

MANCUNIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF LABOUR IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Michael Pateman

The 1945 General Election remains the most celebrated election result in the history of the Labour Party, even though the parliamentary majority achieved was surpassed by Tony Blair in 1997. It retains a mystique that no other election has equalled. This is, no doubt, due partly to the unexpectedness of the result. After the 1935 election the Labour Party held only 166 seats, in comparison to the 361 held by the Conservatives, and even by the outbreak of the Second World War, with an election due to be held within a few months, there were no indications that Labour would fare significantly better. Yet in 1945 Labour romped to a landslide victory, increasing its representation by 227 seats whilst the Conservatives lost 172, providing Labour with a majority of 146 seats over all other parties. In Manchester the Labour Party exceeded even these astonishing results. Following the 1935 election, Labour held four of the city's ten seats with the remainder going to the Conservatives. In 1945 Labour won a staggering

nine seats, with only Withington remaining in Conservative hands.

That a "swing to the left" had occurred during the Second World War is clearly undeniable, but the *timing* of the swing remains open to debate. Following the publication of Addison's seminal work, *The Road to 1945* (1975), the conventional view of this swing identified 1940 as the pivotal turning point in mass opinion. That year, Addison argued, saw the emergence of a radical new popular political mood, with the Labour Party as the natural beneficiaries. Military humiliation at Dunkirk turned the people against the pre-war (Conservative) "Guilty Men" who were responsible for the country's military unpreparedness, while the new emphasis on equal shares, equality of sacrifice and the concept of "planning" appeared to vindicate much of what Labour had advocated in the 1930s.¹ From mid-1941, the enormous popularity of the Soviet Union seemed to further indicate a distinct



Churchill visits blitzed Manchester, April 1941.

leftward shift in the electorate. Most importantly, the new mood prompted massive public interest in "reconstruction" – the building of a "better Britain" in which there must be no return to the bad housing, unemployment and consequent poverty that blighted so many lives in the inter-war period. For Addison and his supporters, the relationship between Labour and the new popular mood was essentially unproblematic. From 1940 onwards, Labour rode on the crest of widespread popular support as Labour policies and the new priorities of the general public enmeshed to an unusually high degree: "The trend was essentially towards left-wing attitudes, with the Labour Party as the natural beneficiary whenever party politics revived."² In effect, the result of the 1945 General Election was pre-determined five years earlier. Indeed, Addison suggests that the leftward swing actually peaked between 1940-42, suggesting that had a general election taken place in this period Labour would have received an even greater majority than in 1945.³ However, drawing on public opinion evidence from Manchester, this article will challenge this hypothesis, suggesting that there were no significant shifts in political views in the period up to the end of 1942. It accepts that the hardships of the War's early years generated a massive interest in "reconstruction", but argues that this was subordinated to a general willingness to "win the war first". Far from there being a major swing to the left, popular opinion was largely apolitical. If there was any political movement at all, it may well have been *away* from Labour in middle-class areas where the Party needed to increase support to have any chance of victory in the next general election.

The Manchester Blitz

Throughout the first few years of the War Britain remained, militarily, very much on the back foot. Amidst the seemingly endless tales of defeats and retreats, the British people endured a great deal in these years, and the War had a massive impact on all aspects of civilian life: conscription and re-direction of the labour force, long working hours (55-60 hour weeks were the norm) and, of course, rationing.⁴ Most importantly, civilians now experienced war at first hand through bombing. Virtually every city endured its own "blitz" and Manchester was the last of all major British cities to receive its own on two consecutive nights, 22-23 December 1940. On the first night a minimum of 270 German bombers dropped at least 233 high explosive bombs, 32 huge parachute mines and thousands of incendiaries, with thousands more incendiaries and a minimum of 55 high explosive bombs being dropped on the second night.⁵ The cumulative effect of the bombing was severe. In two nights, 200 business houses, 165 warehouses, almost 150 offices and 5 banks were totally destroyed or severely damaged; a further 500 business houses, 20 banks, 300 warehouses, and 220 offices suffered lesser damage. Effectively, within a mile radius of Albert Square, 31.3 acres had been laid in ruins. Scores of famous buildings, including the Cathedral, had either been totally destroyed or were little more than shells; 159 schools were damaged, some so severely that repair was impossible; 86 churches were damaged; several cinemas along with over 180 public houses and breweries were destroyed or damaged and most of Manchester's hospitals sustained damage and many were unable to admit further patients. Many buildings had been gutted by fire rather than demolished by high explosives. Over a two day period there were six officially designated "conflagrations", 20 major fires, and 600 (acknowledged by authorities to be a modest estimate) serious, medium and small fires. On the night of 23 December a massive fire around Piccadilly engulfed nine and a half acres, described shortly afterwards as the biggest fire in Britain since 1666. It was not until the afternoon of Christmas Day that the fire situation throughout the area was under control. By 2 January 1941 the number of dead in Manchester numbered 363,

