, the extent to which she was, as One Nation Cabinet colleague, Ken Clarke recalls, 'intensely political', has also been under-estimated.[138] This moved her to compromise on major issues like Rhodesia (1980), the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), and the Single European Act (1986). Such arguments can be taken too far. Right-wing zeal operated alongside the more 'political' Thatcher, and the extent of her laudation of the market cannot, ultimately, be described as 'moderate'. Yet, it is further testimony to the country's lack of appetite for a wholesale rightwards shift, that, by the late 1980s, as she seemed much less plausibly a balancing force, her more 'extreme' enemies (Arthur Scargill, General Galtieri) long defeated, and her right wing doctrine (the poll tax) and abrasive style (over Europe) now more foregrounded, her position in both the Cabinet and the country correspondingly weakened, culminating in her 1990 fall.

Nor is the history of the SDP-Liberal Alliance in the 1980s solely illustrative of centrist weakness. Its poor showing of seats in the 1983 and 1987 elections undoubtedly demonstrates the continuing resilience of binary party politics. Yet, popular support for the Alliance

remained substantial, a persistent moderating warning for both its rivals. It was also part of a much longer-term trend of revived centre party performance, under the influence of voter class dealignment.[139] This developed firmly via the Liberals in the 1960s, continued under the Liberal Democrats, and crystallised in their entry into coalition government in 2010.

Reflecting a renewed confidence on both centre-right and centre-left after 1990, Thatcher's successor, John Major offered an approach both more diplomatic and socially inclusive. The poll tax was jettisoned, the Maastricht Treaty signed with Europe (1992), and peace furthered in Northern Ireland, through the Downing Street Declaration (1993). Indicating a reassertion of the centrist value of 'equilibrium', Major insisted that 'self-reliance can be taken too far, and a proper balance must be kept'.[140] But the more systematic pursuit of a 'third way' came with New Labour leader, Tony Blair, through his fusion of 'social advance and individual achievement'.[141] This was translated, through by far Labour's most sustained period in government, into an aspirational agenda of educational opportunity, supported by major re-investment in public services.

This was not an all-conquering centre. As Madelaine Lee has shown, policy convergence in these years co-existed with continuing right-left division.[142] The 2016 Brexit vote, and associated 'populist' advances, are a stark reminder of what have always been limits to the comprehensivity of British 'moderation'. Yet, countervailing evidence of contemporary centrist resilience, as so often in centrist history, tends to fall under the radar. The advances by the British National Party in the 2009 European election, and UKIP in the 2015 general election, are much better remembered than both parties' subsequent rapid decline. Boris Johnson's ability to propel a comprehensive Brexit through a Remainer House of Commons (and, polls often now suggest, country), remains to be proven. Amidst the strong Liberal Democrat revival in the 2019 European elections, discussion of a new centrist party, or coalition extends, unlike in 1981, widely across *both* Conservative and Labour parties.

Moreover, any national rightwards movement implied by Brexit, has not been replicated on the 'core' socio-economic policy debate, on which, judging by Theresa May's loss of her majority in 2017, support for austerity is waning.

If the above cautions against a declinist narrative of post-1970 centrist influence, the same holds true of its intellectual contribution. Firstly, to the extent that the post-1970 centre embraced a heightened emphasis on themes of social mobility and choice, it is too simplistic to label these monolithically right wing. Post-1970 centrists operated in an increasingly complex social environment, in which, after decades of state expansion, people's rising expectations were placing a new emphasis on individual aspiration. Centrists, being self-critical revisionists, sought to respond to this new context. But if the new politics articulated, in part, a heightened 'individualism', as recent research has demonstrated, 'this individualism had multiple political and cultural valences'.[143] The appetite it articulated, which was 'for greater personal autonomy and self-determination', had been growing long before the arrival of Thatcherism, in fact receiving much of its sustenance from the post-war welfare state. It was evident in such varied, and often progressive trends as working class social mobility, declining deference, and liberalising attitudes on race, gender and sexuality. It was often able to underpin more co-operative values, not just replace them.[144] Even the period's more obviously 'right-associated' manifestations of social mobility, like council house sales, or growth in self-employment, were often empowering, and, in that sense, egalitarian.

The above also constituted a further stage in the evolution of the centre's longstanding belief that political success rested on encouraging the active engagement of 'the people'. This sense that people mattered more than systems underpinned the centrist critique of the sterile 1980s' debate between statism and market, but also of a consensus period, some of whose methods did now feel too 'top-down'. Increasingly favouring an enabling over a directive state, centrists now advocated a greater role for the recipients of services, 'to improve the lot

of patients and pupils, not treat them as pawns in an out-of-date class war', as now Alliance Prime Minister Designate, Jenkins put it in 1983.[145] 'System changes', as his SDP co-founder Shirley Williams suggested, in her aptly titled *Politics Is For People* (1981), had neglected 'the people …, the human factor'.[146] Again contrary to declinist narratives, British politics had a much *more* sophisticated understanding by the end of the century of what centrists had always half-known, that 'deep' progress comes through cultures of popular inter-action, as much as economic levers. This realisation united the diverse searches after 1990 for a new emphasis on 'participation', evident in Major's Citizens' Charter, Blair's constitutional and educational reforms, and David Cameron's 'Big Society'.

