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John Smith's settlement? The work of the 1992-1993

Labour party - trade unions links review group

Abstract

In this article, I examine the work of the 1992-1993 Labour party trade union links review group. I ask whether the measures it proposed amounted to a new, durable settlement which governed internal relationships within the party. I detail disagreements amongst trade unions over the format that parliamentary selections should take; I evaluate the demands for reform of the party-union link; I ask whether support for reform and for OMOV was falling in the early 1990s; I consider whether unions launched a 'no say no pay campaign' with regard to the Labour party; I assess how much restraint was demonstrated at this time by Labour's affiliated unions; and I consider what might have been at stake in these debates more generally. I conclude that there was considerable antagonism in party-union relations during the early 1990s and that the work of the review group did not amount to an enduring settlement.

Key words: Labour party, trade unions, modernisation, parliamentary selections, leadership elections

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Introduction

Scholars have given relatively little attention to the work of the 1992-1993 Labour party - trade union links review group (LPTULRG, 1992a and b)¹. The paucity of discussion is surprising given the extensive newspaper coverage given to Labour's 1993 party conference at which the review group's work was discussed. Following the recommendations of the final report, that conference voted for the introduction of a form of one member, one vote (OMOV) for the selection of parliamentary candidates, and for the reform of the electoral college by which the party's leader was elected so that trade unions took a reduced share and their members voted on an individual basis. Many press commentators concluded that these changes amounted to a fundamental reform of Labour's structure, one achieved in the face of considerable opposition from leading trade union figures: it was, in short, a major triumph for the modernisers within the party. Writing in *The Guardian*, Hugo Young described it as 'a famous victory', as 'the party makes its way into the modern age'. He continued, 'It marks the end of baronial domination of the Labour party' (Young, 1993, 22). For *the Independent*, it was a 'dramatic, close-run but decisive victory' (MacIntyre and Clement, 1993, 1). According to *The Scotsman*, it was a 'history victory to curb union power' (Macaskill and Copley, 1993) with 'far-reaching rule changes' (Smith, 1993). These views were reinforced a year later at the time of Labour leader John Smith's unexpected death. Subsequently, however, interest focused on Tony Blair's New Labour project.

Academic analyses of the review group have been somewhat at odds with such contemporary press opinion. These accounts tend to accept the difficult circumstances surrounding the working party's proceedings and the acrimony that surrounded its deliberations. But they doubt the importance of its conclusions. Alderman and Carter argued 'there were very few substantial constitutional changes'. Their immediate judgement was that the reforms passed at the 1993 Labour conference were 'largely

cosmetic' (Alderman and Carter, 1994, 332). Without addressing the substance of the changes, Paul Webb noted that 'a somewhat bitter debate' had come 'nowhere near constituting party-union divorce' (Webb, 1995, 1 and 2). In a measured analysis, Meg Russell concluded the review group's proposals to be 'relatively cautious', suggesting that 'the final package fell well short of what many had wanted' (Russell, 2005, 30 and 56). Thomas Quinn suggested that the group was 'dominated by traditionalists from the big unions' (Quinn, 2005, 68) though he goes on to suggest that the introduction of reforms did have some impact on the party's structure. In the Nuffield election study, however, David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh draw a stronger conclusion about the new measures: 'These steps effectively broke the power of the unions within the party' (1997, 49).

Recently, Lewis Minkin's volume, *The Blair Supremacy*, provides a detailed narrative of the review group's work (Minkin, 2014, 82-144). This contribution is especially valuable, not only because it is the most comprehensive scholarly account of the review group's work, but also due to the fact that he was a member of the working party. Appointed to the review group at the start of its discussions, Minkin played a central part in shaping its deliberations through the production of a number of papers that fed directly into its final report. Like other scholars, Minkin disputes the outcome of the 1993 conference as representing a triumph for Labour's modernisers. Unlike their accounts, he suggests that the debate was not especially rancorous or harsh. More fundamentally, he concludes that the new arrangement did amount to a revised settlement of the party's structure (Minkin, 2014, 108).

In this article, I look at work of the review group and its contribution to Labour-union relations. My central aims are to evaluate the debate within and around the working party and to assess how substantive was the solution reached at the 1993 conference. I ask what was at stake in the debate: did discussion over OMOV mask a more fundamental dispute within the party? I assess whether the review group led to a new *settlement*, in some form or other, of the party-union relationship? I define a settlement as a stable and durable set of arrangements which most significant Labour actors accepted as being legitimate and enduring. Finally, I consider what this episode tells us about John Smith's leadership of the

party. In discussing these issues, I draw on the existing academic literature, but I make particular use of Minkin's account as a framework for my analysis. As a participant and as scholar with a reputation for meticulous analysis, Minkin's analysis provides a starting point for my evaluation of the review group and Labour union relations more generally. I draw on a plethora of other sources including the archival papers of the review group and of Labour's National Executive Committee as well as material in *Tribune* and trade union publications. All of these have been largely neglected in the existing work (even to an extent in Minkin's characteristically forensic analysis). *Tribune* is especially useful as a counterweight to press coverage: it was a leftwing newspaper that was unaligned in the debate and took a variety of positions on issues as they came up. So *Tribune* is not open to the same sort of charge of media interference that might be made against other journalistic sources. Accordingly it throws interesting light on the state of Labour politics.

I start with a narrative account of the review group's work before providing a summary of Minkin's key analytical points. (Minkin's narrative is packed with subtlety: I do my best to do justice to the complexity of his account.) The following sections take a more analytical perspective discussing in turn a number of issues raised about the working party's deliberations. I address the disagreements amongst trade unionists on the review group and the substance of their discussion about parliamentary selections; the nature of demands for the reform of the party-union link; whether support for OMOV declined within the party during the early 1990s; whether there was a 'no say no pay' campaign by the trade unions; and how much restraint was exercised by the trade unions during the debate. I go on to assess what was at stake in the debate. Finally, I conclude briefly by assessing the nature of the settlement agreed in 1993 and what light this episode throws on John Smith's leadership of the party.

The work of the review group

Throughout the party's history, Labour's relations with its affiliated unions have, of course, often been difficult with numerous points of tension and disagreement. In the 1960s and 1970s, then into the 1980s, frictions mounted over such matters as aspects of economic strategy (for example incomes policy or public spending), as well as broader strategic concerns and organisational issues (see Daniels and McIlroy, 2010; and Minkin, 1991). In April 1992, Labour's fourth general election defeat in a row heightened tensions further as the party sought to understand its poor electoral performance. So-called "modernisers" within the party drew a straightforward conclusion, blaming Labour's intimate association with the unions for the reversal at the polls (Gould, 2011). Whether matters were quite so straightforward is less clear. Dianne Hayter – writing in part to rebut Phillip Gould's account - suggested that trade unions had played an important part in steadying Labour during the 1980s and advancing some of the reforms that modernisers proposed. Minkin too emphasised the role played by unions as ballast within the party, helping to stabilise it.

It was in this context that, In April 1992, in a *Tribune* article, Tom Sawyer, deputy general secretary of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and a member of Labour's NEC, mapped out an agenda for discussing the party's link with its affiliated unions (Sawyer, 1992a). He wrote to Larry Whitty, Labour's General Secretary, asking that the issue might be discussed so that the relationship was dealt with in a 'considered and constructive way' (Sawyer, 1992b). The suggestion came, of course, in the aftermath of an unexpected general election defeat which had focused debate in part about the structure of the party and the role of the trade unions. Writing a little later in *Fabian Review*, Sawyer defended the link but called for a 'new settlement' (Sawyer, 1992c, 4). In May, the NEC charged Whitty with coming up with a concrete proposal (NEC minutes, 27 May 1992, 6-7). He followed this up with a brief paper for the June meeting, proposing 'an authoritative Review Group to look at all aspects of the relationship', (Whitty, 1992). The NEC decided to go ahead (NEC minutes, 24 June 1992, 6). Whitty proposed that the committee's membership was made up largely of trade unionists and parliamentarians. They were joined by Larry Whitty as secretary and Joyce Gould, a party official, as well as Lewis Minkin. Two nominated members, Bill Morris and John Edmonds, general secretaries of the Transport and General

Workers' Union (TGWU) and the GMB respectively, immediately stood down and asked that Margaret Prosser and Tom Burlison took their places (NEC minutes. 22 July 1992).