with 455 seriously injured hospital cases and 728 less serious wounds. Over 30,000 homes had been destroyed or damaged and several scores of thousands of people had been rendered homeless. In eight days, 72,000 meals were served at rest centres and in just one day the city's mobile canteens fed 10,000 people. The following photographs provide examples of the damage inflicted on the city:

A Better Future?

In the face of such devastation and hardships it was hardly surprising that people looked to the future. Throughout Britain there were "heightened expectations about the securing of a better world when arms were finally laid down."⁶ Popular discussion on the subject of social reconstruction was, in turn, both stimulated and fed by the progressive intelligentsia. From 1940 onwards, the writer J.B. Priestley's popular series of "Postscripts" on the B.B.C., in which he urged his listeners to turn their minds to the creation of a better, new world, was only the most controversial of several examples. Priestley's talks were extremely popular in Manchester, with the non-political *Manchester City News* (hereafter the *City News*) describing him as "a man who, next to the Prime Minister, has done more than any speaker or writer to sustain and inspire the mass of the people ... The solid heart of Britain is behind him ... He is saying things we shall remember."⁷ A series of Penguin Specials examining the prospects and possibilities of post-war Britain were published and were widely available, and many of the national daily newspapers became more receptive to progressive ideas. *The Times* became an advocate of social reconstruction. By the end of 1940, Mass Observation had found evidence of a radical new spirit and a "questioning of the status quo."⁸ Manchester was no exception. In November 1940 the liberal *Manchester Guardian* (hereafter *Guardian*) commented: "All serious thinkers are agreed that if democracy is to justify itself we must make a different sort of Britain after the war and put an end to a number of injustices that disfigure our life today."⁹ Later in the War Labour's *Northern Voice* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Manchester and Salford Labour parties, retrospectively commented that in 1940:

*One man's war became everyman's war and in their camps and their shelters, on fire watch and on guard, men began to ask themselves: What on earth have we been doing all these years? Why these recurring wars, these economic collapses, these hideous towns, this overwhelming moral and spiritual bankruptcy? Why, why, why? Disgust, shame, anger – all these played a part and it became clear that there had arisen a grim determination to accept democratic responsibility and rise above the moral and social standards of the past?"*¹⁰

In his "Weekly Column" in the *City News*, Sidney Wicks believed:

This new vision of a land precious enough to be died for must surely give a new meaning to social and political life when peace allows us to turn to the trowel and the plough. Will this new emotion be transmitted into constructive social effort, the dream expressed in practical rebuilding of the whole structure of the national life? I think it will. Wherever men meet, in orderly rooms, in observation posts, sitting after tactical exercises on the hillside, they talk of reproaches, of evils, of reforms greatly to be desired. They talk like men who are acquiring the right to rebuild Britain.

Such massive interest in the reconstruction was not short-lived and, if anything, intensified in the next two years. Throughout 1941 reconstruction remained a major feature of the local press. In



Back Piccadilly ablaze.



Back Piccadilly ablaze.



Damage to the Canon Street area.

January the *Guardian* warned:

The war will leave behind it not only a great deal of dangerous confusion but a great deal of dangerous impatience. If the Parliamentary system cannot adapt itself to these conditions, if politicians resist reform for the sake of resistance, they will find the nation is not in a temper to watch these dilatory proceedings with indulgence ... We all know what are the four or five great spheres of action in which large advance is essential: education, nutrition, agriculture, regional and town planning and all those questions of economic re-organisation that are involved in the effective treatment of unemployment.¹¹

