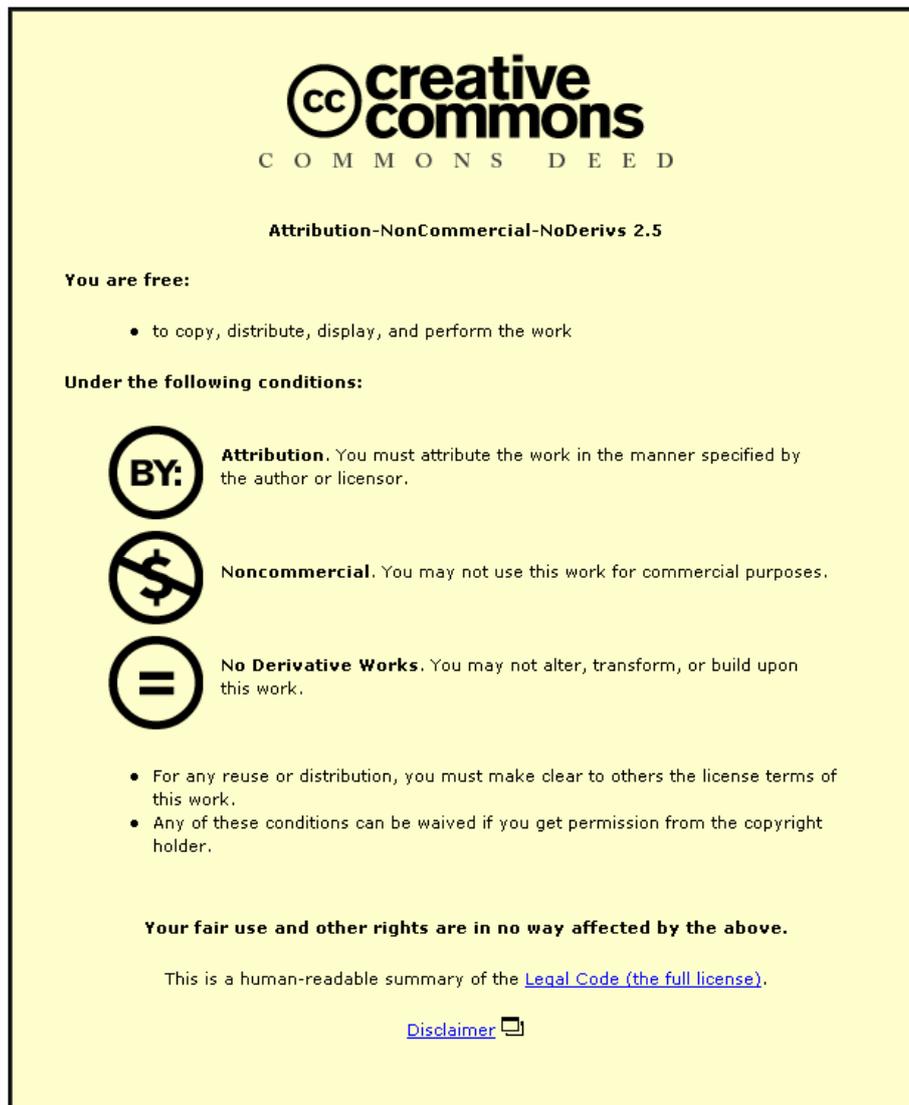




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**The Media and Intra-Party Democracy:  
'New' Labour and the Clause Four Debate.**

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**Abstract:**

**This article considers the role and increasing influence of the media in internal Labour Party affairs. Consideration is given to the activities of three ‘auxiliary’ institutions that became central actors within party debates during the leadership of Neil Kinnock. These are the external agenda-setting print media popular amongst party members; the opinion research based on questioning of the electorate or, more specifically, those seen as potential Labour supporters; and, managing both the media and research, the burgeoning cadre of specialist advisers and aides working for the leader. The latter part of the paper looks at the defining moment of Tony Blair’s three year period as Labour leader in opposition, that is his successful attempt to re-write the party’s statements of aims and values including the revered Clause Four. It will be shown how Blair used the reformed party structures bequeathed him by predecessor Kinnock to manage discussion and deliver a victory not certain at the outset of the debate. In winning the argument, the leadership demonstrated how its powerful position derives not just from its place in the party hierarchy but also from its ability to use the media to structure and control debate.**

**Introduction.**

On 29th April 1995 Labour held a special interim conference to conclude a discussion over the party constitution begun six months earlier by leader Tony Blair. In front of the assembled delegates was a single motion calling for the replacement of the 75 year old clause that contains the organisational 'mission statement' of aims and values. The resolution, carried by a comfortable margin, succeeded in overturning a restatement of faith in the old constitution passed at the 1994 Annual Conference, paradoxically the event which had launched the debate. More remarkable than the special conference result was the symbolism of a major Labour meeting slow hand-clapping National Union of Mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill for questioning the legitimacy of the proceedings. The treatment of Scargill, who ten years previously won Annual Conference support in spite of strong opposition from the Kinnock leadership, was indicative of a changed party culture. This perception was reinforced by the warm response given Blair and his supporters. The reasons for this transformation, and the contribution of political marketing to it, form the basis of discussion in this article.

The notion that there is an inherent tendency towards the centralisation of power within a party was first popularised by Robert Michels. In his influential study of the German Social Democrats, Michels argued that organisational democracy was a practical impossibility due to the inherent tendency of the hierarchy or leadership to centralise power within itself. This, he argued was 'the iron law of oligarchy'.<sup>1</sup> Significantly Michels, in developing his thesis, noted the importance of the media: 'The press constitutes a potent instrument for the conquest, the preservation and the consolidation of power on the part of the leaders'.

Applied to Labour Michels' thesis appeared to have some validity, at least until the trauma of 1931 when the then leader and prime minister Ramsay MacDonald deserted his party to set up in coalition government with the Conservatives. Since then the internal politics of the organisation have been characterised as a vibrant, sometimes unmanageable 'broad church' coalition of interests though the varying success of leadership in maintaining control of the party has been discussed by McKenzie, and by Shaw.<sup>ii</sup> This paper is concerned with examining how and why the present 'New' Labour leadership have been able successfully to subjugate dissident factions in a way which would appear to give renewed relevance to Michels' thesis. Particular attention will be paid to the way certain agenda-setting media have been used by the main agents responsible for the party's transformation.

