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 wisdoms’ 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 battlefields 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 individualism 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.

Whilst much emphasis has been placed on the Conservative party’s adoption of the postwar settlement, the ‘politics of consensus’ was only critical insofar as it offered the Conservatives the opportunity both to eliminate fears that rule from the Right would threaten full-employment and to construct a distinctive alternative to Socialist government with a broad-based popular appeal. As Girvin has argued, the chief task confronting the Conservative party in the wake of the electoral catastrophe of 1945 was to demonstrate a willingness to ‘operate a system [the welfare state] that they had not created and with which they were often ideologically uncomfortable.’ For E.H.H. Green, the publication of the Industrial Charter and the Worker’s Charter in 1947 and 1948 respectively were instrumental to the Conservative party’s conscious attempts to regain the political initiative from the Left through the ‘language of accommodation’3. Certainly, there can be no doubt that throughout the 1950s the Conservative leadership believed that any threat to the welfare state would alienate floating voters and damage the party’s success at the margins; a CRD report in September 1958 reaffirmed the importance of commitment to full-employment in sustaining working-class Toryism, whilst Macmillan’s acceptance of the Treasury Resignations in 1958 ostensibly demonstrated the party’s dedication to ‘Attlee’s consensus’4, even amidst growing fears of British comparative decline and the risks of high inflation. Yet, whilst a demonstrable commitment to full-employment, the welfare state and the mixed economy was undoubtedly a precondition of Conservative electoral recovery, the areas in which the party distinguished itself from the Attlee government were critical not only in breaking the virtual

2 R.A. Butler Art of the Possible
stalemate produced at the 1950 general election but also in sustaining the trend for continued Conservative gains after the mid-1950s, by which point ‘housing and the welfare state were no longer exclusively associated with Labour’.

Although consensus indisputably enabled the Conservatives to meet the challenge of Labour’s popular appeal on the basis of ‘security through public provision’, the former party’s ascent to a virtually hegemonic status in 1959 was achieved on the basis of a distinctive political discourse. As the party under Baldwin had successfully done in the interwar period, after 1945 the Conservatives sought once again to reposition themselves as the defenders of basic public freedoms and to characterize Labour government as baleful to the rightful pursuit of prosperity and individual freedom. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska has contended, ‘There was no consensus on post-war austerity’, and the debate about rationing, austerity and controls in postwar Britain provided the Conservative party with the opportunity to define the conflict between socialism and capitalism as one between oppression and opportunity respectively. CUCO propaganda, including the widely-distributed 1949 publication *The Right Road for Britain*, argued that ‘socialism thrives on scarcity’ whilst ‘Conservatism flourishes in conditions of abundance’ by freeing ‘the productive energies of the nation from the “trammels” of overbearing state control and bureaucratic management’. In a similar vein, the 1951 Conservative election manifesto likened the electorate’s vote as a choice ‘between two ways of life; between individual liberty and state domination; between concentration of ownership in the hands of the state and the extension of ownership over the widest numbers of individuals’ and repeatedly warned of the ‘ever-present’ threat of Communism to the British people. Whilst Black points out that ‘the fear and taint of Communism had been used against Labour since the 1930s’, the political climate created by the background of the Cold War undoubtedly granted such attacks added ‘impetus’. The opportunity to recreate a viable and popular anti-socialism was thus renewed and seized upon by Conservative propagandists, evident in the publication of the 1958 pamphlet *They’ve got a little list*, which detailed 500 British companies supposedly threatened with nationalization by Labour, depicting Gaitskell on its cover as Chinese. At a more fundamental level, the Conservative party powerfully propagated the notion that Labour’s ‘controls were there for the sake of control’, with Churchill blaming the Attlee government’s difficulties in fulfilling its housing pledge on ‘the pedantic, irrational enforcement of socialist prejudice’. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska has argued, the Conservative party’s vigorous assertions of the ‘linkage between austerity and Socialism’ in the late 1940s not only helped the right to regain lost support after 1945 but, more importantly in the long-term, helped to promulgate the conception that Conservative rule was better suited to creating and sustaining economic growth and ‘affluence’. By recognizing that notions of the supposed causal link between conservatism and affluence originated in Conservative criticisms of postwar rationing and control, it is much easier to see the flaws in the argument that raw socio-economic change in the 1950s made the Conservative party the ‘passive beneficiaries’ of increased prosperity.