The *Guardian's* sister paper, the *Manchester Evening News* (hereafter *Evening News*) believed: "There is throughout the country a popular feeling, perhaps more intense than ever in history that this time things should be better ordered."¹² By 1942 popular discussion in Manchester on the question of reconstruction was such that the Manchester Information Committee (hereafter M.I.C.) – the Manchester branch of the Ministry of Information – asked for specific reports on public feeling concerning the issue. Over the following months the M.I.C. received reports and public opinion questionnaires highlighting the depth of public interest; "there is much enthusiasm over post-war reconstruction"; "post-war being widely talked about"; "a considerable amount of discussion of the kind of peace we shall make after victory" and "much talk of post-war education and town planning".¹³ Perhaps the most illuminating evidence of public interest in post-war matters came not through the M.I.C. but via a question and answer session between the Lord Mayor, Wright Robinson, and a group of one hundred children of school leaving age in mid-October 1942. This was the bleakest phase of the War since Dunkirk. Rommel had pushed the Allies back in North Africa; British and Empire troops had just completed a further withdrawal in the Far East, while the Germans had progressed deeper into the Soviet Union and were encircling Stalingrad. Despite the seriousness of the situation, at least one third of the questions were directed at post-war matters, with the remainder enquiring about the Mayor's official duties. Some of the questions warrant reproducing, for they provide a guide to the conversations children were hearing around them, and the priorities being ascribed to particular aspects of reconstruction: "What

is Manchester planning for the improvement of the slums now and after the war?"; "Are there going to be more or less hospitals after the war?"; "After this war, will the ordinary man's son have as much chance of going to college as the rich man's son?"; "Do you know whether there will be any unemployment after the war?"; "In post-war housing, will there be much communal housing as there is in Russia?"; "Should flats be built after the war?"; "Will there be a big slump after this war as there was after the last?"; "Has Manchester City Council taken any steps to prevent unemployment after the war?"; "Has, or are there, any plans being made for equality of opportunity as far as education is concerned?"¹⁴

In mid-1942 the M.I.C., hitherto a centralised body, was divided into five divisions with each responsible for a separate area in order to make their information gathering more effective.¹⁵ This change revealed that interest in reconstruction was not confined to specific social groupings but to society as a whole. Reports from the Northern Division, which consisted of traditionally strong Labour areas (notably Ardwick and Clayton) and those of the Southern Division, which represented staunch Conservative areas (Moss Side, Rusholme and Withington) revealed little or no difference in popular views. Reconstruction was being widely discussed across the whole spectrum of the electorate.¹⁶ The enormous public interest in reconstruction was not confined to Manchester's civil population for her servicemen showed perhaps even greater enthusiasm. In August 1942 the M.I.C. noted "great interest, especially amongst the lads home on leave from the Forces, about a new social order."¹⁷ A short time later it was again reported that there were "many servicemen calling in the Bureau complaining that their dependants are not receiving a fair deal from the Government and mutter dark threats about a 'New Social Order' after the war".¹⁸ The priority being given to particular aspects of reconstruction was the same throughout the city with housing, employment and education considered the most important priorities, with more modest numbers referring to pensions and family allowances.¹⁹

The Impact of Evacuation and Bombing

The massive interest in reconstruction was undoubtedly further stimulated by revealing social findings made in the early years of

the War. First came the startling revelations exposed by the evacuation of schoolchildren from the city in 1939. Evacuation provided shocking evidence of poverty in Manchester (and in all other major cities). Many of the children came from the poorer areas of the city and the condition of a large minority of them surprised and horrified their largely middle-class hosts in the reception areas (rural Lancashire and Derbyshire). In November 1939 the Manchester Education Department published an interim report on the evacuation, which stated:

Much has been written about the dirty condition of the children, and it is a fact that the physical condition of a minority was not what it should have been, and there were children with vermin, impetigo and eczema. Clothing in some instances was dirty and it is not surprising that in such cases householders resented the introduction of such children who, owing to lack of home training or some physical cause, were obviously undesirable guests. There were also many difficulties created by parents who visited householders and altogether failed to appreciate their points of view. Often there was dissatisfaction on both sides, resulting in acrimonious arguments, in appeals to the tribunals and in withdrawals.²⁰

Other reports confirmed the poor condition of many Manchester evacuees. A Women's Institute report noted: "Some children [from Manchester] had never slept in beds ... few children would eat food that demanded the use of teeth - [they] could only eat with a teaspoon"²¹ In Derbyshire, local residents were driven to revolt by their newcomers from Manchester. A regional welfare

officer reported:

They were really difficult and rough. I don't mean that they were unpleasant, they were enchanting, but their habits were appalling. The people of Derbyshire experienced children just doing their jobbies on the floor of sitting rooms. The women approached the Dowager Duchess of Derbyshire who told the Ministry of Health, on behalf of the people, that they refused to have the children in their homes.²²