The initial part of the discussion will examine the organisational legacy Neil Kinnock bequeathed to his successors John Smith and Tony Blair. It will be shown how new structures consolidated during the marketing driven Policy Review enabled the leadership to exert considerable control over a once notoriously fractious party to the extent that Labour rather than the Conservatives now enjoys a reputation for being disciplined and centralised. The piece will conclude by examining the debate surrounding Tony Blair's successful attempt to re-write the aims of the party as set out in its constitution. It will be demonstrated how Blair was able to use the new institutional arrangements to win the case for a revision of the document and, in particular, its revered Clause Four. Arguably the defining moment in Blair's three years as leader of the Opposition, the move proved critical to the relaunch of the party as 'New' Labour.

### **The Kinnock Legacy.**

The Policy Review of 1987-90 marked a watershed in modern Labour Party history. An exercise that repositioned the Party nearer what was perceived to be the electoral centreground, the Review served as an important strategic turning point. Labour embraced a more intensive, marketing focused approach to campaigning. Consequently the use of professional research and consultancy, once limited to party publicity activities, began to inform policy formulation.<sup>iii</sup> This change, made in the aftermath of a third consecutive election defeat, has proved to be of critical importance to the centralisation and retention of power by each of the three successive leadership teams that have presided since 1987.

The function of 'agenda-setting' is central to understanding why the Policy Review and subsequent leadership exercises have played such an important role in restructuring the party. Cohen distinguished the core feature of this concept when he wrote: 'the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about'. Having been popularised in a celebrated study of election campaigning,<sup>iv</sup> Steven Lukes adopted the phrase agenda-setting to identify what he termed one of the three 'faces' of power that determine outcomes within an organisation.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, in their assessments of internal Labour Party bargaining procedures, both Minkin, and Koelble, point to the importance of agenda-setting in framing internal debate.<sup>vi</sup> Both studies concentrate on analysing organisational decision-making during the 1970s and early 1980s, a period characterised by 'crisis management' and dominated by a concerted attempt to shift power away from the Labour leadership at Westminster. Those in the vanguard calling for reform, mainly left-wingers active in the trade unions and at grassroots' level, focused their efforts on

setting the agenda of Labour's Annual Conference. As Henry Drucker noted this supreme decision-making body, labelled the 'parliament of the movement' by former leader Clement Attlee, meant a delegatory form of self-governance embodying a commitment to internal democracy.<sup>vii</sup>

When it was founded there was a degree of accountability within the Labour Party largely absent in the more hierarchical organisations of political opponents, some state institutions and commercial firms including those owning and running mass media interests. An organisation whose political influence has grown with the progress of the Twentieth Century, the mass media have traditionally been viewed with hostility by many Labour partisans and trades unionists. Ironically the same external media now play an important role in the internal governance of the party, helping the leadership maintain control of the organisation and dominate debate. This development has had important consequences for Labour's previously federal, participatory structures.

To better understand the changed nature of party organisation the next sections will consider the increasingly central role played by three 'auxiliary' institutions in shaping and determining decision-making outcomes.<sup>viii</sup> Firstly, and most importantly, there has been the growth in size and importance of a leadership bureau of full-time staff and part-time advisers responsible for implementing and, increasingly, devising strategy. With the emergence of this elite there has been a parallel growth in the party's reliance on another auxiliary in the form of a select group of external media contacts. In return for privileged access, these media outlets have been responsible for the subtle conduit of pro-leadership viewpoints to the general and, more importantly, internal party publics. Finally, in terms of the input side to the debate, there has been increasing preoccupation

on the part of the hierarchy and its bureaucracy with the attitudes of those deemed to be floating voters and thus essential to any electoral success. These opinions, as enunciated in polling research, have guided the thinking of the leadership, its agents and media outlets to the extent that the views of potential Labour supporters have manifested themselves as another highly influential auxiliary institution.

### The New Party Machinery.

The strategic changes forged during and after the Policy Review helped centralise power within the Labour leadership who, by skilful use of external media channels, were able to co-ordinate internal agenda-setting and continually outmanoeuvre rival factions and malcontents. The notion of increased professionalism aiding the emergence of elitist parties is not new. In the 1960s, political scientist Leon Epstein drew attention to this relationship when he used the term 'contagion from the right' to describe the possible emergence of American style cadre parties in Europe.<sup>ix</sup> More recently Panebianco has focused on the growing importance of the 'electoral professionals'.<sup>x</sup> Writing at the time of Labour's Policy Review, *Tribune* editor Phil Kelly forecast the potential beginnings of such a realignment of power in the party:

If it becomes a mass party which takes its membership seriously, and involves them in policy-making and implementation, then it will need a system of internal management based on consensus. If it descends into a media-orientated marketing organisation for top politicians, then it will need internal discipline which will make the fifties seem liberal by comparison.<sup>xi</sup>

Prior to the late 1980s agenda-setting in the Labour Party was chiefly understood to mean the ability of leaders, groups and factions to influence policy and organisational

decisions through the mobilisation of internal opinion. The party's strategic development has intensified these actors' reliance on external mass media as a vehicle for political communication. This relationship has transformed the basis of internal agenda-setting and contributed to an erosion in the once strong horizontal decision-making structures, most obviously the Annual Conference and Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs).<sup>xii</sup> Where opinion formers once strove to put their case across in labour movement papers like *Voice of the Unions* and *Tribune*, they now seek to use sympathetic external media such as *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Daily Mirror* to disseminate their viewpoint.

