Harold Wilson
50th anniversary of the 1964 government

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Editorial
The great reformer - or the great illusionist?

It was a moment when change and renewal were catchwords on the left, thirty years before Tony Blair uttered the same. Harold Wilson's rise to power as Labour prime minister represented an exceptional turning point in British post-war politics. Or rather, it was meant to do so. The general election on 15 October 1964 saw Labour return to power after thirteen years of Conservative government. Except for Clement Attlee from 1945 to 1951, no Labour prime minister had led a majority government. Moreover, Wilson was a leader for a new era, thirteen years younger than his predecessor Alec Douglas-Home, and marking a sharp contrast to the public-school ruling elite that had dominated British governments before him. In short, the swinging sixties were there for him to take charge.

Where expectations are high, disillusionment may follow however - as many governments with a reformist zeal have experienced. 1964 did not turn out to be a turning point in British politics like 1945 or 1979. Indeed, Wilson's six years in power from 1964 were considered "lost years" by some, particularly by those who saw redistributive policies and public ownership as the pivotal issues for the left. Yet Wilson's political project was more about reducing the significance of class than about furthering the interests of the working class. His government saw its purpose as allowing talent to flourish and encouraging industrial renewal.

That industrial renewal did not amount to much, as David Edgerton's article in this issue of British Politics Review suggests. Instead, Wilson's government came to be remembered for its liberal reforms on issues such as abortion, divorce, theatre censorship and homosexuality. In other areas, reform ambitions came to a standstill; that includes House of Lords and devolution, both of which returned to the political agenda under Tony Blair three decades later. And the man on the top became more known for his tactical skills than for his ideological capacity, balancing and re-bouncing to an extent that would make him a great asset at election time but perhaps less successful as a statesman.

In the present issue of British Politics Review, the Harold Wilson government is addressed from all these perspectives and more.

Øivind Bratberg and Atle L. Wold (editors)

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The Wilson government: a roller-coaster reputation

By Steven Fielding

Harold Wilson's political reputation has been on a roller-coaster ride ever since he became Labour leader in 1963 after the sudden demise of Hugh Gaitskell.

To some extent this has been the experience of most of Britain's major political leaders. Usually enjoying a honeymoon, once in office the realities of government mean they normally leave office under a cloud. As Enoch Powell once said, all political careers end in failure. Certainly, most seem to. Time, however, can be a great healer in failure. Certainly, most seem to. As Enoch Powell once said, all political careers end in failure. Certainly, most seem to.

Wilson's reputation has gone through its own unique series of highs and lows. Once I've outlined these, I will assess what his period as Labour leader might signify for the current Labour party, led by the son of Ralph Miliband, one of Wilson's greatest critics.

Early Harold

From the start, Wilson was hailed as brilliant Leader of the Opposition, for uniting a hitherto divided party and leading it to victory in the 1964 General Election, after being out of office for 13 years.

Gaitskell had wanted to transform Labour into a different kind of party, one in which clause four – which since 1918 had committed the party to the extension of public ownership - had disappeared. It was also to be a party in which the working class and trade unions were just elements in a broader, 'progressive', 'catch-all', centre-left party. But he went about this in a remarkably clumsy manner and after the party's 1959 defeat – which he blamed on its association with 'old-fashioned' nationalisation – Gaitskell fought a bitter internal battle with opponents, most of whom he dismissed as Communists. And he lost. Such were the divisions opened up by the Labour leader, when asked what had been the best thing that had happened in 1963 one Young Socialist answered: 'the death of Hugh Gaitskell'.

Wilson actually saw merit in Gaitskell's broad strategy but believed his tactics were destructive. Instead of attacking Labour's rank and file, as leader he therefore set about uniting the party behind his vision of a modernised Britain that he predicted would be forged in the 'white heat of technological change'. Contemporaries hailed Wilson's invocation of the promise of "the scientific and technological revolution" during his first leader's speech in 1963 as outlining a new vision of socialism. He appealed to both sides of the party because his speech gave the state a central role in this forward-looking process while emphasising the imperative for greater efficiency from both sides of industry and the need to appeal to those beyond the working class.

Wilson's assertion that only Labour could deliver this New Britain, not the out-of-touch, upper class Conservatives, was seen as vital to his appeal to younger, suburban white-collar workers and so to regaining power in 1964. This was the first of four general elections, which Wilson won – although one of these victories left Labour with a working Commons majority. The party had been out of office since 1951 and its vote had declined at the 1955 and 1959 elections. Some experts even claimed that without drastic change Labour would never win power again, a belief that motivated Gaitskell in calling for the abolition of clause four. Wilson however appeared to have proved the experts wrong.

Wilson's ability to keep his government going despite its precarious position in the Commons while skillfully wrong-footing the Opposition saw him add to his masterly reputation. The Conservatives even paid him the ultimate complement by getting rid of the upper class Alec Douglas-Home and electing as leader their own version of Wilson, the grammar school educated and supposedly 'classless' Edward Heath.

Prime Minister Wilson

Wilson called an election for April 1966, one that saw Labour win a majority of 96 seats and one of the party's greatest victories. Within a few weeks England had even won the World Cup! Once installed safely in government, Wilson's reputation took a massive nose-dive. If a brilliant short-term tactician, one who could use words to paper over ideological cracks and temporarily inspire the voters, as Prime Minister he was found wanting by almost everybody. Too cautious and conservative even for some of the most right-wing members of his Cabinet, Wilson was also accused of mixing debilitating insecurity with unfounded arrogance.

His Defence Minister Denis Healey wrote of Wilson in his memoirs:
He had no sense of direction, and rarely looked more than a few months ahead. His short-term opportunism, allied to a capacity for self-delusion which made Walter Mitty appear unimaginative, often plunged the government into chaos. Worse still, when things went wrong he imagined everyone was conspiring against him. He believed in demons and saw most of his colleagues in this role at one time or another.

In particular, Wilson refused to devalue the pound which meant the expansionary policies upon which ‘white heat’ was to be based never happened. For defending the pound meant deflating the economy, keeping wages down, allowing unemployment to creep up and standards of living to fall, all of which fuelled industrial discontent.