For the first time, Manchester's middle-classes had been exposed to the poverty in their midst, in areas of the city they probably never visited, and some were undoubtedly roused to support measures to eradicate it. Following such revelations, the *Guardian* stated:

More than anything else evacuation must have brought home to people how far from perfect our democracy is. 'The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the richest he', but those who have seen some of the poorer children arrive from the cities will realise more than they did before how different the two lives are. If this memory can stay in the country's mind it may be that in an expedient of war will have been found the seeds of a great peace-time reform.²³

The bombing of Manchester prompted further social findings, this time in the field of housing. A survey of the city's housing stock in 1942, conducted by Manchester's Medical Officer of Health, confirmed that there had been very little, if any, improvement on



Evacuation instructions in a south Manchester school, 27 August 1939.



Children walking to Chorlton station for evacuation, 2 September 1939.

the findings of the 1930s. The survey revealed that Manchester still had 69,000 unfit properties and that over one-third of all houses remained below "reasonable" standards of sanitation.²⁴ Wright Robinson, a prominent figure in the Manchester Labour Party, noted that the Officer had found, in his district, that of the 1,848 houses inspected, over 1,800 had perished brickwork, 1,512 had bulged brickwork, 1,500 were verminous and 1,315 were bug infested.²⁵ The Medical Officer stated that throughout Manchester: "The unsatisfactory nature of such a large proportion of the dwelling houses must be causing incalculable, but nevertheless great, damage to the health of the occupants and the bad effect on the welfare of children, in particular, can scarcely be exaggerated."²⁶ The *City News* said:

To be told that we have in Manchester no less than 68,837 houses which are unfit for people to live in them cannot indeed do any other than depress us. Yet to give the fullest publicity to these figures at this time when rebuilding is a subject much in the public mind, is itself a hopeful sign. For it is only if we grasp the magnitude of the task ahead that there is real promise of wiping out this blot on our civic record. We have not merely to make Manchester a better looking city. We must undertake the more fundamental and urgent task of seeing that all its citizens are decently housed.²⁷

At the heart of the popular interest in reconstruction was a general belief that the state would play a more significant role in the nation's social and economic affairs in the post-war years. Although the state's activities had increased gradually in the inter-war years, in 1939 Britain's economic life was still overwhelmingly in the hands of private enterprise. War mobilisation increased the state's power massively and soon it controlled virtually every aspect of the war effort and civilian life. The belief that such involvement would continue after the War, at the expense of private enterprise, which was increasingly seen as being responsi-

ble for the unemployment and squalid living conditions of much of Britain between the Wars, was evident as early as 1940 and, following the Blitz, was particularly focused on the issues of housing and town planning. The *Guardian* observed:

One effect of the daily destruction from the air has been to turn men's minds to the possibility of planning towns and buildings on more pleasing and intelligent lines ... the rebuilding must be rational and in accordance with social need ... it is essential to have firm direction from the top to overcome anarchic interests.²⁸

Such criticism of the failings of private enterprise was adopted by the *Evening News*. A mid-1941 editorial hoped that post-war Britain would see no return to the "opportunity which a laissez-faire age gave to the shrewd and unscrupulous to make money out of their neighbours..."²⁹ Demands for nationalisation or an increased role for the state were not new. What was significant in the early years of the War was that such ideas gained a more general acceptance. "Plain Citizen", writing in his regular column in the *City News*, observed: "The demand of the common people that, having once more gone through the anguish of war, they shall this time get a better world will be heard everywhere ... There is a general assumption that the changes to come will be in the direction of more state regulation."³⁰ The civilian and service interest in reconstruction was, however, accompanied by a considerable cynicism. Many recalled that the First World War had witnessed similar hopes and aspirations, fed by the promise of "Homes fit for Heroes". Such promises had led to little in the way of progressive change and there were many who believed that the aftermath of this war would be little different. Early in 1941, the *City News* observed: "Many people when they hear the promises and aspirations that come so freely from all quarters today remember painfully the social aspirations of the last war and shortly after, and the sad contrast of the realities."³¹ Deep cynicism was still evi-



A Manchester slum



The interior of a Manchester slum.

dent in the summer of 1942. The M.I.C. received reports noting a mood of "dissatisfaction with the rosy picture painted by leaders about life at the end of the war – 'experience of the last war should produce caution.'"³² Many dismissed high-level talk of reform as a carrot with which the Government sought to encourage people to work harder and sacrifice more, talk which would be forgotten after the War. In August 1942 public opinion questionnaires revealed that people were asking whether "something [is] really going to happen, or is it just bluff?"³³

A Swing to the Left?