Given its already privileged position, a leadership with coherent strategies has significant leverage over party rivals. This advantage has been enhanced by the growing role of the mass media, an aspect of contemporary politics recognised in two of the most thorough recent investigations into Labour Party structures. Observing the evolution of the party in the early 1990s, Lewis Minkin was swift to identify the growing presidentialisation of the organisation. Referring to its leader, he noted:

'His office now housed an unprecedented proliferation of aides, assistants and advisers, with an overview of, and involvement in, all aspects of Party activity and all dimensions of the links with the unions. In effect there was now an Executive Office of the Leader...(providing) the basis of a centralised power structure unique in Labour Party history.'<sup>xiii</sup>

The 'Executive', that is the Leader's Office at Westminster, derived its political authority from close working relationships with Kinnock. Senior Office aides, together with those in the party's Campaigns' Directorate and with senior marketing advisers, formed

what Shaw calls the new 'strategic community'.<sup>xiv</sup> Together these overlapping bodies have helped centralise power within the party to an even greater extent than that managed by Harold Wilson and his famed kitchen cabinet.<sup>xv</sup> The success of this strategy has been reflected in elections for the 29 member National Executive Committee(NEC), the institution at the apex of the extra-parliamentary party, which has seen a slow erosion in the number of leadership critics(which formed a majority in the late 1970s) to the point in 1993-94 when all dissident voices were temporarily voted off the body.

Another aspect to the centralisation of power has been the increasing prominence of the political public relations expert or 'spin doctor' as epitomised by Peter Mandelson. First as Director of Labour Party Campaigns and Communications in the second half of the 1980s and subsequently as MP for Hartlepool, Minister without Portfolio and a confidante of Tony Blair, Mandelson's name has become synonymous with controversy.<sup>xvi</sup> It is difficult to think of any other Labour official since former General Secretary Morgan Philips who has been regarded with similar awe by both allies and opponents in the party. Whilst most of this comment has focused on the supposed skill and deviousness of Mandelson as an adviser, much of it fails to appreciate or obscures the reality that his position of strength derives from a close working relationship with the leader in an evolving political culture which increasingly affords the mass media a greater influence over party affairs. It is perhaps significant that Arthur Scargill, in drawing up his blueprint for his own rival Socialist Labour Party, acknowledged the power of New Labour 'spin doctors' as one of the reasons for breaking with his old colleagues.<sup>xvii</sup>

### The Media of Agenda-Setting.

In tandem with its growing influence within the party, the bureaucracy has attempted to mobilise opinion in favour of the leadership through the cultivation of external media contacts. This section discusses the way in which this activity has restructured debate and accountability within the party and further aided the centralisation of power.

Before the Policy Review agenda-setting within the Labour Party centred on influencing decisions made by Annual Conference and implemented in the interim by its NEC. Public debate centred around left journals *Tribune*, *New Statesman* and now defunct party titles like *Labour Weekly* and *New Socialist*. After 1987, as the strategic orientation of the party began to change, the potential influence of external media broadly favourable to Labour increased. Since then newspapers with an anti-Conservative bias like *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* have become important for the dissemination of new ideas and thinking throughout the party and especially within the elite at Westminster and CLP level. In addition such material often serves as a useful cue for broadcast media reports of internal Labour business.

*The Guardian*, collectively owned by the Scott Trust, regularly features writers sympathetic to the liberal left and the Blair leadership in particular. Recently these have included John Gray, Geoff Mulgan, Martin Kettle and Chair of the Trust Hugo Young. Together with much of the newspaper's political coverage in the period 1992-95, these columnists have tended to exhibit a positive attitude towards the 'modernisation' of Labour project. Admittedly there are contributors hostile to 'New' Labour such as Francis Wheen, Paul Foot and Steve Bell, but their opinions tend to diverge from the newspaper's editorials. When set against the overt partisanship of pro-Conservative

qualities *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* it is unsurprising that *The Guardian* fills a void in the market with its support for Labour and, on certain occasions, the Liberal Democrats. However, when considered in intra-party terms, this coverage has added significance because it invariably favours the Labour 'moderniser' position as opposed to what have been collectively labelled 'traditionalists'.<sup>xviii</sup>

The other major Labour supporting newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, has a long history of endorsing successive party leaderships. During the recent 1995 Annual Conference the title and its political editor John Williams were particularly strong in their advocacy of the leadership position following the education debate, the most controversial of the week.<sup>xix</sup> The paper has also co-sponsored the official Labour Party 'Red Rose' tour designed to attract new members and, in theory at least, more readers. Despite occasional disagreements, such as the call by the *Daily Mirror* for the resignation of Harriet Harman following the MP's decision to send her son to a selective school, editorials have tended enthusiastically to endorse the positions of Tony Blair and his supporters.

Both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* enjoy circulations well in excess of an individual Labour membership estimated to be in the region of 300 to 350,000. Predictably there is considerable shared allegiance to the party and those titles deemed most supportive of it. Seyd and Whiteley calculate 35% of members read *The Guardian*, 27% the *Daily Mirror/Record*, 7% *The Independent* and 15% others. Only 13% read no national newspaper.<sup>xx</sup> The first two titles alone boast more members as readers than the combined sales of Labour supporting publications like *Tribune*, *New Statesman*, *Labour Left Briefing*, *Chartist* and *Red Pepper*, all of which have run editorials critical of the

leadership from a left perspective in the period between 1992 and 1995. Whilst these titles rely on small circulations of a few thousand, *The Guardian* alone sells between 400 to 500,000 copies per day and has an estimated readership of at least twice that. As the Labour Party metamorphoses from an organisation based upon strong horizontal structures into a more top-down leadership driven vehicle, the potentially pivotal role of these national newspapers becomes more obvious. This is especially the case as the party moves towards embracing 'One Member, One Vote' for the selection of parliamentary candidates, leadership elections and referenda on constitutional and policy matters.