When the Treasury could no longer afford to maintain the pound’s value the enforced 1967 devaluation plunged the government into crisis and saw Labour fall into unprecedented depths of unpopularity. At this point there were plots against Wilson. His paranoia was fuelled by the fact that if he had any friendships in the party they were amongst the left – with whom he disagreed politically - while those with whom he mostly politically agreed despised him because he was not Hugh Gaitskell. Thus, the left claimed that under Wilson Labour gave up on socialism and was merely trying to administer capitalism – at the expense of the working class. His critics on the right claimed he could not even properly administer capitalism.

In attempting to make the economy work Wilson had always been obsessed with strikes, which he blamed for most of the country’s woes. When the National Union of Seamen went on strike he even claimed it was the work of Communists. Less well known, when milkmen in London threatened to strike he wanted to send in soldiers to drive the milk floats, until informed that he’d have to declare a National Emergency to do that. Wilson saw Barbara Castle’s 1969 plans to reform industrial relations, given the title of In Place of Strife, as a way to outflank the Conservatives by making strikes harder to call. But while the overall deal was favourable to the unions, he failed to get it through his own Cabinet and suffered another loss of prestige.

Despite this, by early 1970 Labour had recovered its electoral position somewhat. Wilson subsequently called a general election for June, although he had not kept the rest of his party informed about his intentions, which meant Labour was ill-prepared to fight the contest. By this point however he felt he could do without the party, believing he alone could win the election and his campaigning mostly consisted of Wilson emulating the Queen’s then novel ‘walkabouts’, which meant he waved and smiled but said as little as possible.

Compared to the promise of ‘white heat’ Wilson’s government was one of limited achievement – he could name little more than reducing the balance of trade deficit and creating the Open University. Moreover, its failures were generally believed to have been due to Wilson's own shortcomings, notably his lack of strategic vision. Anything good that came of the government – its permissive legislation and commitment to equal pay – was seen to have been the responsibility of others who sat around the Cabinet table.

Late Harold

Wilson’s second period as Leader of the Opposition was inglorious. Unable to stop Labour moving further left, he was forced to go along with policies that contradicted those he had followed in office. Critics claimed Wilson’s only object was now to keep the show on the road even though he couldn’t control in which direction the show was moving.

Unexpectedly returned to power in February 1974 – as the largest party but lacking an overall majority – Wilson then won a majority of just 3 seats in October. It was his fourth and final election victory, but it was a pyrrhic victory. The massive economic problems left by the Conservatives, who had struggled to deal with the world slump, would have been too much for most politicians. Wilson did however use these difficulties as the reason for not following Labour’s manifesto promise to engineer an ‘irreversible shift of wealth and power to the working class’, and he moved Tony Benn from the key Industry portfolio to Energy. Stumbling from crisis to crisis, in 1976 Wilson resigned, possibly encouraged by early signs of Alzheimer’s. Wilson’s departing Birthday Honours did him no favours, fuelling speculation about personal corruption, and accusations that he had sold honours for favours, notably to Lord Kagan, who had supplied Wilson with his trade mark Gannex raincoats when he first become party leader.

The election of Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1979 created a sense that British politics had been radically changed – the ‘consensus’ within which Wilson had operated had it was said ceased to be: it had failed. If right-wing Conservatives had no love for Wilson – in 1989 Thatcher asked fellow Conservatives, amidst much laughter, ‘Who are these people with the Gannex conscience? You know: the one you reverse according to the way the wind is blowing?’ – then none in his own party looked to Wilson for inspiration. For the left, Wilson represented everything they despised about their Parliamentary leaders. Those on the right believed Wilson had been culpable in failing to fight the left’s rise, something of which, they fervently believed, Gaitskell would not have been guilty. In 1991 one of that number David Marquand went as far as to describe the Wilson era as defined by ‘lost innocence, of hopes betrayed’.

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Wilson’s Evolving Reputation

There is now a fashion for ranking everything, even British Prime Ministers. These rankings each have different ways of making their calculations, but in 1999 Wilson was ranked as the 10th best Prime Minister; in 2004 he was 9th; but by 2010 had reached the dizzy heights of 5th. His reputation is improving – but why?

Historians were the first to start to rehabilitate Wilson who died in 1995 although illness meant he had quit the public stage long before then. The early 1990s saw the publication of three biographies only one of which reinforced his poor reputation, the others to various degrees sought to mitigate it. Certainly I was involved in a 1993 book that highlighted the contextual constraints in which his 1964-70 government operated and which any Prime Minister would have had trouble in transcending.

If we hardly claimed the government was a success we suggested it was much less of a failure than it was thought to have been and that many of its failures should not be blamed just on Wilson. It was however hardly a ringing endorsement of his leadership!

Yet, while New Labour claimed that it was true to the party’s abiding values, going all the way back to Keir Hardie, its leaders were uninterested in appropriating Wilson. So far as the Blair generation of modernisers was concerned – who were university students while he was Labour leader – Wilson was a failure and guilty of ‘corporatism’. If Blair went out of his way to praise Thatcher, Wilson was a non-person during the New Labour years. Wilson was in fact used against Blair by those thought him too close to the George W. Bush White House and opposed his Iraq adventure. At least Wilson did not send troops to Vietnam, despite pressure from LBJ, they claimed. Tony Benn was certainly not embarrassed to cite his old enemy Wilson against his new enemy Blair in that respect.

As the Labour party under Ed Miliband tried to find a post-New Labour identity, the left-wing commentator Neil Clarke of the Campaign for Public Ownership claimed in 2010 that Miliband should actively emulate Wilson, someone he claimed was – at least compared to Blair - a principled hero of the left, who successfully kept a divided party together. In 2012 the right-wing Daily Mail even used Wilson – presented as an economic expert skilled in the cut-and-thrust of debate - to highlight the shortcomings of Miliband during Prime Minister’s Questions. Wilson, the Mail asserted would also have wiped the floor with David Cameron.

As these two examples suggest, Wilson is now a free-floating signifier who can be used for a variety of contradictory purposes, appearing principled when many contemporaries saw him as the reverse, a success when many at the time saw him as a failure. Nostalgia also plays its part, at least for some on the left, for, given the triumph of neo-liberalism across the party spectrum since 1979 Wilson can be claimed to be significantly to the left of Miliband’s Labour party. But I am not sure what use such comparisons are.

Wilson Now

Rather than juxtaposing a Wilson frozen in time and comparing him favourably with the flawed present – in the same way Clement Attlee was used against Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s - it is more useful to see him as embodying a perennial problem, certainly for the Labour party. Wilson’s 1963 ‘white heat’ speech formed part of Labour’s attempt to make itself relevant to what its leaders were assured was a new electoral landscape, one in which the ‘traditional’ working class was in decline.