There were, manifestly, significant issues to be discussed. The system of parliamentary selection in operation – locally based electoral colleges made up of individual members alongside affiliated trade unions - was operationally difficult to manage: in 1991, without finding an alternative, the party conference had voted to abolish it. There was dissatisfaction about the operation of the electoral college to choose the party leader in which union votes were cast as monolithic blocks for one candidate (Cook, 1992). In some unions, there was little consultation of members as to whom the block should be allocated. Interventions by union leaders in the party's 1992 leadership election where some had rushed to back John Smith's candidacy reinforced such concerns (Wickham-Jones, 2014, 37). For some modernisers within the party, there was a more controversial claim that the unions (and Labour's link with them) were an impediment, by definition, to electoral victory (see the on-going account in Gould, 2011, for example, 119 and 172). In any case, Whitty mapped out a wide remit for the new group.

Rather at odds with the task allocated to the review group, on the issue of parliamentary selection, outgoing party leader Neil Kinnock gave Labour a firm steer towards the introduction of one member one vote (Kinnock, 1992). The same NEC meeting in May that discussed Sawyer's letter endorsed a proposal from him for OMOV for candidate selection (Foss, 1992, 3). Kinnock's memorandum was blunt and clear. The party had agreed to reform parliamentary selections but widening the franchise to include trade union levy payers alongside individual members in some form would, he argued, be unnecessarily expensive and procedurally difficult. Some constituencies might be swamped by affiliated participants (possibly over 10,000). Legal challenges would be likely. Some unionists who did not support the party would be able to take part. Accordingly, it was better that unions should retain a role in some other way. Kinnock wanted Labour to move immediately to a straightforward OMOV of party members. The former Labour leader had long campaigned for the shift (Westlake, 2001, 273-5). Space precludes a full discussion here but an undated

office memo mapped out much the same terrain as his 1992 paper. Alongside the issue of cost, it criticised the involvement of levy payers on the grounds that they would swamp individual party members and might be supporters of other parties. It would be very expensive: 'Every trade union would have to guarantee the reliability of their systems – this has not been the case in their own elections' (Note on the levy payers participating in OMOV in reselections', no date).

In June, the NEC handed parliamentary selections back to the working party (NEC minutes, 24 June 1992, 6; Westlake, 2001, 612). The party conference in September then voted for the NEC report which indicated its support for OMOV while allowing the review group to proceed (NEC report, 1992, 40). At the same time, however, the conference also voted against NEC advice and passed a motion that supported continued trade union participation at all stages of parliamentary selection (NEC minutes 27 September 1992, 8). At this stage, *Tribune* reported that the review group was working – against the Kinnock memorandum – towards a version of OMOV where union levy payers were enfranchised (*Tribune* reporter, 1992, 3). In November 1992, an internal memorandum, RG49, mapped out a draft report for the committee. It proposed combining individual votes with collective representation through the establishment of a register of party supporters of the party that would be drawn up from the affiliated organisations (RG49, no date, 6). The draft recommended that for parliamentary selections an electoral college would include these registered supporters (RG49, no date, 13).

Following the party conference, however, a shift took place in the review group. Bryan Gould was defeated in elections to the NEC and his place on the review group was taken by Tony Blair. In a sense the choice of Blair was straightforward. The replacement needed to come from the PLP. Robin Cook and John Prescott were already members of the working party. New to the NEC, having stood down for a few months when Smith was elected to replace him, Neil Kinnock might have been an unusual choice as an ex-leader with a clear position on many of the issues. Tony Benn was now rather isolated on the left of the party (Dennis Skinner had lost his seat). That left a choice from Gordon Brown (newly elected with

Blair and focused on economic issues), David Blunkett (who was associated with Bryan Gould, having managed his election campaign for the leadership) and Blair. Of course, it may be that John Smith also wanted a modernising voice to counter the arguments deployed by trade unionists. Clearly identified as a leading reformer within the party, Tony Blair took a tougher line on the introduction of new measures such as OMOV (Rentoul, 1995, 320-322). At the October meeting of the review group, a lengthy discussion ensued over parliamentary selections at which it was agreed that OMOV would be discussed in the report although the supporters' register would remain as the trade unions' preferred option (minutes, 30 October 1992, 1-2). At the same time, a number of options would be mapped out for leadership elections. The following month, the working party came to discuss the possibility, developed by Tom Burlison of the GMB, that trade union levy payers should participate in future selections as registered supporters. Along with Nigel Harris of the AEEU, Blair was extremely critical of the proposal, suggesting it would create two classes of members and was, in any case, unworkable (Anderson, 1992, 6). Writing in *The Guardian*, Patrick Wintour suggested that Burlison's scheme for levy payers lacked support from his own union's northern region (which wanted them to become full members) (Wintour, 1992a, 2). A GMB source complained to *Tribune* about the article: 'What's happening here is that the OMOV people are trying to bounce Smith' (Osler, 1992a, 3). A couple of weeks later, a *Tribune* leader noted that the issue risked 'a spectacular bout of internal feuding' (*Tribune*, 1992a, 2). By January, it was clear that the committee, effectively log-jammed, could not reach an immediate agreement. Some members of the group questioned whether any form of report might be produced ('Resume of progress', no date, 1). *Tribune* reported that it was 'deadlocked' between the registered supporters scheme and OMOV (Osler, 1993a, 10). Subsequently, the paper indicated that the group would simply map out different options for candidate selection as well as leadership elections so a final decision could be taken later. (Osler, 1993b, 3.) In February, Labour's NEC agreed to issue an interim report in this format along with a questionnaire to elicit party opinion.

At this stage, John Smith mapped out his preferences: he wanted a redefined electoral college made up in equal shares of the PLP and individual party members to elect the leader, a reduced union vote at conference with ballots cast individually, and OMOV for

parliamentary selection though in the future registered supporters might be involved (NEC minutes, 24 February 1993, 8; Stuart, 2005, 326-7). He expressed 'his wish to ditch any union role in internal elections' (Osler, 1993c, 3). Further support for OMOV came from a variety of sources within the party including Kinnock, former deputy leader Roy Hattersley, the Fabians and the Labour Coordinating Committee. Describing the interim report as 'long and turgid', John Spellar, one Labour MP and a strong supporter of OMOV, argued that registered supporters scheme was 'politically undesirable and administratively impractical' (Spellar, 1993, 6; Hayter, 2005, 41).

Many senior trade union leaders, however, appeared to be implacably hostile towards OMOV. In the past, John Edmonds of the GMB had been critical of the block vote and supportive of OMOV: *The Guardian* quoted him as describing the existing format of the electoral college as 'a nonsense' (Wintour and Milne, 1992, 2). In the late 1980s, he had mapped out a modernising agenda, directly criticising the block vote. He told the 1989 party conference 'We [trade unions] must surrender control. The trade unions should step aside. Many new members must be recruited and these individual party members must be given a new responsibility, because whenever possible we should make our decisions by one member, one vote. The changes must be radical' (LPACR, 1989, 139). In the summer of 1992, Patrick Wintour reported that Smith had been assured that Edmonds was committed to reform of the union link (Wintour, 1992b, 21). But by then Edmonds appears, in my view, to have reoriented his views and backpedalled. Of course, Wintour's claim may have reflected wishful thinking or deliberate spinning in the Smith office. Edmonds' arms may have been tied by the position taken internally by the GMB (Timmins, 1992, 9). At any rate, Edmonds now opposed taking trade unionists out of Labour's internal elections. He argued, 'By all means one person, one vote, but let's make sure that that voting procedure includes everybody who is in the party, including those trade unionists', continuing, 'It would be totally undemocratic to deprive them all of their say' (BBC, 1993a, 2 and 3).