The widespread interest in post-war reconstruction has been held, by historians such as Addison, to indicate a major swing to the left in public opinion in the period 1940-42. The massive popular enthusiasm for the Soviet Union following her entry into the War in mid-1941 seemed only to emphasise the shift to the left. The depth of interest in the Soviet's military performance and her way of life was a major feature of this period of the War, a point that has not gone unnoticed by those attempting to discover popular political sympathies. Throughout 1942, public opinion reports revealed that war news from the Eastern Front was almost as widely discussed as news of British forces.³⁴ Furthermore, with the continuing German advance into Russia came widespread calls for the Allies to open a Second Front in Europe to relieve the Soviet burden. In Manchester, as elsewhere, the major force behind this push was the Communist Party and in September 1942 the Lord Mayor received a deputation of seventy men, all Communists representing a number of workshops, to press this demand.³⁵ Two large public meetings in support of a Second Front, again initiated by local Communists, were held at Belle Vue and in Piccadilly, drawing large turnouts.³⁶ The Soviet Union was clearly hugely popular in Manchester. One local Communist recalls:

When a Russian trade union leader visited Metro Vickers the support he got was enthusiastic beyond imagination. He was even invited to come downstairs to the directors dining-room but he wanted to go to the workers canteen instead and he was very warmly cheered. No doubt about that.³⁷

The M.I.C. noted that "you frequently hear the jest that we had better borrow some Russian generals."³⁸ The local press also extolled the virtues of Britain's Soviet allies, with the *Evening News* typical in asserting: "We were told that Communism was a ghastly failure. Now we learn that the release of science for the aid of industry and agriculture has worked miracles and is one of the secrets of Russia's amazing resistance."³⁹ Manchester's support for Russia, combined with its enormous interest in reconstruction, seemingly provides strong evidence in support of Addison's hypothesis. However, Manchester was characterised not by left-wing attitudes but by a general disinterest in party politics in any form. Popular interest in reconstruction was subordinated to a general willingness to win the War first. Consequently, although not the case in later years, reconstruction did not yet have a political edge, and no political party was linked with reconstruction in the public mind. Given the cynicism about the prospects of reform, one might have expected there to have been considerable local pressure on the Government to initiate some tangible measure of reconstruction to prove that their talk of change was genuine. Indeed, both the *Guardian* and *Evening News* regularly pressed for such evidence. In October 1940 the *Guardian* claimed: "Among the things required now is an assurance that some Cabinet Committee is working unremittingly on a design for twentieth-century living in the sphere of reconstruction at home."⁴⁰ How-



The Labour Leader and Deputy Prime Minister, Clement Attlee

ever, such statements were unrepresentative of the public mood, for one of the most notable features of these early years, even as late as the summer of 1942, was the complete lack of such pressure from the general public in Manchester. This is an important point which has been either widely dismissed or ignored by many historians who have seemingly confused widespread interest in reform for a demand for work to begin immediately. In fairness many contemporaries, including Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee, also believed that the public mood required the Government to give the people something positive to fight for (i.e. the promise of change) rather than the essentially negative aim of defending (and therefore maintaining) the *status quo*.

Most political studies of the War have argued that such attitudes demonstrated that the Labour Party was in touch with the mood of the people. Conversely, Winston Churchill is portrayed as reactionary, a man out of touch with public feeling on the issue and an obstacle standing in the way of change. It is true, of course, that for more than two years after he came to power in May 1940 Churchill's energies were directed almost totally to matters of military strategy and, on the occasions he turned his attention to the Home Front, to production. In these years Churchill, who, in Hugh Dalton's words, was "allergic to post-war policy", avoided reconstruction matters realising that they would threaten coalition unity and therefore his own position.⁴¹ For Churchill, reconstruction would have to wait until the War was won or, at least, until victory was in sight. The Manchester evidence suggests that as late as August and September 1942 Churchill's attitude, far from being diametrically opposed to that of his people, was merely echoing their own private thoughts. Questionnaires taken in the city during August revealed that high-level talk of reform was unpopular with many Mancunians, who felt politicians should concentrate exclusively on the war effort: "I am continually hearing complaints of public speakers talking of what is going to be done *after* the war, when we have not yet won it."; "Too much talk on post-war problems whilst still fighting for our existence."; "There is too much talk of post-war."; "General attitude is 'get the war over.'"; "General opinion is 'first catch your hare.'"; "General