Those who accepted this analysis believed Labour had to focus its appeal on those ‘intermediate voters’ found in the expanding skilled working class and lower middle class. They believed this group had rejected the party in the 1950s because they thought it only stood for the lowest in society. These intermediate voters were deemed to be uninterested in the substance of policy and only reachable through catchy slogans and images.

Wilson’s ‘white heat’ speech was part of wider effort to appeal to this apolitical group and impress them that Labour was ‘modern’ and able to address their material concerns. As Wilson confirmed in subsequent speeches, which expanded on the ‘white heat’ theme, the full exploitation of the possibilities of science would only take place if Britain could unlock the talents of all the British people, talents he claimed were frustrated by companies run by public school boys whose authority was based on aristocratic connections not ability. By helping the ambitious to get on through taking science and technology seriously – and using the state to do this - a Labour government would, he claimed, help all Britons prosper.

If the speech was the product of a very different age the political calculations that underpinned Wilson’s strategy are very contemporary, at least with regard to how Labour’s leaders looked upon ‘intermediate voters’ - ‘middle England’ and the ‘squeezed middle’ by another name. Wilson was adept at apparently reconciling a divided party and conjoining it with the not especially socialist ambitions of the British electorate behind a great theme, with which all could identify. It was something that his predecessor Attlee had done as well as, three decades later, Blair. Like them, Wilson was unable to sustain his achievement in office and the winning electoral cross-class coalitions they had helped construct frayed and fell apart. If Wilson fell faster and further than these two, his example suggests that such failure – relative or absolute – is inherent. Yet, in mobilising party and electorate behind his transcendent ‘white heat’ vision Wilson achieved something most of his predecessors and successors, including the current Labour leader, have usually failed to do.
The 1964-70 Wilson Government and the British Constitution

By Kevin Theakston

After thirteen years in opposition, many of the incoming Labour ministers in 1964 were slightly surprised by the formalities and protocols of government when they first took office. New Cabinet ministers had to be sworn in as Privy Counsellors and needed a tutorial on how to kneel on one knee on a cushion, raise the right hand with the Bible in it, advance three paces towards the Queen, take the monarch’s hand and kiss it, bow and then move back ten paces without falling over the stools placed behind them.

Tony Benn complained in his diary that he found the ‘tribal magic’ of this ceremony ‘degrading’ but recognised that he had to do it to be allowed to receive secret Cabinet papers. As they settled behind their ministerial desks in their Whitehall departments, some Labour politicians took time to get used to the nanny-like attentions of the civil service – listening-in to their phone calls and keeping track of all their appointments and comings and goings. If you put all the official paperwork in your ‘in-tray’ into your ‘out-tray’ without a mark on it, his private secretary smoothly told Richard Crossman, we will deal with it and you need never see it again.

Here was the embrace of the famous British ‘Establishment’ – the beguiling mysteries, rituals and secrets of the inner circle and of the hierarchies of Westminster, Whitehall and Buckingham Palace. The ‘what’s wrong with Britain’ debate of the early 1960s had identified archaic institutions (including parliament, the civil service and local government) as among the key obstacles to social and economic ‘modernisation’. But for all the talk of change and reform, Labour under Harold Wilson largely accepted the established order. Asquith’s Liberals before the First World War) had passed measures to reform the House of Lords. Wilson’s Constitutional Reform Act 2005 modernised the House of Lords but he failed in the 1960s. Partly, this was because Labour was not convinced that the constitutional reform was ‘essential to democracy as we know it’.

When Benn, as Postmaster-General, came up with a plan to issue pictorial commemorative postage stamps without the Queen’s head on them, the prime minister sided with a horrified Palace and blocked any idea of even symbolically edging the monarchy away from its central place in British public life. Always at home in Whitehall (he had been a wartime temporary civil servant), Wilson generally worked well with civil servants and regarded them highly, rejecting left-wing allegations of bureaucratic sabotage and political bias. He was not an uncritical admirer of the Whitehall machine, however, being suspicious of the power of the Treasury and feeling the top mandarin class lacked drive and specialist expertise. The first of what were later called special advisers (often labelled the ‘irregulars’ in the 1964-70 government) appeared in small numbers in Downing Street and some ministries – politically-appointed expert advisers and political aides brought in from outside the civil service. Wilson set up the landmark Fulton Committee, whose report in 1968 sounded more radical than it really was and allowed him to pose as a Whitehall reformer, but in fact it largely served to assist, encourage and accelerate developments already underway or in the pipeline in terms of civil service organisation, management, recruitment and training. He soon lost interest in the detailed issues while bigger reforms that might have called into question the conventions of ministerial responsibility and of a permanent career civil service were never on the agenda.

The traditions of closed government and official secrecy were preserved – Labour ministers would not countenance any idea of ‘freedom of information’ reform – save for the opening up of government records after thirty years rather than fifty. Wilson also tinkered endlessly with the machinery of government – creating new government departments and merging or renaming old ones – but his approach was ad hoc and very political (concerned with short-term headlines and with reshuffling, balancing or playing-off against each other the personalities round the Cabinet table), showing little evidence of strategic purpose or design.

The two previous non-Tory majority governments (Atlee’s Labour government in the late 1940s and Asquith’s Liberals before the First World War) had passed measures to reform the House of Lords. Wilson’s government failed in the 1960s. Partly, this was because there was little enthusiasm in the Cabinet: the main impetus behind the abortive reform scheme of 1968-69 came from Richard Crossman, while other powerful ministers had doubts and reservations.

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Wilson's own personal commitment to a full-scale reform was never unwavering – he was always more interested in reducing the Lords’ delaying powers than in overhauling its composition. Then – fatally – the government took time to work out its proposals and to consult in all-party talks (1968), which eventually were broken-off, before it introduced (in 1969) a bill to create a two-tier second chamber with voting and non-voting peers (which would eventually phase out the hereditary peers) with a six-month delaying power. This got bogged down in the Commons and fell victim to the guerrilla tactics of an improbable cross-party coalition of backbench rebels and opponents who either wanted, on the left, stronger meat (preferably abolition of the Lords) or, on the right, to prevent any change to the Lords at all.