Smith indicated that he was prepared to compromise on the electoral college and, to a lesser extent, on parliamentary selection. On 19 May, he issued a press statement

supporting the notion that levy payers could join the party at a reduced rate and so participate in selection (Labour party press release, 19 May 1993, NEC papers). At the May NEC, he called for levy payers to be given cut price membership: he was subsequently criticised for pushing the proposal through without wider consultation (Osler, 1993e, 3). He accepted that unionists could retain a role in the electoral college to elect the party's leader. John Prescott, an MP and frontbencher closely associated with the affiliates, argued in *Tribune* for this kind of levy plus arrangement: affiliated members could pay a small supplement to take a full part in parliamentary selections (Prescott, 1993, 2). Tom Sawyer described the idea as helpful (Sawyer, 1993, 1). But he repeated support for the establishment of a register of union based supporters. Some senior trade union leaders rejected Smith's compromise, claiming that it was contradictory: why should trade unionists have a role in electing the leader but not selecting parliamentary candidates? *Tribune* quoted Bill Morris: 'I don't see how you can compromise on democracy', though he continued 'there is always room for dialogue (Osler, 1993f, 5) He insisted the unions 'exercise collection participation' in the party, a move interpreted as supporting the status quo (quoted by Milne, 1993a, 6). Edmonds seemed equally uninterested in compromise: 'If you are going to give individual trade union members who are affiliated members of the party a say in the leadership, then surely they should have a say in the selection of local candidates who stand on their behalf' (BBC, 1993a, 3-4). In *The Guardian*, he argued that OMOV disenfranchised affiliates: 'if trade unionists can vote in a national electoral college to elect their leader, why should they not be allowed to vote in a local electoral college to select their parliamentary candidate?' (Edmonds, 1993a, 18).

Through the summer of 1993, trade union conferences rejected OMOV, including some normally regarded as Labour loyalists. In April, USDAW snubbed general secretary Garfield Davies's advice and voted narrowly against OMOV (*USDAW Today*, 1993, 10; *Tribune*, 1993a, 1). UCW and MSF followed the shop workers' union (*Branch Officials' Bulletin UCW*, 1993 para 501; Osler, 1993g, 3). In turn, GMB, NUPE and NCU rejected OMOV: *Tribune* described the proposal as 'dead in the water', a phrase attributed to Bill Morris by *Sunday Times* journalists (Osler, 1993h, 3; Grice and Prescott, 1993; see also Harper, 1993a, 4). Unsurprisingly, the TGWU voted against it in July. By contrast support for OMOV came in an

open letter to each Constituency Labour Party (CLP) from leading parliamentarians and members of the NEC Tony Blair, David Blunkett, Gordon Brown, Robin Cook and Neil Kinnock (Milne and White, 1993, 1).

In July, Smith secured support for his compromise package from the review group in its final report (Osler, 1993i, 3). On 19 July, the NEC voted by 20 to 7 to back Smith. A number of trade union members supported Smith, some of them against their union mandate (NEC minutes, 19 July 1993, 4). Despite such support for this compromise and notwithstanding an accommodating speech (in policy terms) at the Trades Union Congress in September, it appeared likely – given union opposition - that Smith would suffer a humiliating defeat when the issue was voted upon at the party conference. There was some shift toward Smith: Garfield Davies indicated that USDAW would ignore its conference decision and back OMOV (Osler, 1993j, 1). NUPE decided to back a vaguely worded motion which effectively meant support for Smith (Harper and White, 1993, 1). But other unions remained opposed.

In the event, the Labour conference voted for OMOV by the tightest of margins (Hagerty, 1993, 1). It also backed reform to the leadership electoral college. The pattern of voting was complex. The TGWU and the GMB had sustained their opposition. But in the event, as well as the AEEU, NUPE and USDAW, a number of other unions had come round to back Smith including COHSE, UCW and RMT (Wintour and Harper, 1993a, 1).

Lewis Minkin and the review group

In his account of Labour politics during the 1990s, Lewis Minkin repeatedly emphasises the importance of the norms, unwritten rules, and protocols that he suggests have guided the behaviour of key actors across the party and its affiliated unions (see also Minkin, 1991, 26; Wickham-Jones, 2015). In particular, Minkin makes much of an overriding norm of ‘restraint’ which shaped trade union attitudes in the review group’s discussions, just as it has done more generally over previous decades. He argues that it is effectively the defining

characteristic guiding trade union behaviour: it is 'the most significant feature' of the informal rules that shape conduct within the labour movement (Minkin, 2014, 13). Such restraint on the part of unions ensured loyalty towards and solidarity with the Parliamentary Labour Party: Trade union leaders would be sensitive about how they might approach issues. At other times, however, Minkin's approach appears to put less emphasis on norms and more upon a rationally-oriented cost-benefit analysis: 'It [the link] has survived because of a common heritage and shared values, but it has survived mainly because its usefulness far outweighed its costs and disappointments' (Minkin, 1992a; Minkin, 1992c, Minkin, 1992e).

Within this framework, Minkin highlights a number of specific aspects of the review group's work. He argues that, for the most part, trade union participants approached the work of the review group in an open-minded manner (Minkin, 2014, 86). Indeed, he suggests that trade unionists accepted the need for a reform of the party-union link: they wanted some sort of dialogue about how to go about it. They acknowledged that there were issues with the operation of the block vote, the process by which union votes were cast as a single entity at the party conference, and they quickly accepted that the unions should no longer have a majority of votes at it, agreeing to a reduction in their share from 90 to 70 per cent with a planned further cut to 50 per cent. It is a mistake in this regard, Minkin suggests, to view the debate as one between obstructive trade unionists and forward minded modernisers. Whatever they might have said publicly, there were 'repetitive signals' from the modernisers that the link should be broken in some fundamental manner: 'the separatist aim had been privately clarified' (Minkin, 2014, 83). Modernisers did not consider the wider issues involved: they addressed neither the benefits that Labour derived from its relationship with the trade unions nor the difficulties that ending that link would create.

Despite this broad consensus, Minkin emphasises just how divided the trade unions were amongst themselves over the exact form that reforms might take. Different unions took varied positions across the issues under consideration (Minkin, 2014, 90-91). In terms of parliamentary selection, effectively the crux of the review group's work, the GMB had

originally backed OMOV but then shifted over towards some form of a registered supporters' scheme. NUPE also favoured the development of registered supporters albeit in a different format. Other trade unionists were critical of such an arrangement. Bill Morris felt affiliated members should be included simply by virtue of paying the levy. Minkin concludes, 'The opposition to OMOV in the unions never came up with a united alternative platform' (Minkin, 2014, 96). When they (representatives from GMB, TGWU, NUPE, MSF, UCW and RMT) met in May 1993, they were unable to reach agreement over parliamentary selection (Osler, 1993d, 3; Milne, Wintour and Knewstub, 1993, 6). The AEEU (Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union) meanwhile backed OMOV enthusiastically.

Consistent with the norms he has outlined, Minkin is at pains to suggest that, contrary to press reports, there was no financial pressure put on the party during the work of the review group. He claims that the notion of a 'no say, no pay' campaign by which the unions demanded influence in exchange for their continued monetary contributions was without foundation. There was, he accepts, a single 'clumsy' briefing in June 1992 on the subject by Sawyer (Minkin, 2014, 95). But union figures acted with characteristic self-control in making no demands and offering no warnings on the issue. The reduction by unions of the number of affiliated members (accompanied by a reduced aggregate affiliation payment) simply reflected a general decline in union membership (Minkin, 2014, 108).

Attitudes within Labour were shifting. Minkin suggests that by 1993 there was less support for OMOV amongst the CLPs than in the past (Minkin, 2014, 93). In a 1990 consultation it had been 87 per cent. By 1993, party soundings generated backing from only 35 per cent (with 15 per cent opting for the levy plus variant). The implication of this point is that there was less grassroots pressure for a dramatic overhaul of the party's structure.