The growing links between Labour leaders and their supporters in the press provide them with an important source of practical as well as psychological support. Additionally the intensification in contacts between media and party has helped cement the relationship between journalists and the new core of political professionals, some of whom are one and the same. This has had a significant impact on the culture of the party, with the emergent 'strategic community' conveying a very different impression of Labour to that previously presented by the affiliates in the trade union movement. This increasing professionalisation of politics, and the central importance it attaches to deliberations between middle-class graduates on the Labour frontbench and in the media, signals a change of emphasis in an organisation whose proletarian heritage and image used to differentiate it from rival parties.<sup>xxi</sup>

### The Importance of Marketing Research.

Private polling, that is opinion research commissioned by parties, is not new to British politics. Nevertheless the importance attached to this form of data as a source of

electoral feedback has grown in recent years and is borne out by an increase in the amount as well as the type of polls being commissioned. Where parties once relied on quantitative opinion research methods such as the large-scale survey they are now also funding ongoing qualitative studies of voter attitudes in the form of focus groups. Typically these focus groups consist of about 6 to 10 people sharing a weak partisanship and/or similar socio-economic background. A trained moderator facilitates a recorded discussion which aims to explore voters' deeper seated value and attitude structures in order to put the answers given to quantitative surveys in perspective.

Parties have long used small group discussions in their electioneering work: the inter-war period saw the Conservatives holding cottage coffee mornings whilst Labour relied on impromptu back street meetings to target the electorally important group of women voters. Though both efforts were primarily propagandist in intent, they constituted a potentially instructive source of feedback. In the strict sense of the term, focus group research became a strategic reality for parties with the advent of more adventurous election advertising campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>xxii</sup> Interest in these methods intensified during the 1980s when the Conservatives experimented with various qualitative tools and the Labour run Greater London Council used similar methods to some effect in a memorable attempt to stave off its own abolition.<sup>xxiii</sup>

During the Kinnock leadership focus group research became an important means by which Labour monitored changing trends in popular opinion. From 1985 to the 1987 election qualitative studies of public attitudes were commissioned on an ad hoc basis. Later, during the Policy Review, focus group data relating the opinions of floating voters became integral to debate.<sup>xxiv</sup> These results, together with quantitative survey

data, helped to provide some of the momentum behind subsequent changes in policy and organisation. It was a factor Kinnock acknowledged as crucial to the exercise because, as he saw it, the process was 'reinforced periodically by using the Shadow Communications Agency to give presentations which... assisted in the efforts to sustain the movement of the Review in the desired direction'.<sup>xxv</sup>

Similarly, in the aftermath of the 1992 election defeat, focus group findings once again became an important source of information for Labour leaders trying to make sense of the result. If anything the deep scepticism towards the accuracy of traditional polling evident following the 1992 campaign<sup>xxvi</sup> has created a climate in which greater value is attached to the findings of qualitative based political research. This has had a significant impact on strategic debates inside the Labour Party.

The rest of this paper turns to discuss more recent political developments, specifically the six month debate over the Labour Party constitution that took place between late 1994 and early 1995. For historian Brian Brivati the issues raised in this period underlined Labour's past organisational 'conservatism' and attachment to a set of institutional arrangements which, he argued, had been 'retained because of their historical importance rather than their contemporary relevance'.<sup>xxvii</sup> Central to this discussion were disagreements over Clause Four. Despite being only a part of the constitution, the extract was the only part of the document subjected to real scrutiny and argument. Indeed in discussing the outcome of the debate, media commentators frequently spoke of Tony Blair's having been successful in re-writing Clause Four rather than the whole statement of aims that defined the

### **Clause Four.**

Since the Labour Party constitution was formally drafted in 1918 its fourth clause has traditionally been regarded as the organisational mission statement. The importance attached to the declaration was underlined in the late 1950s when Clause Four(part IV) began to appear on each annual issue of party membership cards.<sup>xxviii</sup> Heavily symbolic, these sentences provide the backdrop to one of the most contentious debates to take place in the history of the party.

### The Controversy over Clause Four.

The importance of Clause Four or, more specifically, part IV derives from its stated aim of achieving a more equitable society through the pursuit of public ownership programmes. Drawn up by leading Labour intellectual Sidney Webb in 1918, the statement reflected the party's aspiration to emancipate people via greater socialisation of the economy. Following the end of the Attlee administration in 1951 it became clear not every Labour politician agreed with the aim of Clause Four, by now widely interpreted as a call for the extension of nationalisation in light of the government programme implemented during the late 1940s. So-called 'revisionist' objections to the notion of realising party goals through state ownership formed the basis of Anthony Crosland's influential book *The Future of Socialism*.<sup>xxix</sup>

Following Labour's third successive election defeat in 1959, leader Hugh Gaitskell moved to try and change the wording of Clause Four in the belief that party policy on nationalisation was electorally unsaleable at a time of perceived economic affluence and security. In his attempts to change the constitution, Gaitskell found himself blocked by a powerful coalition inside the party consisting of trades unionists and left-wingers.

Though he ultimately failed in his bid to delete the wording, Gaitskell nevertheless succeeded in showcasing and making Clause Four central to the party's identity.

Though the party card continued to retain the Clause, few subsequent policy pronouncements made use of the wording. Following the Policy Review of the late 1980s public ownership as a strategy of economic management was abandoned as a priority for an incoming Labour government. After the 1992 general election indifference on the part of some towards Clause Four began to turn into outright hostility. Bill Jordan, President of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, was vocal in his call for the scrapping of the wording.<sup>xxx</sup> Soon after, Campaigns Co-ordinator Jack Cunningham also urged the abandonment of Clause Four.<sup>xxxi</sup> The following year, in the middle of the so-called 'Clintonisation' debate over whether Labour should move further into the political centreground, the idiosyncratic MP Frank Field declared his opposition to Clause Four,<sup>xxxii</sup> a view echoed by an editorial in *The Times* a week later.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Speculation over a possible re-write of the constitution increased with the publication of a pamphlet by leading moderniser Jack Straw questioning the party wisdom of relying on the by now 75 year old Clause.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Influential support for Straw came from a Fabian Society inquiry into the party constitution presided over by Lord Peter Archer which pointedly refused to include the old wording in its proposed revised version of the document.<sup>xxxv</sup> Those pressing for reform were joined by Roy Hattersley<sup>xxxvi</sup> and eventually, in a later but symbolically important intervention, former leader Neil Kinnock who concluded his BBC television documentary *Tomorrow's Socialism* by making reference to the issue.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Despite the obvious enthusiasm of some in the party for changing the constitution, Clause Four was reaffirmed at the 1993 Annual Conference. Support for the old wording could even be found in the key moderniser journal *Renewal*.<sup>xxxviii</sup> For his part Labour leader John Smith was decidedly agnostic in public when asked about the matter.<sup>xxxix</sup> His attitude appeared to dampen speculation about the possibility of reform up until his untimely death in 1994. When Tony Blair, the favoured candidate to succeed Smith to the Labour leadership, was asked by David Frost whether he would press for changes to the party constitution he replied:

'I don't think anyone actually wants the abolition of Clause Four to be the priority of the Labour Party at the moment. I don't think that anyone is saying now, in the run up to an election, that this is what we should focus on. The vast majority of the British people don't sit out there and debate the intricacies of the Labour Party constitution.'<sup>xl</sup>

Blair's sentiments appeared to reflect mainstream opinion within the party. As seasoned political commentator Paul Anderson pointed out during a leadership election campaign which itself had followed on from the momentous decision to adopt 'One Member, One Vote': '...no one is suggesting that further reforms of the Labour constitution are on the cards this side of an election'.<sup>xli</sup>

Within three months of taking up the party leadership Blair changed his mind and, in his first Annual Conference address at the helm, publicly stated his intention to go for a re-write of Clause Four. Declaring 'Let us say what we mean and mean what we say', Blair never mentioned the Clause by name during the speech, choosing to rely on his press officers to point out the specifics to assembled broadcasters and journalists. If the

declaration excited the media it did not move delegates in formal debate two days later. Proposed by Glasgow Maryhill CLP delegate Jim Mearns, a motion calling for the reaffirmation of Clause Four led to impassioned speeches from defenders including David Winnick MP and opponents, notably communication workers' union leader Alan Johnson and modernising MP Denis MacShane. The motion was passed by a narrow margin, the front-page of *The Guardian* tersely reporting 'Vote for past defies leader'.<sup>xlii</sup> Inside the same edition, the setback was reported to have been 'airily dismissed' by the Blair camp. The next time the subject came to be debated by a national Labour conference the way in which the agenda was framed would be considerably more favourable to the leadership.

#### The Momentum behind Blair.

In putting their case for reform of Clause Four, modernisers such as Blair argued Labour needed to update the party constitution to show it embodied 'a radical and realistic vision of democratic socialism for the next millennium'.<sup>xliii</sup> Adopting a similar tone Janet Anderson, Secretary of the Tribune Group of MPs, argued the need for an effective 'mission statement':

'At a recent meeting of the Tribune Group, the editor of *Tribune* Newspaper said he would be worried if the debate about Clause Four became simply one about 'Marketing' the party. But that is precisely what we have to do. We have to persuade people to our point of view. Every time we campaign, we seek to market the Labour Party... But, in order to do it, we need a clear message of what we stand for.'<sup>xliv</sup>

In addition to the apparent electoral capital to be made out of the exercise, a successful re-write would likely increase Blair's status both within the party and with the general

public at large.

In their plans to reform Clause Four, the leadership had a considerable organisational advantage over their opponents not least because they were able to use party funds and guaranteed television airtime to support their campaigning. Two editions of the *Labour Party News (LPN)*, the regular publication mailed to all members, ran prominent features on the debate. Despite the absence of an officially sanctioned alternative to the existing Clause Four, the special issue distributed in January 1995 included contributions from nine leading party figures broadly favourable to change with only three against. The following edition of *LPN* in March reported on the soundings Tony Blair had been taking with regional meetings of Labour members. Mirroring the Clinton approach to campaigning, the Labour leadership also commissioned a video that was sent out to complement local branch discussions of a specially drawn up Clause Four consultation document. Despite the apparent openness of the process, sections of the party were concerned about the implications of the debate. One member, John Solomon, summed up this body of opinion when he noted:

'We were bombarded by propaganda from Walworth Road, including a special edition of *LP News*, the content of which was largely in favour of change and a glossy covered booklet. There was also a colourful video to help with the questions, even laying out the time which should be spent in replying to each section of the values. Peculiarly enough, during all this time there were no proposals of any actual change to be made to Clause Four; no real substance to consider, only a reiteration of values and three vague issues to which a response had to be made. So much for weeks of consultation; a very costly exercise, a softening up process, known in marketing terminology as 'demand plasticity'.

(I)t was a marketing ploy. And this massive consultation(sic) programme was going to be processed by March 15th? Poor Walworth Road. How did they manage or did they? In fact, the new Clause IV was made public on March 13th. Many of us wish we could receive our renewed L(about) P(arty) membership cards as quickly as that.<sup>xlv</sup>

Blair and the modernising camp also benefited from something they could not have foreseen for certain: a divided opposition.

The surprise when the leader launched debate over Clause Four was visible later that evening on the *Midnight Special* programme.<sup>xlvi</sup> Featuring two Labour MPs closely aligned on the centre-left, the discussion led them to differing interpretations of the day's event. For his part Peter Hain recognised that to mount a serious campaign against the leadership might undermine Blair's authority in the party and with the wider public. By contrast Jean Corston lamented the debate was taking place at all, primarily because it deflected attention away from what she perceived to be the issues and problems facing her constituents.

The cautious approach of Corston and Hain was mirrored by the newsletter of their parliamentary 'What's Left' caucus. This recognised the dilemma facing the Labour left should they campaign to keep, reword or add to the existing Clause Four.<sup>xlvii</sup> The latter positions, respectively championed by the joint *Tribune* and *New Statesman* editorial teams and London MEP Stan Newens, helped complicate the debate. The other viewpoint was supported by the appropriately named 'Defend Clause Four' campaign which received backing from MPs and MEPs in the left-wing Socialist Campaign

Group together with a few members of other factions, most notably right-winger Gwyneth Dunwoody and centrist Andrew MacKinlay.<sup>xlviii</sup> Like the other left campaigns, publicity material from the Group stressed the need to maintain the party's stated belief in public ownership as a way 'to realise our commitment to equality, freedom and social justice'.<sup>xlix</sup>

Blair, then, enjoyed a significant advantage over his opponents given his organisational resources and the relative simplicity and unified theme of his case. In addition, the modernisers' position was once again augmented by use of media sources and opinion poll data.