Labour can claim credit for the creation of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (or ombudsman) but that was only a modest step in terms of citizen rights and protections against state bureaucracy. Other attempts at parliamentary reform – experiments with changed parliamentary hours and with specialist select committees – were pretty half-hearted and made little headway. Richard Crossman was the main enthusiast as Leader of the House of Commons (1966-68) but Wilson seemed mainly interested in diverting the energies of potentially troublesome backbench MPs. When one minister argued that ‘our backbenchers should be grateful that as a socialist government we want to keep the Executive strong, not to strengthen parliamentary control’, he was actually applauded by others around the Cabinet table.

Harold Wilson once said that Royal Commissions ‘take minutes and waste years’ but he (like other PMs) found them useful devices for defusing issues and postponing awkward decisions. He set up no fewer than three in the 1960s on sub-central government: one on local government in England and Wales, one on local government in Scotland, and a third on devolution and the regions and nations of the UK. The first two reported in 1969 (but Labour was unable to take action on them before it left office) and the latter reported in 1973, when the Conservatives were in power, and it was promptly shelved. It was clear, however, that Labour did not envisage a territorial dispersal of power to levels of government away from Westminster and in 1964. But powerful figures in the Labour party and government were strongly opposed to any idea of devolved legislative powers for Scotland and Wales. Willie Ross, the Scottish Secretary, prided himself on his nickname, the ‘Hammer of the Nats [Scottish Nationalists]’. Electoral advances by the Scottish and Welsh nationalists in the 1960s, however, and some dramatic victories by them over Labour in a couple of parliamentary by-elections, showed that the tectonic plates of the UK were starting to shift. The old argument that the economic and social problems of Scotland and Wales could only be solved by central solutions implemented by a socialist government using all the powers of the central British state was starting to have less purchase in the 1960s. Wilson bought some time with his Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969-73) – he always personally found devolution a boring subject and was opposed to the idea of a federal system - but cracks in the traditional constitutional order of the UK were starting to appear.

In conclusion, looking back at the Wilson years in the 1960s, we can see that the established institutions and orthodoxies of the ‘Westminster model’ remained entrenched. Wilson and his Cabinet colleagues were, for the most part, strongly attached to the fundamentals of an executive-dominated, centralised, parliamentary regime and constitution. Major reform of the civil service came later; starting under Thatcher, rather than under Wilson, a man of whom it was once said he would be ‘most upset if he ever thought he had caused serious offence to a permanent secretary.’ Wilson had long left the scene and was dead before the Blair government pushed through a whole series of constitutional reforms after 1997, dealing with some of the issues he had faced in the 1960s such as Lords reform and devolution - but one strongly suspects that he would not have been enthusiastic about them.
The men who made sodomy legal: The Wilson Government and the realisation of overdue reform

By Kate Gleeson

The Sexual Offences Act 1967 made the first inroads to decriminalising men's homosexual sex since buggery was made a capital offence under Henry VIII, by providing that 'a homosexual act in private shall not be an offence provided that the parties consent thereto and have attained the age of 21 years.' The Act was drafted at the direction of the 1957 Wolfenden Report, but bore the distinct hallmark of individuals of the 1967 parliament. More complex than the dictated product of Wolfenden, and more idiosyncratic than a simple reflection of the social climate of the 1960s, the private member's bill was a Labour initiative with bipartisan support (with 60 Tories including Margaret Thatcher voting for reform).

Analyses of Wilson's social legacy tend to focus on significant reforms concerning capital punishment, gaming and obscene publications. The Sexual Offences Act has been curiously neglected, viewed simply as the anti-climactic, overdue product of the Wolfenden Report; the inevitable culmination of the permissive climate of post-war affluent Britain. But the Bill could not have succeeded when it did without the support of Wilson and his government that provided it extensive time in parliament, even though some of the strongest opponents were old-school Labour MPs who quaintly regarded sodomy as a ruling class vice. It also would not have succeeded without strategic manoeuvring around the other great social legacy legislation of the era - The Abortion Act 1967 which transformed abortion governance in the western world, preceding by half a decade the landmark US case of Roe v Wade. On the fiftieth anniversary of the first Wilson ministry, it is revealing to revisit the law that enacted the Wolfenden recommendations after a decade of both Conservative and Labour governments avoiding implementation of what might now seem like inevitable reform. It is particularly revealing to revisit the strategies and tactics of the parliamentary Labour party that enabled reform.

Churchill established the Wolfenden Committee in 1954 in response to concerns about the increase in women's street prostitution and male homosexual offences after the war. In 1957, much to Home Sectary Sir David Maxwell Fyfe's horror, the committee recommended the decriminalisation of both categories of offence when performed in private, along with a heightened punishment of women soliciting sex in public. Fyfe was adamant he was not going down in history as 'the man who made sodomy legal, so the prostitution recommendations were enacted swiftly in the Street Offences Act 1959, while it took ten years of parliamentary prevarication before male homosexual acts were partially decriminalised by way of the Sexual Offences Act 1967.

Wilson was elected in October 1964, promising an extensive program of reforms, but with only a majority of five in the Commons to achieve it. Wilson was not un-attuned to the cultural shift of the sixties (awarding MBEs to the Beatles as he did), but he was cautious. In 1961 he had warned that endorsing the Wolfenden proposals would cost the party six million votes. But by 1964 he promised free votes on 'controversial issues' and the 1965 appointment of Roy Jenkins as home secretary changed the culture of the parliament entirely. Jenkins, who idealised a 'civilised society', insisted he be permitted to indicate his personal support for reform. After a number of attempts at reform by both Labour and Conservative MPs from 1960, on 5 July 1966, Labor Member for Pontypool Leo Abse stepped in with his own peculiar brand of persuasion to introduce the Sexual Offences Bill, under the ten minute rule. Although enabled by widespread support, the Act is very much the love-child of Leo 'the lionhearted' Abse, as he was known. Indeed, some hoped the act would be named after Abse.

The 1960s did not see radical claims for gay rights voiced in parliament (or, arguably, elsewhere: the Gay Liberation Front was formed in 1970 after Stonewall). Lord Arran, sponsor of the Bill in the Lords, argued for reform in regard to equality for minorities like 'the Jews and the negroes'. But Abse was the self-styled Freudian sophisticated solicitor with a vision - the transcendence of repression. The eccentric member, famous for the psychedelic shirts he liked to wear on budget day espoused the 'universality of bisexuality' and unwcomely psychoanalysed those Conservative members of parliament opposed to reform.