The situation surrounding the 1992-93 debate over Labour's trade union links was made more difficult throughout by deteriorating personal relations between John Smith and John Edmonds (Stuart, 2005, 332). Smith found Edmonds' behaviour very difficult and unhelpful.

Concluding that the modernisers were pushing the reform agenda far too far, Edmonds refused to compromise on constitutional issues. Despite such difficulties, Minkin suggests, the unions continued to exercise self-control. They did not push on issues as their position might have allowed them to do and as their views might have suggested they would. When, at the GMB Congress in 1993, Edmonds directly criticised the leadership of the PLP, many were astonished at how tough he was and at how far the norm of restraint had been eroded. Writing in *The Guardian*, Edmonds warned that ‘Even GMB loyalty has its limits’ (Edmonds, 1993a, 18). For Minkin, the issue had ‘stretched this restraint to its limits’ (Minkin, 2014, 94). Defending union interests had effectively become paramount in a struggle against modernisers. (Smith’s direct involvement, according to Minkin, helped some trade unionists to reassess their position, partly out of loyalty to the Labour leader, despite their mandated position - 2014, 98).

Despite Smith’s compromise and his interventions, defeat still looked certain for the Labour leader given the number of unions mandated to oppose the reforms that he had backed (Minkin, 2014, 98-102). In the event, however, the drafting of the relevant NEC rule change was carefully structured to include OMOV alongside a commitment to all women shortlists (AWS) (see also Kettle, 1993, 21). Such wording put some unions in a dilemma given that they backed AWS but opposed OMOV. An ambiguous motion from the RMT and NUPE referred to levy plus and union participation in an unclear manner. Party officials and supportive MPs went out, apparently for the first time in such circumstances, to intervene in the argument, lobbying for support for the leader’s position (see also Clement and Wynn Davies, 1993). Anthony Bevens and Andy McSmith predated this initiative back to the summer, targeting ‘the unmandated, the weak and the vulnerable’ among the constituency delegates (Bevens and McSmith, 1993, 6). John Prescott gave an emotional speech demanding support for Smith but some unions had already been won over (the risk of Smith resigning as leader if defeated – at the very least the likelihood of a major constitutional impasse in the party – played a part in such deliberations). One of the largest affiliates, Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF), decided to abstain. Having gone to the brink of an extremely damaging crisis, the rule change proposing OMOV was passed by a narrow majority of 47.509 per cent to 44.388.

The thrust of Minkin's account challenges the notion that the work of the review group and the votes at the 1993 Labour conference were an unambiguous victory for the modernisers within the party; 'It was in effect a huge rebuff' (Minkin, 2014, 108). Modernisers had hoped, he claims, to end the party's link with the unions but in the event the working party had reaffirmed its importance to Labour politics. The 1993 conference had rejected a motion supporting pure OMOV and backed one from the TGWU calling for an electoral college for parliamentary selections. The vote on the rule change simply took precedence over the TGWU backed motion. Trade unionists had agreed that the affiliated organisations' share of conference votes would come down to 50 per cent – the unions would no longer have a majority (Minkin, 2014, 103). The block vote was to be recast to the extent that each delegate would receive a voting card for the conference. In terms of hand votes, this form of representation was very favourable to CLP delegates who were numerically dominant.

Towards the end of 1992, Tony Manwaring, a party official working with the review group, explicitly attempted to draft 'protocol' for a 'new settlement between the party and affiliated unions' (Manwaring, 1992). In effect, Minkin suggests that the review group succeeded in mapping out such an arrangement. It was 'an impressive collective achievement': Labour had reworked its organisational structures and agreed a new settlement with the trade unions (Minkin, 2014, 106).

There is much to be commended in Minkin's analysis of the work of the review group, not least, of course, the depth of his empirical material. Indeed, the account in *The Blair Supremacy*, if anything, understates his role. His input to the discussion was of considerable importance, offering a number of papers directly to the review group which, while detailing areas where it might be reformed, outlined the benefits to Labour of a close institutional link to the trade unions. In normative terms, making a strong case in favour of the relationship, Minkin effectively took on an unstated role as the main theorist of the review group (Minkin, 1992b). He placed a particular emphasis the unions' role as ballast, stating,

for example, that 'the activity of groups used to thinking in terms of unity gives important ballast in times of stress and crisis' (Minkin, 1992c, 2; Minkin, no date, 2). Both the interim and final reports of the review group went on to make much the same point, noting the importance of the trade union contribution to the party in terms of 'realism and stability' without which 'the Labour party would doubtless have torn itself apart on a number of different occasions' (LPTULRG, 1992a, 7 and 1992b, 3). Minkin told one meeting, 'We have to attempt to secure a new settlement' (Minkin, 1992a, 4). In effect he mapped out the 'new settlement', based on formal and 'new unwritten rules', that came to form the basis for the group's proposals (Minkin, 1992b, 8).

As well as offering a clear commitment to reform and a defence of the relationship, Minkin went on to outline his argument in a number of trade union publications as well as occasional interviews and even less frequently meetings (see, for example, Minkin, 1992a, 1992c). He emphasised the representative role of the unions through the base they afforded the party in the working class and in the work place. The link also offered financial resources to the party, and a means to communicate with the electorate. In the next section I begin my analysis of the review group's work by assessing the arguments within it regarding parliamentary selections.

The depth of disagreement on the review group: problems with a supporters' register

Concluding a registered supporters' scheme to be too expensive, the TGWU wanted to maintain trade union branch participation along the lines of the existing electoral college (Whitty, 1993; Prosser, 1992). By contrast, the GMB and NUPE proposed – differing – arrangements to allow registered affiliates to take part. *Tribune* noted the group's 'paralysis' (Osler, 1993b, 3). More importantly, as the review group edged towards such a scheme, the proposal attracted a barrage of criticisms (see, for example, RG42, no date; 'Resume of Progress', no date; 'Memorandum on Selection and Reselection', no date; and RG33, no date). Questions included: how would supporters be identified? Which constituency would they be allocated to? How would the scheme be kept up to date? How long would it take to

get it up and running? Who would be responsible for it and for its practical operationalisation? How much would it cost? How would it prevent double voting (individual party members getting another vote as an affiliate)? What would the consequences be if a union opted out of the arrangement? Would such an arrangement undermine the incentive to join as a full member? Would it lead to two classes of members? Should registered supporters get a weighted vote (a fraction of that of a full member)? Would such a scheme be in breach of data protection laws? Would registered members be subject to the same rule of a 12 month period as were individual members? Would members of other parties get a vote? On the latter point, the Tribune group of MPs concluded, 'We take the view that only Labour Party members should be allowed to participate' (Tribune Group of MPs, 1993). A register might open the system up to external manipulation and to legal challenges. One memorandum commented that a universal system would be 'unnecessarily bureaucratic' and 'involve considerable expense' ('Union participation in selection', no date, 2). Another concluded that in some situations, 'the propensity for abuse in such circumstances is legion and well-documented' ('Parliamentary Selections and Party-Union Links', no date). The Tribune group suggested that 'It would also allow undue influence to be exerted by outside groups with a separate political agenda to ours' (Tribune group of MPs, 1993). One paper noted a likely male bias in a registered supporters' scheme: 'The selectorate is less likely to support women candidates, unless they have the support of the relevant trade union' (RG42, no date, 6).

Discussing Tom Burlison's registered supporters' scheme in a submission to the review group, Mark Walker, at the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport workers), insisted that it was 'actually immensely complicated' (Walker, 1992, 1). He indicated that other parties would participate; it would be open to manipulation; and levy payers could swamp party members (in response to which levy payers might be given a fraction of a vote but, in turn, that would undermine the basis of OMOV). If they selected which constituencies to get involved in, unions would look to be driven by particular interests and to have ignored their members elsewhere. He argued that, 'This system will not be seen as fair because it will not achieve the objective of "One (Labour Party) Member, One Vote" ' (Walker, 1992, 2). Ordinary members would want something to distinguish themselves from

levy payers but this would make levy payers second class citizens effectively. Some unions were concerned about contacting levy payers at all fearing that it would lead to an increase in contracting out: drawing attention to their contribution might increase opt outs. John Williams of the TGWU put it bluntly: 'Writing to all our political levy payers... could be the kiss of death for the political levy' (Williams, 1992; see also Christopher, 1992).