#### The Use of Agenda-setting.

The wisdom of Blair's decision to re-write Clause Four appeared to be challenged by Gallup opinion poll results published in the middle of the debate. These findings contrasted with earlier MORI data which had suggested floating voters would be more likely to support Labour if the Clause was changed.<sup>1</sup> Reported in the *Daily Telegraph*,<sup>ii</sup> the Gallup findings indicated 37% of the general public supported the original wording, 28% did not with 35% undecided. The results, whilst inconclusive, could have suggested public ownership might be a strong campaign theme for Labour. Ironically, writing on the same day in another newspaper not generally popular with party members, veteran columnist Keith Waterhouse developed this point when he commented:

'What privatisation now means, in the public mind, is a licence to print money to pay the bonanza and other jackpot benefits of chief executives. Privatisation is now private in the sense of hands off, keep out. And Tony Blair chooses this moment to

tour the country persuading the brothers and sisters to ditch Clause 4. Some sense of timing.<sup>liii</sup>

In marked contrast to the Gallup polling figures, a previous Fabian Society sponsored research series of relevance to the Clause Four debate had received much greater attention in the anti-Conservative press. Commissioned during the Smith leadership, the pamphlets were written by modernising MP Giles Radice and Fabian Director of Research Stephen Pollard. Each used focus groups to analyse the political attitudes of voters in marginal seats who had considered supporting Labour in 1992 but in the event stayed Conservative. The work made an impact by, as Tony Blair put it in opening his 1945 anniversary lecture, 'turning the attention of the party towards lost voters in the South'.<sup>liiii</sup> Reflecting their geographical bias the series was known as 'Southern Discomfort' and provided Labour modernisers with a supply of useful data. All three editions proved influential in focusing minds on their call for the symbolic dropping of Clause Four as a demonstration of the party's desire to change. Their importance in the subsequent debate was later acknowledged by the Society in its promotional literature:

"The Fabian Society paved the way for the introduction of "One Member, One Vote" and the new statement of aims and values which replaced the old Clause Four. Our path-breaking series of pamphlets on the attitudes of swing voters in the south of England- the "Southern Discomfort" series- prepared the ground for the modernisation of Labour's Constitution and policies."<sup>liv</sup>

Whilst the official National Executive Committee report referred to the party's loss of electoral support amongst a multitude of demographic groups,<sup>lv</sup> the pamphlets focused on people in social categories C1/C2, resident in target seats mainly in the south-east,

aged 25-50 with children. Despite this narrow base and the problems associated with extrapolating too much from focus groups, the material appeared in several reports and features, creating the impression that it was a scientific type source of considerable authority. Quite apart from the choice of sample selection and dangers of undertaking qualitative research in isolation from traditional forms of polling, little was made of the potential psychological need of participants to justify their previous vote for the Conservatives with overly negative commentaries about Labour.

More relevant to the immediate debate over Clause Four were the research exercises commissioned by some of the trades unions. Like the *Southern Discomfort* work, the results appeared to reinforce the moderniser case. The first survey research, organised by the consultancy Union Communications, suggested as many as 72% of members in affiliated unions wanted the constitutional changes to be made.<sup>lvi</sup> Another poll, conducted for the AEEU, resulted in a response of 91% in favour of revising the Clause. Considered in relation to the conflicting Gallup data in the *Daily Telegraph*,<sup>lvii</sup> the statistics support the notion that the question was a key factor in determining outcome, an issue of importance when it came to the decision by others to ballot their memberships. The move to hold what effectively amounted to a referendum on the party constitution was a significant step away from a representative to a more direct form of internal democracy. Like the switch to 'One Member, One Vote' for leadership and candidate elections, the move has implications for the future conduct and outcome of party debates.

The communications' workers union, the only union to go ballot, won a significant vote of confidence for the modernisers' plans. Both *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* gave

prominent coverage to the result.<sup>lviii</sup> By contrast other executives and local parties conducted their consultation exercises through the usual constitutional means of meetings and workplace liaison. By March 91 CLPs had declared their support for the maintenance of the existing Clause Four,<sup>lix</sup> a factor which probably loomed large in the leadership's ad hoc decision to encourage constituency parties to ballot members in place of the previously binding local General Committee system of voting.<sup>lx</sup> When two of the largest affiliates, Unison and the TGWU, remained firm in their commitment to the Webb wording, an editorial in the *Daily Mirror* denounced them as 'undemocratic'.<sup>lxi</sup> Some party modernisers questioned the legitimacy of these affiliates' position in the party: 'It is the votes of ordinary members which have driven the Clause IV change, not the pronouncements of trade union executives'.<sup>lxii</sup> The same issue of the LCC newsletter went on to list results from the few hundred constituency parties who had voted for change as against the handful who did not.

The decision by the TGWU not to ballot members led to a rift between General Secretary Bill Morris and the Labour leadership.<sup>lxiii</sup> More dramatically it also provided the impetus for a serious challenge by moderniser Jack Dromey for Morris's position later in the year.<sup>lxiv</sup> Other acrimonious episodes during the debate formed the basis of press reports which tended to favour the leadership. In particular the near half of Labour MEPs who publicly declared their allegiance to Clause Four with a front-page advert in *The Guardian* on the day Blair came to address them in Strasbourg were labelled 'Stalinist' in the same paper's editorial the following day.<sup>lxv</sup> Similarly much was made of the leader's denunciation of those behind the advert as 'infantile incompetents'.<sup>lxvi</sup> By contrast to the impression given in the press, Alex Falconer, one of the MEPs Blair targeted, contended the meeting had not been so one-sided.<sup>lxvii</sup>

Other stories appearing in the press helped strengthen the case presented by Blair. Towards the end of January, *The Observer* reported that Blair had been on the 'warpath' at a recent meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party.<sup>lxviii</sup> The following day both the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* ran features underlining Blair's belief that unless Clause Four was reformed the party would lose the next election.<sup>lxix</sup> Additionally significant was the selective reporting given different consultation results: whilst the Scottish party conference decision to support Blair made *The Guardian* front page and an editorial, the Greater London region vote against change two weeks later only merited a small item on the fifth page of the same paper.<sup>lxx</sup> Similarly, favourable coverage followed endorsements of change from other sectional groups, notably two major conference meetings of the national sections for youth and women. Despite the fact that both were representative rather than decision-making bodies, the results were interpreted by the press in an unambiguous way: 'Blair wins youth'<sup>lxxi</sup> and 'Labour women vote strongly for the new Clause 4'.<sup>lxxii</sup>