feeling is to get the war won and then to talk of reconstruction. If we don't win we needn't bother talking about reconstruction – Hitler will see to that for us.”⁴² Not one questionnaire (out of over sixty) revealed dissatisfaction with the lack of progress in social reform being made. So throughout the early part of the War, Labour was not riding on the crest of public opinion but was actually in advance of it. While the Labour Party and much of the local press were pushing for change, most people supported Churchill's approach. The lack of public pressure for immediate reforms was reflective of a general disinterest in politics. M.I.C. reports during these years reveal that political apathy was a characteristic of the city. On the occasions that public interest in politics was recorded by an observer, it took the form of a common desire for all politicians to present a united front. This was also admitted by the Clayton Labour Party which, in December 1940, found that “there is no demand for a general election.”⁴³ Again, in a M.I.C. Public Opinion survey of August 1942 it was noted; “A General Election was not wanted.”⁴⁴ This was a national trend, with Mcallum and Readman pointing out: “It is certain that nothing was further from the minds of the general mass of the electorate in 1942 than the idea of holding a general election.”⁴⁵ The one contested by-election in Manchester in this period highlighted a general disinterest in political conflict. The turn-out for the by-election in the Labour-held seat of Clayton (October 1942) was only slightly over 20 per cent, as against the 1935 general election turnout of 77 per cent. Although the by-election figure was measured against an electoral register that was now three years out of date, it should be noted that a by-election in Rusholme two years later attracted a turn-out of nearly 35 per cent against an even older register. Amongst those who did vote, the majority evidently did so only to show their support for the Government, rather than through any great interest in policies. One voter said: “I would [like] to give my vote for the Government ... I think everyone who can should go to show our confidence in those who are running the country today.”⁴⁶

Anti-Labour Sentiment

Throughout this period, political conflict or a party seeking to use war-time issues for its own ends caused considerable public resentment. Interestingly, local criticism was directed solely at the Labour Party. In late May 1942, following the Labour Party Conference, which endorsed the continuation of the electoral truce by a majority of only 1,275,000 to 1,209,000, the M.I.C. recorded that there was “much disgust at the strength of the vote against the electoral truce”⁴⁷ Two months later, public opinion questionnaires revealed the existence of “strong criticism of the Minister of Labour's [Ernest Bevin] tendency to indulge in party propaganda on every possible occasion.”⁴⁸

The perceived Labour bias of the B.B.C. caused much disquiet, with one observer reporting “violent criticism of the left tendency of B.B.C. speakers and the broadcasting of the Socialist Party Conference as blatant party propaganda.”⁴⁹ As the Conservatives were largely dormant, no similar criticism could be made of the Conservative Party. There is no evidence to suggest that widespread interest in reconstruction boosted support for Labour. There was, again, considerable feeling against parties using reconstruction to advance their own cause. In the summer of 1942, public opinion reports revealed that on the issue of social reform there was disquiet at the way “politicians give the impression they are playing for position.”⁵⁰ Others reported that: “There seems to be some disquiet re talk of post-war. Whilst all feel that changes are necessary, there seems in many quarters a real fear lest they are being used by sentimentalists to foster their own social or political fads.”⁵¹ Once more, public criticism was reserved for the Labour Party. In reaction to the 1942 Party Conference, where



The Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin.