Minkin notes the lack of consensus amongst trade unionists. Though there was some support for continuing with the electoral college for parliamentary selections as a stop gap measure (LPTULRG, 1992b, 15), there was no agreement as to what might replace it in the longer term. What is clear from the archival papers and memoranda is just how critical was the response generated by the proposed registered supporters' scheme. Interestingly, far more criticisms were made of the register than of OMOV. To be sure, participants in wider discussions disliked OMOV for watering down union involvement in the party's affairs. But those responsible for developing practical proposals raised a plethora of unfavourable points about the main alternative possibility. Minkin argues that, the failure to reach agreement notwithstanding, there was an understanding that reform was necessary: the debate, however, indicates a profound hostility in principled and practical terms towards the register. OMOV received far less critical attention.

The demands for reform

The pressure for reform of Labour's link with its affiliates was directly related to trade union behaviour. In this respect, Minkin's analysis may underestimate the pressure for reform within the wider labour movement. Numerous press reports identified issues over the conduct of trade union leaders during the 1992 Labour leadership contest (Alderman and Carter, 1994, 322-323; Wickham-Jones, 2014, 37-38; Minkin touches briefly on this issue, see 2014, 82). The actions of trade union leaders in pre-emptively endorsing Smith's candidacy shaped the wider debate. The leftwing MP, Clare Short complained about 'trade union leaders slipping back into bad habits' as Edmonds offered support to John Smith 'before he even had time to telephone members of his union's executive' (Short, 1992, 3). A

commentator in *Fabian Review* noted, 'The appearance of union leaders on television within days of the result was blatant in its assertion of power' (Dewdney, 1992, 4).

The pages of *Tribune* in the months after the April 1992 general election suggest widespread support for institutional reform throughout Labour. A leader stated bluntly: 'Labour needs radically to democratise its own structures. One member one vote for all major decisions and elections is essential and urgent' (*Tribune*, 1992b 2). While he went on to defend the link, Ben Webb opened an article by saying 'finding anyone who will defend the current arrangement between the trade unions and the Labour party... is a little like searching for principled advocates of the established church' (Webb, 1992, 4). But Barry Sherman, a former trade union official, suggested that, from the point of view of organised labour, the formal link should be ended (Sherman, 1992). Chris Mullin, a former editor of the newspaper, stated uncompromisingly that the case for OMOV was 'unanswerable' given the 'sheer corruption' in the 'disposition of the trade union in a safe seat' (Mullin, 1992, 4).

Commentators had long identified the trade union block vote as a problematic feature of Labour's structure. By the early 1990s, it was not just broadsheet newspapers and those firmly located within the modernisers' wing of the party who were critical. Over 70 per cent of respondents in the University of Sheffield survey of party members thought that it brought 'the party into disrepute' (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 240). A *Tribune* leader complained that insufficient progress had been made in getting rid of it: 'its sheer weight which has meant for years now that a handful of union leaders have had the ability to determine party policy regardless of what anyone else thinks' (*Tribune*, 1992c, 2). It concluded bluntly, 'It is the block vote itself which is the problem: it is an essentially undemocratic institution'. Mullin was equally critical, describing it as the 'greatest obstacle to Labour's credibility as a modern democratic party' (Mullin, 1992, 4). Even supporters such as the journalist, Geoffrey Goodman were unfavourable. In a critique of OMOV, he accepted 'It [block vote] has frequently been used as the instrument of power by the small and powerful elite which controls the most influential unions' (Goodman, 1993, 5). One MORI

poll indicated that only 7 per cent of Labour inclined trade unionists wanted to retain it (Kellner, 1993).

Minkin's position on the issue was ambiguous. In a paper published by the UCW, Minkin defended the block vote, arguing, 'It is prevalent in federal systems. The World Bank uses it as do shareholders at company meeting meetings – this is rarely criticised' (Minkin, 1992c). John Prescott backed the block vote on similar grounds, claiming it could be democratic: 'after all, it is the mechanism by which votes are often cast at annual shareholders' meetings and in pension trusts' (Prescott, 1993 2). Elsewhere, though, Minkin defended Labour's link with the unions rather than the block vote in its practical operation: 'an argument against this [block vote] is not an argument against union ties per se' (Minkin, 1992d, 1). He argued that, for internal elections, 'The time has come to review these arrangements' (Minkin, 1992f, 1). Delegate democracy, however, should continue at conference. He acknowledged the survey evidence noted above, continuing that 'the form of trade union voting at party conference with ever larger unions voting still as blocks, with no registration of minorities, looks more and more inexplicable, more and more unacceptable' (Minkin, 1992a, 5; Minkin, 1992b, 6). Moreover union mergers made the block vote increasingly problematic: 'the possibility of a fairly permanent new settlement could be undermined when the next big amalgamation takes place' (Minkin, 1992g, 8). Minkin focused on a proposal that the trade union share of votes at conference should come down to 50 per cent.

In effect, Minkin's defence of the link did not extend to the block vote (Minkin, 1992d, 13). Of course, any parallels with the framework of either the World Bank or of company structures offered in support of such arrangement were weak as block votes in these cases were indicative of ownership and direct control. In effect, they were evidence of exactly the kind of relationship that Labour wanted to move away from.

Support for OMOV within the Labour party during the early 1990s

A 1990 party survey indicated that 87 per cent of CLPs favoured OMOV (NEC, 1990, 4). Three years later, a subsequent consultation reported that the figure had fallen to 35 per cent, evidence, Minkin claims, of falling support for reforms (LPTULRG, 1992b, 15). In similar vein, *Tribune* reported a BBC poll in which over half the responding constituency parties wanted unions to remain directly involved in candidate selection (*Tribune*, 1993b,3). 93 out of 180 CLPs supported union participation, with 82 favouring OMOV. Critics pointed out such a survey was, effectively, of constituency secretaries and not of party members. *Tribune* detailed another poll organised by the frontbench MP Robin Cook which indicated 74 per cent of trade unionists supported OMOV with only 6 per cent against (Osler, 1993k, 3; Wintour and Harper, 1993b, 4).

In fact, directly comparing the two Labour surveys, as Minkin attempts to do, is extremely difficult. In neither study is the raw data straightforward. The 1993 questionnaire (in the review group's final report) mapped out options for future parliamentary selections. In offering five, it was more complex than that of 1990. On the basis of its results, OMOV got nearly twice as much support as any other proposal. Levy plus, a form of OMOV, got another 15 per cent. By contrast, the 1990 survey had asked two broad questions alongside each other: whether the party should retain the electoral college and whether it should move to OMOV. So, in theory, a respondent could, confusingly, vote yes to both. The calculation of percentage responses published in this survey is not clear from the raw data. The NEC gives, as Minkin notes, a figure of 87 per cent of CLPs favouring OMOV. In fact the number of CLPs favouring OMOV (218) out of total number responding (348 – but this includes some branches) is much lower at 63 per cent because nearly a third did not state a view. The proportion of those stating a view is higher than the published figure, at around 90 per cent. Moreover, these figures are then complicated by additional returns for both surveys published alongside the CLP results from smaller organisational units in the form of branches. Weighting these to try and reach the exact response would be an arbitrary business in terms of the precise differences in size between the two units and, in reality, each form probably represents the views of relatively few Labour activists. On top of this, a

number of respondents in 1993 filled out a further sixth option with specific, uncoded answers. Factoring them into the five options as best one can, we get a total of 643 responses in 1993. Of these, 47 per cent are for OMOV, 20 per cent for the electoral college and 19 per cent for levy plus. Doing the same process for the 1990 survey, we get 88 per cent of units expressing a view supporting OMOV and 19 per cent endorsing the electoral college (the two question arrangement meaning they do not sum to 100 per cent).