Secondly, the more traditionally social democratic beliefs in collective support and greater equality were far from abandoned by the post-1970 centre. The aim of most centrists continued to be a mutually supportive synthesis between social justice and individual aspiration, but through updated means. 'We want the support of all those whose aim in life is to get on, not hold on to what they've got', Jenkins insisted in 1981, 'but who believe that in getting on, they are … benefiting the community as a whole'.[147] It was an ideological pairing shared by his Alliance partner, David Steel, leader of a Liberal Party now more willing in its engagement with positive liberty, as it would be under his Liberal Democrat successors, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy. 'The balance needs to be redressed', contended Ashdown in 1994, 'so that we place the same weight on enhancing our common wealth as we do on encouraging private profit'.[148] For all the growing market rhetoric of the later Blair, the dominant actual practice of his government reflected a similar progressive synthesis.

Harrison suggests that the British centre, having shifted leftwards before 1979, was then redefined rightwards. Drawing attention to Joseph's idea that Conservatives should reject the old consensus 'middle ground', and create their own new 'common ground', he argues that Thatcher shaped 'a newly located consensus', under which 'the overall thrust of [her] …

domestic policy was consolidated after 1990'.[149] An important part of the story, this under-plays the co-existing centre-left contribution to the overall ideological climate. As Hindmoor has recently shown, public expenditure in these years was more stable than sometimes portrayed, averaging forty per cent of GDP during 1950-79, and forty-one per cent, over the 1980-2015 period of supposed neo-liberal hegemony.[150] The undoubted reduction in state ownership has been accompanied by stronger state regulation, in areas as diverse as smoking, environmental pollution, standards in nursing homes, right-to-roam, and paid holidays.[151] Much is made of the difficulties of the centre-left in connecting with a changing post-1970 society, but too little of the problems of a Conservative Party, which has been unable to secure a really substantial electoral majority since 1987. Overall, as Ben Jackson has recently argued, 'labelling recent British political discourse as unvarnished "neo-liberalism" … simplifies a more complicated picture'.[152]

If decline is, therefore, a largely misleading characterisation of the post-1970 centre, and thus of the period's politics as a whole, the centre has yet to resolve its fundamental dilemmas, most notably the continuing incompleteness of its own middle ways. Centrism has continued to reflect a milder version of the right-left division of the wider political culture. Here, the marketization critique of contemporary ideology does have its insights. Jenkins's youthful, dynamic successor as SDP leader, David Owen, channelled the nation's new aspirational appetites, through his ideas of a 'social market'.[153] Yet, a rightwards drift was increasingly evident, in both his excessively combative and divisive leadership style, and his laudation of Thatcherism, glossing over, as Dean Blackburn has argued, 'how to pair up enthusiasm for the free market with concern for fellowship'.[154] The divide between Jenkins and Owen was a precursor of that bedevilling later New Labour, between Gordon Brown and Blair. If Brown manifested the traditional centre-left's continuing struggle to speak for aspirational 'middle England', the later Blair's increasingly one-sided praise of competition -

the aim was 'getting business ideas into public service practice' – seemed at odds with the pluralist even-handedness which had done much to secure his own earlier appeal.[155]

Moderate Conservatives, too, remained internally ideologically conflicted, as well as institutionally divided from their social democratic and liberal counterparts. Pursuing a modernised, centrist Conservatism on civil liberties, overseas aid, and, ultimately, his European referendum stance, Cameron's 'austerity' agenda reflected that this was not accompanied by an updated centre-right position on the funding of public services. Like Baldwin and Macmillan earlier, Cameron believed that 'human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state'.[156] The Liberal Democrats have also yet to overcome their longstanding oscillation between visions of negative and positive liberty, most recently expressed in the division between the party's *Orange Book* and 'social liberal' wings. Their deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg's belief that 'once … [the] building blocks are in place, the state must back off', reflected his party's continuing periodic conservatism over the benefits of the public realm.[157]

If the above reflected the nation's persistent 'dual' conservatism, of a centre-left still expressing too little an optimistic vision of social mobility, and a centre-right still too denigrating of the advantages of an enabling state, this highlights again the country's unresolved political dilemma as a fundamentally *shared,* national one, stretching across parties and classes. For far from being merely the creation of a self-serving elite, British centrism has frequently shown itself a useful barometer of the complexities of the attitudes of 'the people'. However, if populism operates by flattering the supposed popular 'mainstream', reassuring it that the faults lie never with them, but in an easily identifiable 'Other', the centre usually staked itself on the belief that ultimately people wanted not to be flattered, but challenged to improve. Rejecting the twin, left- and right-inspired histories, of a passive citizenry merely ground down

by an over-mighty market, or a stifling state, centrists have been willing to 'gamble', as the liberal social democrat David Marquand put it in 1988, on the people's 'capacity for growth'.[158]

Any newly revitalised centre would likely need, given the sheer excitement presently generated by its rivals, to reacquaint itself with what has always been its capacity for progressive boldness and imagination. If that necessitates a more self-confident advocacy of the importance of public services than has been evident in recent years, it also points to greater engagement with 'new' issues, which the centrism of the past thirty years has left relatively untouched: workplace cultures, gender equality, housing, and the importance of *time* for relationships and leisure. Both centre *and* people, then, are tasked again with proving that there is more about them than just 'muddling through'. As Crosland put it, shortly before his death in 1977, the British centre then, as now, under significant fire: 'the far Left are not the only people who can claim a socialist theory while the rest of us are thought to be mere pragmatists and administrators … The Centre must remember, and keep reminding people, that we are ideologists too'.[159]

Notes

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[17] P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 4-5 & 243.

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