"In 1961, Wilson had warned that endorsing the Wolfenden proposals would cost the party six million votes. But by 1964 he promised free votes on 'controversial issues' and the 1965 appointment of Roy Jenkins as home secretary changed the culture of the parliament entirely."

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Wilson had been returned in a landslide and support for Abse in 1966 was widespread – 244 votes to 100 in favour. But still there was resistance from many older Labour MPs who argued the bill was turning the working classes against the party. Despite the government’s professed neutrality, sympathetic whips rallied support and after an all-night session on 3 July 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was made law, passed by 99 votes to 14 at the third reading. Labour Minister Richard Crossman considered it a ‘staggering result’ in the use of the ten minute rule to push through social reform that appeared inevitable once both Houses had showed support, with Wilson providing parliamentary time mainly so as to have the matter finalised long before the next election. Debate over the Abortion Bill – the other outstanding reform of 1967 – was crucial.

The Abortion Act differs from the other hallmark reforms of the era in that it was not the outcome of a government committee, inquiry or Royal Commission. The result of a private member’s Bill sponsored by Liberal Democrat and member for Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, David Steel, the Act was informed by two prominent lobbies of the time — the Abortion Law Reform Association and the British Medical Association. From 1954 there had been seven attempts to reform the law, but it was not until thalidomide in the early 1960s that widespread support was secured among the public and in parliament. It is unlikely the Act would have been enacted by a Conservative government. Wilson and Jenkins were again instrumental in securing what may now seem like inevitable reform by providing drafting assistance and allowing for protracted debates and readings of the Bill.

Still, the Labour Party was divided on the issue, despite the Bill’s perceived popularity among working class women. Although Jenkins urged the home affairs committee to abandon its policy of strict neutrality toward reform, he was not persuasive. Nonetheless, the provision of an all-night sitting for Steel’s bill was seen to belie the government’s ‘fig leaf of neutrality’ as Crossman called it, and again provide for socially popular reform less controversially by way of a private member’s bill.

The Abortion Act played a tactical role in securing the decriminalisation of men’s homosexual sex. A degree of backlash was directed towards the Labour Party for its support of the Sexual Offences Act, especially from the working classes, but this had a boomerang effect in creating positive demand for the abortion bill.

Crucially, skilled whips were able to use each bill to manipulate the parliamentary vote. The relationship between the two bills was especially troubling for Abse. Despite his otherwise ‘progressive’ leanings, Abse was opposed to abortion and dismissed the bill in his typical way as a ‘bespoke piece of tailoring well fitted to suit the temperamental needs of a phallic narcissistic character type’. Initially Abse fought the bill in parliament, heartening Conservative catholic MPs. But Abse claims he was ultimately ‘politically blackmailed’ for the first and the last time in his political career, as it was made clear to him by many members that if he pursued his objections to the abortion bill they would withdraw their support for the sexual offences bill. Abse succumbed to the ‘blackmail’ and the abortion bill was made law in 1967, carried at the third reading by 167 to 83 votes – a remarkable success after one of the hardest fought parliamentary encounters of the 1950s and 1960s.

The Sexual Offences Act and the Abortion Act have both since been reformed, but their legacies stand as revolutionary and internationally groundbreaking: brave and skilful initiatives to implement reforms that had been on the political and public agenda since the time of Churchill. Preceding both the gay and women’s liberation movements, both Acts were true products of the 1967 parliament, its social ethos and its tactical strategies.

Leo Abse (1917-2008) was a Welsh Labour politician and gay rights campaigner. As MP he introduced private member’s bills to decriminalise male homosexual relations and liberalise the divorce laws, amounting to some of the most radical legislative changes in the post-war period.
Vietnam, policy inaction and the Wilson Government

By Stephen Barber

A master of party management, Harold Wilson has long been considered relatively insignificant in policy terms. But in one important respect this assessment undervalues the importance of his administration’s deliberate inaction. This article makes the case that Wilson’s decision not to become entangled in the US Vietnam war remains one of his most significant achievements with long-term implications as can be appreciated if one considers the counterfactual of the policy.

Harold Wilson is arguably Labour’s most electorally successful party leader. Winning general elections in 1964, 1966, February 1974 and October 1974 (though losing in 1970), he promised to modernise Britain with a clarion call of the ‘white heat of technological revolution’. His election in 1964 marked the end of what he called ‘thirteen wasted years’ of Conservative government. And yet despite his campaigning success and relative longevity in office, he perhaps left little by way of permanent and active policy legacy. It is instructive that the lasting monument to Wilson’s premiership is sometimes thought to be the relatively modest Open University, created by Royal Charter in 1969.

That is not to say that his administration sat on its hands. Among many other things, it experimented with a Department of Economic Affairs charged with economic planning, it attempted reforms in industrial relations known as ‘in place of strife’ and wrestled with Sterling crisis and eventually devaluation. These examples might well be seen as policy failures but what is certain is that they did not represent any kind of paradigmatic shift in the way things were done.

It is important not to ignore the obvious changes which took place. The social revolution of the 1960s and accompanying legislation happened on Wilson’s watch and the prime minister did more than step out of the way of change. But this list of legislation which decriminalised homosexuality, reformed the divorce laws, ended capital punishment and legalised abortion, and which marked a permanent change in law and attitudes, is rarely associated directly with Harold Wilson. Indeed, as the recent biography by John Campbell reconfirms, it is Roy Jenkins who served as a great reforming Home Secretary, who (rightly) receives most of the credit. This is more than simply a reflection on constitutional arrangements that government departments and Secretaries of State propose legislation. After all, there are plenty of examples of other prime ministers - Blair, Thatcher, Heath, Attlee - who are credited with policy changes championed by their Ministers.

Vietnam and appreciating policy

For the most part, when discussing public policy we are concerned with the active decisions of government: legislation, fiscal and monetary adjustments, strategic change and the like. These are the decisions which occupy political scientists and historians. But there is more to policy than that. Four decades ago Thomas Dye defined policy not only as what governments do but also what they choose not to do. And arguably the most important decision taken by the Wilson government in the 1960s, a policy intimately associated with the prime minister himself, was the decision not to join the Americans in the ill-fated Vietnam war.

This reality of how we discuss policy means that Vietnam does not feature as prominently as might be expected in the myriad of biographies and studies of the Wilson government to have been published over the years. The situation is even starker when viewed from the other side of the Atlantic. Harold Wilson and UK policy barely warrant a footnote in many US accounts of the war in Vietnam. While this is understandable, one only has to consider the counterfactual to appreciate how momentous the decision really was. After all, the failures of Vietnam and the considerable loss of life bore heavily on the Johnson and Nixon administrations in the US, created a huge federal budget deficit and permanently scarred the American conscience.