Interestingly, the comprehensive Sheffield survey from 1990 did not ask a direct question of OMOV, enquiring rather whether members felt that CLPs should have exclusive control of parliamentary selection. Over 60 per cent said yes (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 239). In a poll of 4,000 people organised by Mori for the AEEU, 30 per cent of trade unionists said that OMOV would make them more likely to vote Labour (Bates, 1993a, 2). The same poll indicated that 26 per cent of Labour supporting affiliated members wanted unions to have a say in selecting parliamentary candidates. Regarding precise options, 47 per cent wanted OMOV for party members and 34 per cent OMOV including levy plus arrangement. Only 9 per cent wanted the existing arrangement (Kellner, 1993).

While support for OMOV in the early 1990s appears to have more momentum than Minkin indicates, quite what role such data played in Labour's internal debates is less certain. Other than reporting the statistics (often tucked away in reports), the party made little use of it. Different positions were reported in the press, but to little effect. Writing in *The Guardian*, John Edmonds declared that OMOV would be lucky to receive the support of one half of the CLPs (Edmonds, 1993a, 18). In the event, two journalists estimated that 60 per cent of CLP delegates had voted in favour (Wintour and Harper, 1993, 1).

Trade union financial contributions to Labour

One claim that Minkin makes at some length in *The Blair Supremacy* is that the unions did not apply any financial pressure on Labour during the review group debate. He made the

same argument at some length in the early 1990s (Minkin, 1993a, see also Minkin, 1991, 626-627), complaining to *The Sunday Times*, 'To my knowledge, there is no evidence since 1945 of any policy, reform of constitutional rules or internal election within the Labour party which has been secured by threats or fear of financial withdrawal, or the reduction of contributions, by the unions' (Minkin, 1993b) *Sunday Times*, 27 June 1993). Minkin's criterion, however, is a weak one. He equates the absence of a 'no pay no say' campaign with a lack of union pressure on Labour. Influence is measured in a very direct and overt fashion. Financial pressure be applied by the trade unions (or other bodies) in a much more indirect, subtle, and unspoken manner. There is an inconsistency here between Minkin's analysis of the unions on this issue and his assessment of Labour modernisers such as Tony Blair. Minkin is adamant that the modernisers, despite any public protestations to the contrary, wanted to break the link between Labour and the unions. His suggestion is that there was a signal from them, in effect a private view, that this was the case (Minkin, 2014, 83). But, looking at the public debate, there are remarkably few demands for an end to the trade union link. Blair was categorical that, far from ending the relationship, he wanted to reform and modernise it. In a *Tribune* interview in January 1993, he stated that he opposed divorce and simply wanted to introduce OMOV alongside a reform of the block vote: 'I think it is extremely important that Labour should not sever its relations with the trade unions. What I do believe, however, is that we should make the democracy of our party as real as is possible' (Anderson, 1992, 6). He repeated the denial on other occasions (see, for example, Blair, 1993, 22). Giles Radice, a Labour MP, told the GMB congress in 1993 that he knew of no MP who wanted to break the link (GMB, 1993, 312). Minkin may well be correct in suggesting that, despite protestations to the contrary, modernisers wanted such drastic reforms that the link would effectively be broken. Such proposals were not aired in public in a sustained fashion but part of an unspoken agenda.

The same analysis can be applied to the trade unions and the question of financial influence. Union pressure might be part of a similar unspoken agenda. On the face of it, the suggestion of a 'no say no pay' campaign was, as Minkin argues, an anomaly, the result of one unfortunate briefing from early June 1992. Tom Sawyer had spoken out in response to unattributed briefings from modernisers: 'I felt that we had to say something' (Sawyer,

1992d). It was picked up and widely discussed in the media (see Harper, 1992, 2). A quick search through newspaper articles confirms the paucity of references to the issue. Interestingly, however, in December 1992, a *Tribune* journalist used the phrase to describe the positions of the GMB and the TGWU, among other unions: 'no say no pay is their bottom line' (Osler, 1992b, 3). A delegate to the TGWU Biennial Delegate Conference at Bournemouth, Dave Quayle, also used it in debate, complaining about the Labour leadership (*TGWU Record*, 1993, 12). But manifestly the phrase was used sparingly.

Whether the trade unions applied no financial pressure to the Labour party, however, is another matter. At various stages throughout the debate financial matters were raised. In the *Tribune* article with which he launched the idea of a review, Sawyer was straightforward: 'union members will not continue to pay money to the party without proper representation of their views' (Sawyer, 1992a, 1), an indication, when coupled with his clumsy briefing in June, that financial issues were of some relevance. One of the straplines for the *Tribune* piece stated, 'The party cannot survive financially without trade union support'. An unsigned memo in the Labour archive from this period is equally blunt, arguing before turning to the Sawyer initiative: 'From discussions on finance, it is clear that the unions are deeply unhappy with the way this debate has been launched... they are prepared no longer to give wholehearted support to the party until we have achieved some resolution of these issues' ('Labour Party/Trade Union relations', no date). In the summer of 1992, at a joint *Tribune* Labour Coordinating Committee conference, Margaret Prosser argued that 'the party could not survive without the financial contributions of the unions. They are not going to continue unless they have some element of influence' (*Tribune*, 1992d, 3). When he called for the abolition of the block vote, Chris Mullin raised finance: 'There are those who say that if the trade unions were to lose control of the Labour Party they should reduce their contributions to party funds accordingly' (Mullin, 1992,4). In December 1992, as the TGWU cut the number it affiliated to Labour and so its financial contribution, *Tribune* described the decision as 'a rap on the knuckles' for the party (Osler, 1992c, 2). The article quoted one TGWU executive as saying that the union was not getting good value for money and claimed that the TGWU had noted that the decision was political (and not a reflection of its own financial situation). Subsequently, the same journalist

quoted Bill Morris as suggesting that the TGWU would have to consider its position vis a vis Labour: 'what is the purpose in affiliating to a party if you are denied the right to have a say in who leads it and in who represents it' (Osler, 1993f, 5). Picking up on the *Tribune* piece, Patrick Wintour suggested Morris' words represented a straightforward threat, headlining his report, 'TGWU warns it may quit Labour', (Wintour, 1993b, 4). Morris insisted the cut in affiliation was not political motivated and complained about *The Guardian* taking the quotation out of context (Morris, 1993a, 23). Elsewhere he was adamant that the reduction did not reflect 'political jockeying' surrounding the review group (Milne's words; Milne, 1992, 9). Milne noted that some would regard the decision 'as a vote of no confidence in the party'.

In *Tribune*, Edmonds took a similar line to Morris, arguing that levy payers resented being pushed out of Labour: 'they pay into the party' (Edmonds, 1993b, 12). Subsequently, he repeated the point: 'The current disagreement is not about the block vote but about whether trade union members who sustain the party by paying political levies should be denied a vote and cut out altogether' (Edmonds, 1993c, 12). He refused to accept trade unionists should not be involved in candidate selection: 'not just wrong in itself but symbolic of an attitude which asks so much from the unions and gives back so little in return.' During debate at the GMB congress in June 1993, one speaker was blunt: 'if the Labour party want our money, then we want some influence and if they do not want to represent the views of our members, they can do without our money' (GMB, 1993, 315). W. Hughes continued 'There is nobody can tell me that the big national companies who pour money into the Tory fund do not have a say in their policy', continuing, 'They need us more than we need them' (GMB, 1993, 316). Bill Morris told the GMB publication, *Direct*: 'Whether Labour could survive without union funds is a matter those making the policy must answer. I certainly don't lose any sleep over it' (Richards, 1992, 12). Speaking at a fringe meeting at the 1993 conference, Morris was quoted: 'I have a responsibility to get some value for my members' contribution and I cannot accept that people who make a conscious effort to pay the political levy should no say' (Bates, 1993b, 6).

