Q.: How important was 'affluence' to Conservative dominance between 1951 and 1964?

‘Affluence’ has never been a politically neutral term. For Galbraith - whose 1957 work *The Affluent Society* is generally attributed with having popularized the concept – the Western world’s experience of increased prosperity, individualism and mass consumerism in the postwar period not only raised expectations of economic security but also revealed the anachronisms inherent within the complex of ‘conventional wisbons’ that informed a culture of disproportionate emphasis on private production and a comparative neglect of public institutions. For the British political Left between 1951 and 1964, the rise of the ‘so-called affluent society’ not only appeared to threaten the very values upon the basis of which the first majority Labour government had been elected in 1945 - namely class-solidarity, civic responsibility and collective action - but it also appeared to be severely correlated with sustained electoral decline. By the time that the Labour party suffered its heaviest of three successive electoral defeats at the 1959 general election, it was widely held that the politics of affluence were chiefly to blame for the party’s inability to recover. The kinds of crude determinism that characterized Labour attitudes towards its dire electoral situation were epitomized by the title of the study carried out to examine the origins of the party’s weakness in 1960 – *Must Labour Lose?* For the dominant Conservative party, the increasing strength of the critical working-class Tory vote between 1951 and 1964 appeared to confirm beliefs that conditions of prosperity encouraged conservatism. Unfortunately, both contemporary political and subsequent historical discussions on the impact of ‘affluence’ on British politics between 1951 and 1964 have often been framed in overly reductionist terms and have tended to assume that a rise in material living standards naturally translates into electoral support for the Conservative party. However, contrary to prevailing opinion in the 1950s, the political ramifications of popular ‘affluence’ were not fixed. Elections fought in the immediate postwar era from 1945 to 1964 were not won and lost on the basis of socio-economic change, but rather in a series of political struggles between competing representations of ‘security’. Between 1951 and 1964 the Conservatives successfully repositioned themselves as the superior contenders on the battlegrounds of ‘security’ – not only through their commitment to full-employment, the welfare state and the mixed
economy, but also through their ability to define popular experiences of ‘affluence’ in conservative terms, including individualist freedom. Insofar as it alludes to a sociological experience of increased wealth and the diversification of leisure, ‘affluence’ was an indeterminate force politically. Insofar as it provided the Conservative party with a strong empirical premise on which to construct a viable popular politics of ‘security’ and ‘freedom’, it was crucial to their electoral success between 1951 and 1964. As might seem appropriate in a discussion of the political impact of consumerist culture, the key to electoral victory in the 1950s often rested not so much on the procedural content of policy¹, as on its ‘packaging’².

² R.A. Butler Art of the Possible