In launching the debate over the Labour Party constitution in October 1994, Tony Blair could not be wholly sure his intention to re-write Clause Four would be successful. Modernisers' initial fears were confirmed when the Annual Conference voted to re-affirm the existing wording 48 hours later. Leadership anxieties were compounded by the decision of several CLPs, as traditionally represented by their General Committees, to vote against change. Nevertheless the leadership won its case in spite of these setbacks and the fact that they had been unable to promote a new Clause Four for fear of appearing to pre-empt a decision early on in the consultation period. At the special April 1995 meeting the vote registered in favour of change was 66% to 34%. The result overturned the previously binding 1994 conference decision which had supported the

existing Webb version, albeit by a narrow margin of 51% to 49%.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

Arguably the new party structures created during the Kinnock leadership played an important role in enabling Tony Blair and his allies to revise the party's set of constitutional aims and values. Central to this and other internal debates were those influential agenda-setting mass media popular with the Labour membership and those increasingly powerful agents of the leadership belonging to Blair's office and core group of advisers. It was a combination of these aides, their contacts in the media and selected usage of opinion research findings which helped to reshape the perceptions of those participating in the discussion. Prior to winning the leadership Blair had expressed his ambivalence about the need to revise Clause Four not to mention the rest of the party's aims and values. In spite of having adopted a contradictory position within months of succeeding John Smith, Blair and his entourage were nevertheless able to govern the contours of the subsequent argument to the extent that they convincingly won it. In the process they were able to marginalise opponents as well as several plausible alternative viewpoints.

### **Conclusions.**

With the recent overhaul of party structures and the diminution of trades union input into policy decision, leadership elections and candidate selection, media and marketing driven agenda-setting has acquired greater importance in influencing the internal affairs of the Labour Party. This trend has been complemented with the introduction of party referenda during the Clause Four debate, the defining moment of Tony Blair's leadership whilst in opposition. The move, designed to facilitate discussion throughout

the party and include the wider membership in the decision-making process, has afforded Blair and his aides even more control over debate.

The diminution in the party's representative democracy has enabled the leadership to mobilise support for its case. This has been done thanks in part to what Panebianco called 'electoral professionals', those specialist advisers charged with managing strategy. In turn these actors have been helped by their contacts in those media closely associated with the party and through judicious use of polling research which suggests the leadership's view reflects that of the 'opinion electorate', that is those voters deemed essential to any electoral success.

The emergence of 'New', hierarchical Labour party is by no means an isolated development. In his original study Robert Michels identified the role the press could play in helping party leaderships to subjugate dissent and maintain control within their organisations. Similarly, in his pioneering study, Leon Epstein pointed to emergence of professionalism as a means of party governance. More recently Panebianco has highlighted the central importance of media strategists and the selected readings of public opinion to the structure and management of debate within parties. The thrust of these contributions, which have all been concerned with European cases, has been recently complemented by studies of British politics which have pointed to the growth of 'presidentialism'.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Arguably marketing and the media have been central to this development.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Michels, Political Parties (New York: Dover, 1959 first published 1915).

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- <sup>ii</sup> Robert McKenzie, British Political Parties (London: William Heinemann, 1963); Eric Shaw, Discipline and Discord in the Labour Party (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
- <sup>iii</sup> Dominic Wring, 'From Mass Propaganda to Political Marketing: the Transformation of Labour Party Election Campaigning', in Colin Rallings et al.(eds.) British Parties and Elections Yearbook 1995 (London: Frank Cass, 1996).
- <sup>iv</sup> M. McCombs and D. Shaw, 'The Agenda-setting Function of the Mass Media', Public Opinion Quarterly, 36, 1972, pp.176-87.
- <sup>v</sup> Steven Lukes, Power: A Radical View. (London: Macmillan, 1974).
- <sup>vi</sup> Lewis Minkin, The Labour Party Conference (Manchester: Manchester University Press, revised edition, 1980); Thomas Koelble, The Left Unravelling (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).
- <sup>vii</sup> Henry Drucker, Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979).
- <sup>viii</sup> In his pioneering study of political organisation, Ostrogorski used the phrase 'auxiliaries' in describing the newspaper allies of a party. See M. Ostrogorski, Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties (New York: Haskell, 1902 reprinted 1970).
- <sup>ix</sup> Leon Epstein, Political Parties in Western Democracies (London: Pall Mall, 1967).
- <sup>x</sup> Angelo Panebianco, Political Parties: Organisation and Power (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.198.
- <sup>xi</sup> Tribune 2 September 1988.
- <sup>xii</sup> Note the increasing prominence of the National Policy Forum, an organisation which meets in between Annual Conferences to discuss party initiatives under direction from the leadership.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Lewis Minkin, The Contentious Alliance (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p.630.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Eric Shaw, The Labour Party since 1979 (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.57-59.
- <sup>xv</sup> Blair regularly attempts to neutralise the charge that he is an autocrat by attacking those who he believes preach about the politics of Labour leadership 'betrayal', The Guardian 27 July 1995.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Andy McSmith, John Smith (London: Mandarin, 1996).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Arthur Scargill, 'Future Strategy for the Left', unpublished paper, November 1995.
- <sup>xviii</sup> The relationship between The Guardian and Labour has been examined in the left-wing satirical magazine Casablanca ('Who Guards the Guardian?: part two', October/November 1992, p.7) and regularly by Hugh MacPherson in his parliamentary column for Tribune. Two recent studies also mention the link: Richard Heffernan and Mike Marqusee, Defeat from the Jaws of Victory (London: Verso, 1992), pp.219-20; Shaw, The Labour Party since 1979, p.126. That said, relations between the paper and Labour have been more strained since the promotion of Alan Rusbridger to the editorship in 1995.
- <sup>xix</sup> Daily Mirror 5 October 1995.
- <sup>xx</sup> Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, Labour's Grassroots (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.37.
- <sup>xxi</sup> John Gorman, Images of Labour (London: Scorpion, 1985).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Richard Rose, Influencing Voters (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Nicholas O'Shaughnessy and Dominic Wring, 'Political Marketing in Britain' in Henry Tam (ed.) Marketing, Competition and the Public Sector (Essex: Longman, 1994).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Colin Hughes and Patrick Wintour, Labour Rebuilt (London: Fourth Estate, 1990).