Trade union restraint during the debate

Restraint is a central explanatory variable for Minkin in explaining the conduct of senior trade union figures. He suggests that participants were 'astonished' at the depth of argument over the link during 1992-1993 as the notion of restraint was severely tested. It is arguable, however, just how restrained trade unionists were. In June 1993 at the GMB congress, John Edmonds led direct criticism of the Labour leadership: writing in *Tribune*, Dave Osler described it as 'a barrage of fraternal back-stabbing quite reminiscent of times gone by' (Osler, 1993, 3). *The Guardian* referred to 'a floodgate of bitterness over a wide range of issues' (Milne, White and Harper, 1993, 1). Edmonds told GMB delegates that the dispute was 'moving into a dangerous area' (quoted by Milne and White, 1993, 1). These journalists concluded Labour-union relations to be at their most bitter since the Winter of Discontent in 1979. For BBC's *On The Record*, Jonathan Dimbleby stated that Edmonds 'could hardly be less helpful to John Smith', offering a 'fierce critique' (BBC, 1993, 1). Edmonds' speech to the GMB complained about attacks on the unions which had supported Labour 'through thick and thin (and recently there has been quite a lot of thin)'. He told delegates that such behaviour was 'appalling', finishing, 'We support the party, we pay for the party and we have a right to democracy in the party because, never forget, it is our party, too' (GMB, 1993, 300 and 303; *Direct*, 1993a, 6). Writing in *Tribune*, Edmonds stated, 'in practice, OMOV means denying trade union levy-payers any say in the selection of Labour party candidates and the election of the Labour party leader... Fewer people will be consulted and fewer people will vote' (Edmonds, 1993b, 12). After an angry debate, the GMB voted to maintain the electoral college for parliamentary selections until a registered supporters scheme was established. It also passed a motion that 'the Labour party are not playing their part as the main opposition party, representing the working class' (GMB, 1993, 288; see also *Direct*, 1993a and b). Tom Burlison complained that OMOV supporters had joined the review group determined that there was no other possible solution: 'it's arrogance and inflexibility that has led to where we are today and that's on the brink of a crisis' (*Direct*, 1993b, 7).

Bill Morris complained to *Tribune* in the summer of 1993 that the OMOV case was 'fraudulently presented'. He continued, 'Let me tell you what the real debate is: it's the exclusion of trade unionists from the decision making forums of the party' (Osler, 1993f, 5). He rejected any reduction in the constitutional rights of union members: 'I don't see how you can compromise on democracy'. Morris was forthright, 'we're not chained to the Labour party'. At the July 1993 TGWU conference, the most he offered, by way of compromise, was a code of conduct to guide union behaviour (Osler, 1993k, 3). He insisted, 'We shall not be moved out of any of these electoral colleges', (*T & G Record*, 1993a, 12). Even after Smith had won over the NEC and the working party, Morris persisted, complaining that OMOV restricted the democratic rights of union members (Morris, 1993b, 8). Continuing, he refused to acknowledge any problem with the kind of existing collective model that underpinned Labour: 'The TGWU needs no lectures on democracy from the college of spin-doctors' (see also Morris, 1993c, 3). At the Labour conference, both Edmonds and Morris spoke in the debate; both opposed Smith.

The final report of the review group noted that the debate had been 'deeply divisive and, at times, bitter' (LPTULRG, 1993b, 11). The extent and character of that argument challenges Minkin's notion of restraint as being a significant factor in relations between Labour and the unions. It contests the emphases he puts upon self-control and upon a union role as ballast within the party, portraying relations as more conflictual and disputed. Moreover, it is striking that many of the reports quoted above are to be found not just in the broadsheet press but in *Tribune* and in union journals – sources broadly sympathetic to the movement.

What was at stake?

The above discussion suggests that, at times, the debate during 1992-93 over Labour's links with the trade unions was a bitter and discordant one. At the same time, however, on occasion there did not appear to be much dividing the positions adopted by some of the protagonists. Patrick Wintour argued that at one point there was a hair-splitting 50 pence per member separating the two sides, that is between a levy plus based register and OMOV

(he suggested it would require 50p to top up an MSF member's levy into membership on the basis of the Smith proposal: Wintour, 1993a, 22). *Tribune* described the row as a 'senseless internal bust-up' (*Tribune*, 1993c, 2). It concluded: 'The reality is that parliamentary reselections and leadership elections are not particularly crucial in defining the relationship between Labour and the unions... even simple OMOV... would make only the smallest of changes to the nature of the party union link.' The newspaper later noted 'that the argument over OMOV has festered for long has owed much to the strained relations between sections of the Labour party and the trade unions (*Tribune*, 1993d, 2).

The depth of disagreement and the rancour over potentially minor issues reinforces the notion that at times the argument was a proxy for more fundamental disagreement about the structure of the party. For Labour's modernisers, the reforms may well have marked an attempt to recast the party's constitution in a fundamental fashion (as Minkin suggests). For many senior trade unionists, the reforms were about scapegoating organised labour for the April 1992 general election defeat. Their position marked an attempt to retain as much of a role as possible across a range of the party's institutions. Trade unions were also critical of Gordon Brown's initiative as shadow chancellor to reorient the party's economic strategy: as one journalist put it, 'the complaints go far beyond the union link' (see, Milne, 1993b, 2). In September 1993, John Edmonds complained about being held responsible for electoral reversal: 'we were still blamed for losing the election despite any significant evidence that the union link was the cause' (Edmonds, 1993c, 12). For Bill Morris, the attack on unions was 'a rather lazy search for new scapegoats' (*Tribune*, 1993e, 3; *T & G Record*, 1993b, 5). He protested about 'the salami-style removal of the unions from the Labour party, slice by slice' (Morris, 1993b, 8)

The debate about Labour's electoral strategy and the orientation of the party was, however, not the only issue to have shaped the context within which the 1992-93 debate took place. At the time, discussions were underway between the TGWU and the GMB concerning a possible merger of the two unions. In the summer of 1993, both the GMB and the TGWU conferences voted in favour of negotiations (Osler, 1993m, 3; *Labour Research*, 1993, 7-9;

Direct, 1993c, 8; and *T & G Record*, 1993c, 14). Minkin does not discuss the possible merger but critics of John Edmonds, in particular, argued that his shifting trajectory, moving from support for OMOV to hostility toward it, was shaped by the merger and by a desire to lead the new body. They asserted that he may have wanted to offer a position more likely to be acceptable to the TGWU membership. Bill Jordan, president of the AEEU accused Edmonds of making a leadership bid for the new union, a claim that Edmonds rejected (Harper, 1993b, 6). Two commentators suggested that Edmonds had a 'hidden agenda' while, earlier in the summer, *The Guardian* reported a colleague of John Smith as saying, 'It's all part of the GMB bargaining game' (see respectively Clement and MacIntyre, 1993, 6; and Milne, White and Harper, 1993, 1). In his notes of a meeting with Neil Kinnock, Hugo Young wrote, 'Edmonds is totally preoccupied with becoming book of the new G and T union. This is the intellectual dishonesty of his new position on OMOV' (Young, 2008, 387).

Conclusions

Lewis Minkin's *The Blair Supremacy* offers many important insights into the 1992-1993 Labour party trade unions links review group. Rightly, it restores this episode as a significant one in the development of Labour politics over the last few decades. It should be recognised that significant reforms were discussed and assessed before the advent of New Labour under Tony Blair's leadership in 1994. It is clear that the reforms agreed in 1993 did not represent the kind of clear victory for modernisation that many press reports suggested to be the case. In this article, however, I have offered a different interpretation of the working party and of labour politics more generally. While noting the strength of Minkin's analysis, I conclude that, in the aftermath of the 1992 general election defeat, there was considerable dissatisfaction across the party concerning its institutional structure and, accordingly, there was substantial pressure for constitutional change. In this regard, support for OMOV remained strong during the early 1990s while serious concerns were raised about the about the operation of block vote. Senior trade unionists remained extremely reluctant to concede a reduced role in such areas as parliamentary selection and the electoral college to elect the leader, despite the many criticisms that were made of existing arrangements or of other proposals that might sustain the involvement of organised labour. Whatever support was

offered by some trade unions for OMOV during the 1980s, much of it appeared to have been heavily qualified during the arguments of 1992-1993. Dianne Hayter's account of internal party politics in the 1980s is persuasive but, broadly, such support for reforms was not sustained into the early 1990s (as characterised by John Edmonds' shift on the issue of OMOV). (Of course, different unions took varied positions on these issues: the AEEU continued to push heavily for reform.)