there had been talk of using the Party's influence to introduce reconstruction measures as soon as possible, the M.I.C. noted that they had “heard much disgust expressed with the blah-blah talked at the Conference.”⁵² Rather than helping to present a united front, non-Labour supporters felt that Labour was undermining the war effort by failing to cease their party political activity and attempts to make political capital out of war-time issues were, therefore, the antithesis of the popular mood. For this reason, widespread public interest in reconstruction had no positive effect on Labour's popularity. Labour's push for reconstruction was seen as blatant party political propaganda at a time when the majority of the local population believed the war effort should be receiving sole attention. There was consequently no swing to Labour in Manchester in the period 1940-1942. Admittedly, the Labour candidate in the Clayton by-election, Harry Thorneycroft, polled over 80 per cent of the vote, as opposed to the 53 per cent the Party achieved in the 1935 General Election, but this was more attributable to other factors than to a great surge in Labour's popularity. The by-election was fought under the terms of an electoral truce, which ensured that Labour could contest Clayton without opposition from either the Conservative or Liberal parties. Indeed, Labour's high poll was distorted by the fact that the Clayton Conservative Party urged its own supporters to vote for Thorneycroft as he was the official National Government candidate. Thorneycroft was further boosted by the fact that his only opponent, Major Hammond Foot (standing as an independent), was rather eccentric. He was dismissed by Wright Robinson as an “elderly, tall and bemused Major”,⁵³ with one of his main policies being the “courageous balancing of a terribly menacing unbalanced town and rural planning by the building up of a new yeoman community and ideal modern homesteads.”⁵⁴ In the light of such evidence, one must not ascribe significance to Labour's impressive poll in the Clayton by-election. Indeed, any political shift that may have occurred may actually have been away from the Labour Party in middle-class areas – the very areas in which Labour needed to increase support to win a general election. This was borne out by the Manchester Labour Party membership figures. Membership of the city's constituency Labour parties fell from 8,069 in 1940 to 4,719 in 1942.⁵⁵ This in itself is not significant: throughout the country factors such as service call-ups led to a considerable decrease in party mem-

bership. It was, however, significant that the fall was much greater in the city's Conservative held constituencies than in Labour strongholds. In 1940, the four Labour-held constituencies (Ardwick, Clayton, Gorton and Plating) provided 4,098 members; by 1942 this had decreased by 1,200 to 2,829 – a fall of 29 per cent. In the Conservative areas membership had dropped from 3,971 to 1,890, a decrease of over 2,000 or a massive 52 per cent.³⁶ In 1940 the four Labour constituencies provided 50.78 per cent of the Party's membership, while the six Conservative constituencies provided 49.21 per cent, virtual parity. By 1942, the proportions had changed to 60 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. Evidently, while some of those leaving the Party in Labour strongholds were being replaced by new members, the same was not happening in Conservative-voting constituencies. The intensification of class antagonisms was perhaps leading many of Manchester's middle-class citizens to identify even more closely with the Conservative Party, their natural political defenders. In consequence, Labour was making no inroads into the Conservative's core middle-class support. In 1941, Home Intelligence had found that there was "an absence of thought along traditional party lines and as yet few set-

tled opinions about the expected complexion of Britain's first post-war Government."³⁷ The evidence of Manchester would justify the same conclusion being reached in the autumn of 1942.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article suggests that apolitical attitudes, rather than any swing towards the Labour Party, characterised Manchester between 1940-1942. The public interest in social and economic reconstruction of the country was immense but, at this stage of the War, this did not translate into increasing support for Labour, with the overwhelming wish throughout this period being to ensure the successful prosecution of the War effort. Party politics were simply unimportant for the vast majority of Mancunians. It is probable that Labour did not begin to benefit from the general desire to re-build Britain along better lines until the military tide began to turn the Allies' way in 1943. Then, with victory in sight, reconstruction appeared a more pressing issue with people much less willing to postpone measures of reform than they had been between 1940-1942.