Moreover, it might just be the experience of another ill-fated foreign policy adventure which has refocused attention on Harold Wilson. When the Bush administration decided that the US would invade Iraq, Britain was loyally at her side. But amid the controversy that has ensued in more recent times, criticism of the Blair government for legitimising this misadventure can be identified. And while it is certain that Iraq will occupy a large chunk of assessments of the Blair legacy because it was an active policy decision, the idea that the British government might have declined the invitation to engage in military action naturally leads to a consideration of the Wilson administration which did just that in an earlier political age.
There are then parallels between Iraq and the war in Vietnam. In both cases, the United States was less interested in British firepower than in a legitimisation of military action. Washington would have been content with a token British force in Vietnam or what President Johnson sarcastically demanded as even a ‘platoon of bagpipers’. For Wilson though, the pressure came not only from the transatlantic relationship but also from within his own party where many MPs were vehemently opposed to UK support for the US.

Rhiannon Vickers offers one of the best accounts of Wilson’s Vietnam policy and shows that this opposition to President Johnson’s escalation of hostilities was largely motivated by concerns for his own domestic position and the need to pacify his party rather than because of questions of morality. Unsurprisingly given Wilson’s commensurate skill as a party manager, he successfully negotiated the pressures from his own supporters to distance the government from the conflict without engaging in criticism of Johnson or the policy of the USA. ‘Although the Vietnam War spurred the left to charge that Wilson had betrayed the party’, she writes, ‘he actually was fairly successful in managing British policy on the war. He kept Britain out of the fighting but maintained the country’s “special relationship” with the United States’.

While this article has talked about ‘the decision’ to remain outside of conflict, it does not adequately describe what happened. This was a sustained campaign by Wilson to maintain a line and manage these competing relationships. The policy was inherited from the Conservative government that Wilson’s Labour Party defeated in 1964 and that was to provide ‘moral support’ for the USA’s ‘defensive’ position. This was an increasingly difficult position to maintain as the war progressed and there was huge pressure to come down in support of one side or other; including growing anger from Johnson himself. In many ways the issue of Vietnam led to some of the worst relations between a US President and a British prime minister in post war history. But again the nuances in the policy ensured that there was no real harm done to long term diplomatic relations.

Here Wilson’s political nous is commendable as he stretched his policy to the brink of credulity. He clung to a rather weak excuse that the UK’s role as co-chair of the Geneva Accords precluded use of its military and even managed to disassociate Britain from the controversial escalation of bombing of North Vietnam while still supporting the US administration. After the 1966 general election, which had given Wilson a sizeable majority, more left-leaning Labour MPs were elected who were vocal in their hostility to Washington. And it is perhaps this pressure which motivated the prime minister’s numerous peace making schemes which in the end led nowhere.

Reappraising Wilson

Harold Wilson represents one of the clearest reminders that policy must be judged by what government does not do as well as by what they achieve. Wilson was a commensurate tactician and party manager. His nimble leadership held Labour together in the 1960s and 70s as the left and right of the party began to define themselves so very differently. It meant that Wilson and Labour held office during these years but did not prevent the open warfare and splits which eventually happened after 1979. In terms of an active policy legacy, Wilson’s achievements remain somewhat thin; this despite the great social reforms driven by his Home Secretary amongst others. But his decision not to join in the Vietnam war and hold a shaky policy line which maintained relations with the United States should be viewed as a very great achievement. After all, the conflict outlived Johnson (who died in 1973) dragging on through the Nixon administration until 1975 but Britain thankfully remained outside.

Even if not founded on principle, Wilson’s strategy should be seen as a deliberate decision of policy inaction which made use of his considerable tactical abilities. Harold Wilson himself died in 1995. His epitaph is Tempus Imperator Rerum (Time the Commander of All Things). On reflection perhaps, Vietnam looked rather messy at the time but in retrospect the British policy was skilful and significant.

Further reading:
In all our plans for the future, we are re-defining and we are re-stating our Socialism in terms of the scientific revolution. But that revolution cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society. The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry.

The quote is from Harold Wilson’s speech to the Labour Party conference on 1 October 1963. It was his first speech to conference since becoming party leader upon the death of Hugh Gaitskell. A year later he would find himself in 10 Downing Street. The ‘white heat’ speech came to be seen as the very essence of Wilson’s ideological renewal: a brave new world where talent and hard work would be rewarded and where British society would break with old class barriers in a giant leap towards modernisation.

In the standard view Wilson distanced him from the traditional working-class collectivism of the left as well as attacking the traditionalism and inherited privileges of the right. His was a voice speaking to the rising middle class, in favour of rational organisation of society and progress through scientific improvement. Wilson’s reputation as prime minister hinges to a large extent on whether he managed both to reorient the Labour Party towards this new middle class and whether he did manage to modernise the British economy.

The speech was much more interesting than this analysis suggests, though it is hard to see this. It is full of ludicrous analyses of the potential of technical change. In his speech Wilson claimed that ‘the essence of modern automation is that it replaces the hitherto unique human functions of memory and of judgment’; computers now commanded ‘facilities of memory and of judgment far beyond the capacity of any human being or groups of human beings who have ever lived’. As a result, the ‘programme-controlled machine tool line’ could ‘without the intervention of any human agency’ produce a ‘new set of machine tools in its own image’; they had acquired ‘the faculty of unassisted reproduction’.

This argument was hardly original; rather it is a recurring one throughout a post-war era of technological change. Thus, rather than showing a particularly prescient political leader, it demonstrates that when it comes to those elusive and confusing notions of “science” and “technology”, intelligent people spoke much the same nonsense they do today. Rubbishy techno-futurism encapsulated in brain-rotting cliches is still the way elites want us to think about these matters. It appeals to cynical politicians too – it suggests the past or present are no guide, we must move on, wipe our minds of what we know, ready for the brave new world of the future. In British politics techno-futurism has been the refuge of scoundrels. Wilson’s speech was in part that of a cunning political operator, exploiting techno-futurism in just this way. It is why it has been recommended to more recent Labour leaders.