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- <sup>xxv</sup> Cited in Eric Shaw, 'Programmatic Change in the Labour Party 1984-94', paper presented at the Party Politics Conference, Manchester University, January 1995.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Bob Wybrow, 'The 1992 General Election and Its Impact on the Image of Public Opinion Surveys', paper presented at the General Election Conference, Essex University, September 1992.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Brian Brivati, 'Clause for Thought', History Today, No.143, October 1993, pp.7-10.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Steven Fielding, 'Mr Benn and the Myth of Clause Four', Parliamentary Brief, April 1995, p.38.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Anthony Crosland, The Future of Socialism (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956).
- <sup>xxx</sup> The Guardian 28 April 1992.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> The Times 18 May 1992.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> The Independent 2 February 1993.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> The Times 9 February 1993.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Jack Straw, Policy and Ideology (Blackburn: Blackburn Labour Party, 1993).
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Fabian Society, A New Constitution for the Labour Party: The Report of the Archer Committee (London: Fabian Society, 1993).
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> The Times, 23 February 1993.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Neil Kinnock, Tomorrow's socialism, part two: rethinking the future, broadcast on BBC2, 11 February 1994.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> B. Jones, 'Common Ownership: Relic or Asset?', Renewal, Vol.1, No.3, July 1993, pp.55-61.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> John Rentoul, Tony Blair, p.413.
- <sup>xl</sup> Breakfast with Frost, broadcast on BBC1, 12 June 1994.
- <sup>xli</sup> New Statesman and Society 17 June 1994.
- <sup>xlii</sup> The Guardian 8 October 1994.
- <sup>xliii</sup> New Clause Four Campaign, The New Clause IV, campaign leaflet, 1995.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Tribune Group, Beyond Clause Four (London: Tribune Group of MPs, 1994).
- <sup>xlvi</sup> John Soloman, 'Confused', Fabian News, Vol.107, No.4, August 1995, pp.22-23.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Midnight Special, broadcast on Channel Four, 4 October 1995.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> What's Left Network, Network News, No.1, January 1995.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Tribune 20 January 1995.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Defend Clause Four Campaign, Defend Clause 4, Defend Socialism Newsletter, 1, Winter 1995.
- <sup>l</sup> The Guardian 26 January 1995.
- <sup>li</sup> Daily Telegraph 6 February 1995.
- <sup>lii</sup> Daily Mail 6 February 1995, cited in Greg Philo 'Political Advertising and Popular Belief', in Greg Philo (ed.), Glasgow Media Group Reader, Volume Two (London: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>liii</sup> Tony Blair, Face the Future: the 1945 Anniversary Lecture (London: Fabian Society, 1995). The opening part of the series was widely commented upon in the media, for example see The Guardian 28 September 1992. The first pamphlet was solely authored by Giles Radice and entitled Southern Discomfort (London: Fabian Society, 1992). The others, written with Stephen Pollard, were called More Southern Discomfort (1993) and Any Southern Comfort (1994). In an occasionally illuminating study of New Labour, former parliamentary frontbench researcher Leo McKinstry (Fit to Govern? London: Bantam Press, 1996, p.112) makes mention of the way the series had a marked influence on the Blair leadership.
- <sup>liv</sup> Fabian Society, The Fabian Society, recruitment leaflet, 1995.
- <sup>lv</sup> Labour Party, National Executive Report (London: Labour Party, 1992).

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- lvi Tribune 3 March 1995.
- lvii Daily Telegraph 6 February 1995.
- lviii The Guardian 22 April 1995; Daily Mirror 22 April April 1995.
- lix Tribune 10 March 1995.
- lx The Guardian 25 January 1995.
- lxi Daily Mirror 22 April 1995.
- lxii Labour Co-ordinating Committee, Labour Activist, Special Conference edition, 29 April 1995.
- lxiii The Guardian 3 February 1995.
- lxiv Incidentally a move later endorsed by an editorial in The Guardian (30 May 1995), a newspaper not generally thought of as required reading amongst the largely blue-collar membership of the union.
- lxv The Guardian 10 January 1995. Interestingly, reflecting the notion that a sense of timing means everything, there had been remarkably little comment when the same advert appeared in Tribune the previous November. Certainly it did not lead individual signatories to ask for their names to be removed from the statement as happened on this occasion. Indeed the advert caused so much consternation amongst Labour MEPs that half of them immediately wrote a letter to The Guardian in support of Blair. This duly formed the basis of a frontpage story on the day the letter was published, the signatories' 30 or so names gaining a mention in the article as well as the actual correspondence section.
- lxvi The Guardian 12 January 1995.
- lxvii Socialist Campaign Group News February 1995
- lxviii The Observer 22 January 1995.
- lxix Daily Mirror 23 January 1995; The Guardian 23 January 1995.
- lxx The Guardian 11 March and 27 March 1995
- lxxi The Observer 5 February 1995.
- lxxii The Guardian 3 April 1995.
- lxxiii It should not be overlooked that the motions before the two meetings differed quite considerably: whilst the 1994 Annual Conference had called for a simple restatement of faith in the original Clause Four, the 1995 special delegate meeting was limited to speeches and a vote on whether to accept or reject the new version. Nothing was said of the older text. Blair had thus succeeded in turning the debate into a 'valence issue' rather than one of real contention. That said a noticeable and influential group of opponents including union leaders Rodney Bickerstaffe and Bill Morris held out against the change at the special conference held on a Saturday afternoon which, underlining its high media profile, gained live coverage on BBC2.
- lxxiv Michael Foley, The Rise of the British Presidency (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).