Notes

- 1 For a brief analysis of the various factors put forward to explain the "swing to the left", see R. Sibley, 'The swing to Labour during the Second World War: when and why?', in *Labour History Review*, 55, 1 (1990), pp. 23-34.
- 2 P. Addison, *The Road to 1945* (1975), pp.127-8.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.162.
- 4 The average weekly hours for men and women manual workers in the metal, engineering, and shipbuilding industries had been 48.0 in 1938, but rose considerably to 54.1 by July 1943. After 1941 it was increasingly realised that full efficiency required some relaxation and by June 1945 hours had in general fallen to 49.2. P. Dewey, *War and Progress. Britain 1914-1945* (1997), p.303.
- 5 All Blitz statistics taken from *Our Blitz. Red Skies Over Manchester* (1945).
- 6 D. Dutton, *British Politics Since 1945. The Rise and Fall of Consensus* (1991), p.10.
- 7 *Manchester City News*, 15 March 1941. Audience research reported that an average of one in three adults tuned in to Priestley's broadcasts.
- 8 K. Jefferys, *The Churchill Coalition and Wartime Politics 1940-1945* (1991), p.53.
- 9 *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Nov. 1940.
- 10 *Northern Voice*, Oct. 1944.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 29 Jan. 1941.
- 12 *Manchester Evening News*, 29 July 1941.
- 13 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, August 1942 (All M.I.C. material held at Manchester Central Reference Library).
- 14 Wright Robinson, files relating to official duties as Lord Mayor, 14 October 1942 (Manchester Central Reference Library).
- 15 The five divisions were based on established Police divisions and were constituted as follows: **Central Division:** Exchange, St Anns, St Clements, St Johns, Oxford, St Georges, part of Medlock Street. **Northern Division:** St Michaels, Collegiate Church, Collyhurst, Newton Heath, Cheetham, Harpurhey, Moston, Crumpsall, Blackley, part of Miles Plating. **Eastern Division:** Part of Miles Plating, New Cross, Beswick, Bradford, Ardwick, Openshaw, St Lukes, St Marks, Gorton North & South, Longsight, Levenshulme. **Southern Division:** Part of Medlock Street, All Saints, Moss Side East & West, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Rusholme, Withington, Didsbury. **Wythenshawe:** Wythenshawe solely.
- 16 M.I.C. Northern & Southern Division Public Opinion Reports, May-August 1942.
- 17 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, August 1942.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 M.I.C. Public Opinion Reports, various references, February-August 1942.
- 20 *Guardian*, 27 Nov. 1939.
- 21 P. Lewis, *A People's War* (1986), pp.12-13.
- 22 B. Holman, *The Evacuation. A Very British Revolution* (1995), p.75.
- 23 *Guardian*, 16 Sep. 1939.
- 24 A. Kidd, *Manchester* (1993), p.217.
- 25 *City News*, 24 Oct. 1941.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 7 May 1943.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Guardian*, 18 Oct. 1940.
- 29 *Evening News*, 22 July 1941.
- 30 *City News*, 9 Nov. 1940.

- 31 *Ibid.*, 11 Jan. 1941.
- 32 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, Aug. 1942.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 M.I.C. Public Opinion Reports, Jan.-Oct. 1942. Also see M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, Aug. 1942.
- 35 Wright Robinson Diary, Sept. 1942 (Manchester Central Reference Library).
- 36 M. Crowley, 'Communist engineers and the Second World War in Manchester', *North-West Labour History*, 22 (1997/98), p.64.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p.65.
- 38 M.I.C. Public Opinion Report, 27 June 1942.
- 39 *Evening News*, 15 Nov. 1941.
- 40 *Guardian*, 10 Oct. 1940.
- 41 Jefferys, *Churchill Coalition*, p.112.
- 42 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, Aug. 1942.
- 43 *City News*, 7 Dec. 1940.
- 44 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, August 1942.
- 45 R. Meallum and A. Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (1947), p.2.
- 46 *Evening Chronicle*, 17 Oct. 1942.
- 47 Secretary's Report to M.I.C., 21 May 1942.
- 48 M.I.C. Public Opinion Questionnaires, Aug. 1942.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 M.I.C. Public Opinion Report, 29 May 1942.
- 53 Wright Robinson Diary, Oct. 1942.
- 54 *Gorton Reporter*, 9 Oct. 1942.
- 55 Labour Party Annual Reports, 1941-1943.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 Jefferys, *Churchill Coalition*, p.139.

CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND MEDICINE

University of Manchester

The Centre was established in 1986 to support research and teaching in this expanding and exciting field of history, it concentrates on the period from the industrial revolution to the present, and has strong interests in local, regional and social history. It incorporates the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine and the National Archive for the History of Computing.

Present research topics include: history of hospitals and medical services, especially in the North West; medicine and war; biomedical sciences and technologies; science in and around Manchester; informatics; agricultural sciences; the therapeutic powers of music; physics/chemistry and industry; African medicine; radio-astronomy. Other research interests could be accommodated. There is an active programme of workshops, seminars etc.

CHSTM offers two innovative postgraduate programmes; the MSc in History of Science, Technology and Medicine, and the MA (Econ) in History and Social Anthropology of Medicine. We welcome enquiries from graduates wishing to study full-time or part-time for these degrees, or for a PhD.

Please write to: The Secretary
Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Mathematics Tower
University of Manchester
Manchester
M13 9PL
 Tel: 0161 275 5850
 E-mail: chstm@fs4.ma.man.ac.uk
http://www.man.ac.uk/science_engineering/chstm/frontpag.htm