But it also appeals because it is believed that Wilson put his finger on something vitally important that remains true today – that the British elite are speculators, financiers, aristocrats, hostile to the modern necessities of research, development, industrial modernisation. It is an argument that has been prevalent in criticism of Britain’s economic decline from the Great War onwards, and it is a line that finds particular resonance on the left. From this perspective, class constrains talent; inherited privilege and outdated British institutions are a brake on progress and social justice all at once, not least by restricting research and development (R&D).
It is a position that could easily yield a conclusion that if Wilson failed to deliver, it was because the policies he adopted were simply not up to the task. Supporting research and development, waxing ecstatic about computers, expanding scientific education was never going to be enough.

But Wilson knew very well what the scientific intellectuals and other propagandists did not wish to be frank about: that the British state was by far the world’s biggest investor in research and development other than the US and the USSR. He wanted to redirect this effort: as he put it, Labour would be ‘mobilising Britain’s scientific wealth for the task of creating, not the means of human destruction, but the munitions of peace’.

Yes, he wanted more scientists, and endorsed the myth there were not enough, but he campaigned against the so-called independent, so-called British, so-called deterrent and the overemployment of scientists on ‘prestige’ military projects that never got off the drawing board. In other words he wanted to reform the British state, not by putting science and technology into it, but by redirecting its already massive technical effort, most of which was tied up in over-inflated British warfare state.

The ‘white heat’ speech also embraced another radical policy – hostility to the common market. Many Labour people were hostile to the rampant consumerism of the affluent society, and supportive of the poor of the world, particularly in the Commonwealth. Wilson pressed these buttons hard. What was needed, he said, was an ‘increase in Britain’s productive power’, not ‘some new gimmick or additive to some consumer product’ which television adverts would ‘tell us all to buy a little more of’ when ‘we did not even know we wanted [it] in the first place’. Here is, clearly, a break from the easy idealisation of increased consumption that had characterised the long 1950s.

It was very nice, Wilson said, to do research on colour television and bigger and better washing machines to sell in Dusseldorf, but instead ‘we should be mass producing simple ploughs and tractors’, and researching ‘one or two horsepower steam engines, because that is what the world needs’. The scientific departments of the new universities should be working on plant breeding, fertiliser, animal husbandry for the poor world, which should be supplied with transport equipment by otherwise redundant railway workshops.

How did the promises fare? Wilson was to shed most of the commitments above: the US Polaris missiles were bought and put into semi-British submarines; Britain sought entry to the Common Market once more, and there was no mass production of steam ploughs for the poor of the Commonwealth. But there were important novelties in research policy, the most important and the least understood being the use of military-style procurement for civil projects under a new and vast industry, energy and defence procurement ministry called the Ministry of Technology. Wilson was long committed to creating such a ministry, and it was no gimmick. But the ministry quickly realised that the problem with the British economy was not the lack of R&D, or scientists, but something else, perhaps investment, or management. In other words, it realised that the techno-declinist theses that helped launch it were untenable. In other words, key theses which Wilson espoused, and many analysts then and now espouse, were, the government realised, wrong.

The ‘white heat’ was not a failed attempt to insert technocracy into British politics; it was rather an only partially successful attempt to redirect an existing technocratic state. On that score, the Wilson government met with a broad set of challenges that should not be reduced to inherited institutions and class but encompassed issues such as the dynamic between public and private sector and Britain’s position in the world.

Alas, the speech is remembered, worse, celebrated, for its banalities and not its substance, and what Labour learned in office was consigned to the deep darkness where the truth about research policy is hidden. ‘White heat’ has become one of those pernicious clichés like the ‘two cultures’. Where ‘white heat’ denotes government-inspired industrial modernisation, the ‘two cultures’ depict a counter-productive emphasis on the arts rather than natural sciences in British higher education. Both are clichés that have corrupted our understanding of the operation of knowledge and power in modern Britain. We need to stop using them and begin, at long last, to think freely from them.
Harold Wilson as Labour Party PM
By Øivind Bratberg

Harold Wilson’s record as prime minister illustrates some of the dilemmas that every leader of the Labour Party has encountered. Wilson’s government set out to pursue radical goals through gradualist policies. Wilson himself wished to present Labour as a government allowing talent to flourish, but one which would also sustain a commitment to equality and redistribution. And he aimed for a cross-class electoral appeal, yet also needed to nurture the party’s roots in the working class.

Wilson’s way of dealing with these dilemmas was in many ways emblematic to the 1960s. There is an evident familiarity between the project pursued by his government and what would appear a few years later in Germany under Willy Brandt. More remotely, perhaps, there is a relation to be drawn to John F. Kennedy’s youthful voice of renewal and social justice as American President at the very start of that decade. What was clear across the western world at this time was that the post-war era had reached a crossroads. No longer would the primary concern be reconstruction and basic welfare-state design, as had been the case in the first decade after 1945. Nor could social democrats restrain themselves to representing the industrial working class. What was emerging from a booming economy and a growing public sector was a new middle class, different from both the cloth-cap image of the industrial worker and the business or landed property character of the old middle class. The era of industrial managers and public servants had arrived; sympathetic towards equal opportunities, concerned with the quality of education, eager to see industrial renewal and technological change improve the state of affairs.

These were the groups that Wilson appealed to, explicitly so through his ‘white heat of technology’ rhetoric discussed by David Edgerton discussed elsewhere on these pages. Besides research and development, educational reforms and a climate of cooperation between trade unions and employers were part and parcel of this strategy. It was a set of ideas that were only partly followed through in practice. If we assess the track record of Wilson’s government, education comes out favourably (with the Open University as a flagship) whereas relations in the labour market were no better by the end of the 1960s and would cause considerable difficulties in the succeeding decade.

Wilson was very much a leader for his time, an era where social and cultural renewal forced governments of the left to revise both policies and rhetoric. Despite the unique character of the 1960s, however, it should be possible to draw comparisons to other reformist Labour governments. More specifically, Wilson’s achievements as a Labour prime minister may be compared to those of other celebrated Labour PMs. If we wish to consider the scale of Wilson’s achievements as prime minister, it is tempting to compare him against the two other long-lasting Labour prime ministers since 1945: Clement Attlee and Tony Blair.

Clement Attlee governed through the immensely challenging period directly following the Second World War. His was an era of unprecedented challenges. Yet, it was also a point in time where the Labour Party experienced an unprecedented chance to shape society in its own fashion, honouring the title of its 1945 manifesto ‘Let us face the future’. Harold Wilson’s government was of a very different time, reigning over what had become a post-war consensus in economic policy while facing immense social and cultural change during the roaring 1960s. Moreover, what appeared to be consensual and robust during the preceding Conservative governments proved to be nothing of the sort. The structural weaknesses of the British economy were emerging at full speed during the Wilson governments of the 1960s.