Minkin asserts that the acceptance by trade unionists of a reduced share of conference votes is evidence of an acknowledgement of the necessity of reforms. But, of course, as union votes became more concentrated through mergers and a decline in the number of affiliates, a fifty per cent share meant that a few unions would still be able to sustain considerable influence over the party against the mass of dispersed votes held by CLP delegates. Furthermore, I conclude that that financial issues were part of the wider debate and that this was a bitter debate in which there is little evidence of a norm of restraint. In many ways, the depth of the row and the failure of participants to compromise indicates that wider issues were at stake, concerning the general orientation of Labour politics in the United Kingdom. It is striking, moreover, that ample evidence for my claims about the antagonistic state of Labour politics during the early 1990s is to be found not only in the broadsheet press but in *Tribune*, a newspaper broadly aligned to the party as well as in the archival papers of the review group.

A last point concerns the substance of the settlement reached. On paper the reforms looked more significant than the observations offered by many academics quoted in the introduction above. Did the outcome of the review's proceedings represent, as Lewis Minkin had hoped, some sort of fundamentally recast arrangement between Labour and its affiliated unions? Had, as David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh suggest, the power of the unions within the party been broken? I am not persuaded either that the 1993 conference decisions marked a new, lasting settlement or that Labour's affiliates had been marginalised in some sort of permanent, acquiescent fashion. Space precludes more than a few observations here. But I believe the comments I offer are consistent with my analysis of the

review group's discussions and of antagonistic relations between the party and its affiliated unions. At the time of the review group, Tony Manwaring argued, 'The test of this settlement will be judged – not by what it looks like on paper – but by whether the relationship flourishes on the ground, and whether it assists both partners in meeting the practical demands placed upon them' (Manwaring, 1992). The protocol that he offered was pitched at a very general level, revolving around generalised notions of respect and support. It offered little by way of specificities as to what the detail of the party-union link might look like. Over the next two decades the specific institutional reforms of 1993 came under increasing strain. It was not the design of the measures that limited their impact but the manner in which they were implemented.

The introduction of OMOV for parliamentary selections was, at first, relatively uncontroversial. But the notion of levy plus, the idea that trade unionists might be involved by paying a supplement to their affiliation fee, never really developed to the extent that few of them went on to join the party under the reduced fee schemes. Bill Morris pointed out that an earlier version of levy plus had resulted in only 13,000 new trade union members over five years (*T & G Record*, 1993d, 11; see also Alderman and Carter, 1994, 334). In any case, the possibility of recruiting trade unionists was swiftly engulfed by a more general rise in Labour's membership after Tony Blair became leader. From the start, some questioned whether levy plus was financially viable which may offer an explanation as to why it never really developed (that cut price membership was uneconomic) (Osler, 1993n, 3; see also Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013a, 13). Of course, Labour's membership fell dramatically between 1997 and 2010. In such circumstances, when the possibility of trade unionists joining the party en masse was raised once again, debate about the most appropriate means by which to select parliamentary candidates also re-emerged. Most obviously, in Falkirk in 2012, the role of trade union members and the question of whether Unite the Union, the successor to the TGWU, had adopted a deliberate strategy to shape selections became the subject of much debate. In turn, the controversy surrounding Falkirk led in part to the Collins review of Labour's internal structure which proposed the dramatic reform that affiliated members should make a specific individual decision to opt in (Collins, 2014)

It is also not clear whether the 1993 reform of the electoral college to elect the leader through the introduction of OMOV was as significant as its proposers and scholars claimed to be the case. On a number of occasions, in other electoral colleges to choose a leader of the party in the Welsh Assembly and a candidate to be London mayor, New Labour resorted to union block votes in place of OMOV. By 2010, senior trade union figures had developed strategies by which to shape internal elections within the party, even with OMOV in place. They coordinated their nominations, restricted candidates' access to their members when campaigning, and distributed ballot slips in the same packaging as partisan material. Arguably, such interventions allowed trade unions once again to shape the workings of the electoral college (for an account of Ed Miliband's election as Labour leader in 2010 along these lines see Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011; and Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013b). Again, the failure of the electoral college to operate smoothly became the subject of discussion in the Collins Review which proposed the introduction of a single electorate to choose the leader based on members, individual affiliates who had opted in and registered supporters. In 2015, following the abolition of the electoral college, Jeremy Corbyn was elected party leader in a contest in which the trade unions had a much more limited role (Wickham-Jones, 2015). The proposals of 1993 regarding parliamentary selection and the election of the party leader had not proved durable.

For modernisers within Labour, the main lesson drawn from the review group appears to have been the importance of avoiding formal discussions about the party's existing structures. They became less interested in reforms to the party's institutional arrangements – in effect distancing themselves from the settlement and mapping out an agenda that was for the most part uncompromising in rejecting union demands. Indeed, Minkin's text makes apparent the interventions by which the Blair leadership and others around simply sought to bypass those institutions altogether (Minkin, 2014; see also McIlroy, 1998; and McIlroy, 2010). A variety of devices were used to marginalise opponents and secure desired outcomes. For trade union leaders, the settlement did not prevent them from asserting a role in subsequent leadership elections or adopting an antagonistic posture in more general

terms. The reduction of the union vote to a 50 per cent share at the party conference did little to reduce their capacity to shape formal decisions but for the most part modernisers simply reduced the formal role of the conference and ignored the few decisions that went against them.

For all the discussion about its possible abolition during the discussions of the review group, de facto the block vote remained. Early in the reform process, Patrick Wintour had anticipated that unions would split votes at conference to reflect the internal division amongst their delegation (Wintour, 1992b, 21). In practice, it never happened. Although individual slips were issued to delegates, trade unions cast their votes as a single entity. A disappointed *Guardian* leader noted that the change would be 'cosmetic, with each union voting as one' (*The Guardian*, 1992, 18). Morris was adamant that delegates would be mandated, and that the TGWU vote would not be split between individuals: the union would 'continue to expect its delegates to represent the union and its policies' (Morris, 1993d, 11). The block vote was retained some internal elections within Labour – for the post of treasurer and for trade union representatives on the NEC.

This discussion raises a question mark about how successful was John Smith's brief tenure as Labour leader between 1992 and 1994. To be sure, upon his unexpected death, the OMOV reform agreed at the 1993 conference was highlighted as 'his most important success' (Pimlott, 1994, 146). The analysis offered here suggests that the reform was neither agreed in its design nor straightforward in its implementation. The 1993 reforms proved to be neither an uncontested arrangement accepted by participants in Labour politics nor a durable settlement that persisted in shaping the party's organisation. Much remained unresolved about Labour's institutional structure. Important changes in Labour's relations with its affiliates continued to take place after 1993: for example, within a few years, Tony Blair reworked the nature of trade union sponsorship of Labour MPs. Within two decades, the Collins review reopened an intense and conflictual discussion about the nature of the party's relations with its affiliated unions, a debate that persists to this day without any sign of resolution.

Abbreviations

AEEU	Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union
AWS	All Women Shortlist
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
LPA	Labour Party Archive,
LPACR	Labour Party Annual Conference
LPTULRG	Labour Party trade union links review group
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Technology
NCU	National Communications Union
NEC	National Executive Committee
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
OMOV	One Member One Vote
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
RMT	National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
UCW	Union of Communication Workers
USDAW	Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers

Bibliographical note: Unless otherwise stated, the papers of the review group are to be found under LP TU Links Review Group at the Labour Party Archive (LPA), People's History Museum, Manchester.

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¹. The exact title of the review group varies in Labour documentation: it is first called Labour Party/trade union links review group, then a trade union links review group. The two published reports do not formally identify the group's title and reverse the linkage. The interim report being *Labour party/trade union links* and the final one being *Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. I cite both here as Labour Party/trade union links review group abbreviated to LPTULRG , 1992a and b respectively).