Tony Blair emerged as prime minister at a point where eighteen years of Conservative government coupled with changes with the international domain had broken what was left of the post-war consensus. Blair was in many ways a Labour prime minister operating on Conservative criteria. Yet his government’s reforms in specific areas are notable on their own account, in areas such as devolution and minority rights.

In order to compare the three PMs, let us rest the assessment on two indicators of success. First, creating a winning electoral coalition sufficient to sustain a parliamentary majority. Secondly, producing policies by the left and leaving a lasting impact upon the country.

Creating a winning electoral coalition
On the electoral side, there is, on the surface, little that can beat Clement Attlee. Attlee contested five elections as Labour Party leader, spanning from 1935 to 1955. The average score over those elections was 45,4 percent. His best result was 48,8 percent at the 1951 election, the highest score ever by the Labour Party at a general election. Paradoxically, that election was lost to the Conservatives, due to the vagaries of the electoral system, which reminds us that the level of strength vis-à-vis the other party is of significance as well. Here, Attlee’s average compared with the Conservatives is -0,3 percent, but that is much affected by the 1935 election where Labour was trailing 9,8 percent behind.
What about Wilson? His electoral successes were only marred by one loss, in 1970. Overall, he contested five elections, scoring 42.3 percent on average and thereby beating his Conservative opponents on by 1.2 percent. Tony Blair, finally, was party leader at three elections - 1997, 2001 and 2005, and saw an average score of 39.7 percent, 8.1 percent ahead of the Conservative Party.

It is difficult, then, to draw a clear conclusion on electoral appeal. Clement Attlee’s success was consistent, which counts to his advance, while the two other leaders saw their support drop sharply underway. In electoral strength vis-à-vis the Tories, it is Tony Blair who comes out first. Yet Wilson managed to win four out of five elections, and Blair governed at a time where the Conservatives were in deep and continuous crisis. Finally, Wilson and Blair both had to grapple with a complex social structure where a cross-class and individually tailored appeal had to replace the class-based politics which Attlee to a larger extent could lean upon.

Producing policies favoured by the left...

What is the track record of the three leaders when it comes to political legacy? Here, there seems to be little doubt among historians that Attlee has the upper hand. His government is credited with designing basic features of the welfare state as well as the mixed economy of public and private ownership. Both were features that the Conservative Party accepted as part and parcel of post-war British politics and which thus score high on the indicator of leaving a lasting impact upon the country. Attlee’s government were on these basic accounts one that ticked the desired boxes for party faithful and which also left a legacy that proved to be robust until the crossroads of the late 1970s.

Harold Wilson for his part probably scores higher on policy results than on political legacy. In areas such as redistribution and educational reform, his track record is favourable: Britain in the late 1960s was a country with a stronger social equality and more egalitarian opportunities than a decade before. Moreover, the reforms within the civil rights domain discussed by Kate Gleeson changed British society considerably (and ahead of many other countries in the western world). This is also a field where Wilson’s reforms did succeed in changing the political weather. While many on the left may have wished that economic policies could have been the lasting legacy of the Wilson government, his lasting achievement was instead in the civil rights domain.

While Attlee and Thatcher are typically seen as moments of lasting change in British politics, Blair’s achievements in government do not seem to merit that label. In terms of constitutional reform, change has been profound and with lasting consequences - think of the Scottish Parliament! - and in the area of minority protection and civil rights, his government did take forward Wilson’s legacy by introducing civil partnerships for gay couples as well as incorporating the European convention on human rights in British law. Yet, changing the political weather is not what Blair’s Labour government achieved, despite its considerable success among the voters.

In conclusion, Attlee, Wilson and Blair all left strong imprints on British politics as landmark prime ministers for Labour. Yet, their achievements were of a very different nature. Attlee’s were the most clear-cut and durable, while Wilson’s were less visible and less conventional for the left. Finally, Blair’s achievements amounted more to a successful electoral appeal (taking Wilson’s catch-all ambition to its ultimate heights), while his political legacy as a Labour PM is mixed to say the least.

To return to where we started, Wilson is certainly not alone among Labour leaders in having to balance between tradition and renewal, and between radical goals and cautious means. How should his achievements be judged in this respect? Certainly, his reputation within his own party is an unhappy one. Yet, here was the leader who managed to win four out of five elections and who governed Britain through a decade of exceptional social progress and cultural achievements. Finally, when we consider Wilson against Attlee and Blair, an additional achievement on Wilson’s side lay in keeping his Cabinet united through the travails of power. As the 1980s were to show, there was a tremendous potential for in-fighting in a party which was not disposed to handling the complexities of the post-industrial age. Wilson’s leadership was arguably the more intricate of the three when it comes to keeping his team together and should be duly credited.
With months only to go until the Scottish referendum on independence on 18 September, one of the most senior politicians of the Scottish National Party, the party’s Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Angus Robertson MP, visited Oslo at the invitation of BPS on 2 June 2014.

Robertson addressed the issue of “Independent Scotland: a Northern European Partner” at a well-attended seminar. Robertson presented a confident case for Scottish independence, emphasising Scotland’s enduring links with Norway and the Nordic Region, and the need for the Scots to be able to govern themselves on all accounts.

The presentation was followed by a lively round of discussions, where some of the issues raised were those of an independent Scotland's prospects of staying within the EU, how the SNP viewed continued devolved government in Scotland in the case of a no-vote on 18 September, and whether there was something the SNP and the Yes Scotland-campaign could learn from the successful Norwegian Nei til EU-campaign of 1994.

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Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

Since the inception of devolution in 1999, Scotland and Wales have each in their own way seen their place in the UK’s political structures change profoundly. The creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly has meant a transfer of power but also a flourishing of democratic debate in Edinburgh and Cardiff. Throughout 2014, all eyes have been turned towards Scotland and the independence referendum on 18 September. Meanwhile, the debate has continued in Wales about the direction of politics as well as the appropriate distribution of power.

In the autumn issue of British Politics Review, we cast our glance towards Wales and ask where devolution stands fifteen years after the creation of the Welsh Assembly. We will also consider how the Scottish debate has fed into the broader discussion about devolution in Wales and across the UK.

The autumn edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in November 2014.