Indeed, the Conservatives did not take for granted that increased material prosperity would automatically be reflected in increasing electoral support for the party at the polls. In 1958 the CRD expressed fears that the ‘new working-class’ were liable to attribute the fact that ‘they had never had it so good’ to Socialism ‘because so many of the tangible benefits come to them through the hands of socialist local authorities and the welfare state’. Rather, the Conservative party grabbed hold of ‘affluence’ and consciously constructed a vision of the ‘affluent society’ that seemed inseparable from broadly conservative values. In the run up to the 1955 general election Conservative propaganda presented postwar restrictions as the preserve of Labour government; posters depicting rationing queues were accompanied by slogans declaring ‘Austerity has gone the way of shortages, black markets, controls, power cuts...and ration books’. In the highly successful 1959 campaign, kitsch images of affluent families enjoying the ‘fruits of prosperity’ were accompanied by the warning ‘Don’t let labour ruin it!’. The verbal emphasis on notions of retention and conservation in Conservative propaganda – ‘Taxes down! *Keep* them down!’, ‘A fuller life! A better life! A freer life! *Keep* it so!’?, ‘*Keep* Britain the best-fed country’ – served to further strengthen the view that voting for Labour was an unacceptable *risk*, whereas maintenance of the political status quo would ensure that what had been gained would not be lost. To some extent the successful Conservative campaigns in the 1950s appear to conform to what is known as *prospect theory* – the notion that individuals, if faced with selecting between two roughly identical choices, are least likely to select the option expressed in terms of

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7 Conservative election posters 1959, images courtesy of The Advertising Archives Online
possible loss. By aligning itself with notions of guaranteed stability and economic security, and now presenting the Labour party as an ‘unknown quantity’, the Conservatives had essentially reversed the political situation of 1945; the very definition of ‘security’ had been rhetorically ‘hijacked’ by the right. Overall, the Conservative party successfully undertook the initiative to ‘define the terms and image of affluence' to its advantage, and actively attempted to shape its political constituency in its own image. The success of the Conservative’s self-presentation as the ‘party of affluence’ was evident in Coventry where, despite the Labour Council’s success in rebuilding the shopping precinct, Crossman attributed Labour’s waning vote in the city during the 1950s to the fact that Coventrians found it difficult to make ‘connections between the availability of consumer goods in bright new shops and the ideals of municipal socialism’.

The idea that the Conservative party was able to decisively ally itself with ‘affluence’ in the national imagination has particular bearings on the debate over the reasons for the disproportionate level of female Conservative support from 1951 to 1964. Until recent years, explanations for female Conservatism tended to focus on largely structural and environmental factors; for MacKenzie and Silver, Conservatism among working-class women in the 1950s was rooted in their isolation from the male-dominated industrial work-place and particularly predisposed ‘older, poorer women towards deference and adherence to dominant value systems'; for Pugh, it is likely that traditional areas of female-employment would have brought many of those women who enjoyed increased work opportunities in the postwar years into contact with middle-class values; in Parkin’s radical theory of working class political ‘deviance’ women are more likely to be shielded from the influence of those few social institutions that permit the development of non-dominant Leftist values; more simplistic accounts have helped to perpetuate a myth of ‘inherent female Conservatism’ grounded in woman’s ‘natural’ preference for domesticity and parochialism. These views all appear particularly problematic in the context of the years from 1945 to 1966. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska has pointed out, ‘female employment patterns cannot explain why 43 per cent, 55 per cent and 44 per cent of women voted Conservative in 1945, 1955 and 1966 respectively’. Rather than suggesting that parties are able to passively benefit from structural factors and socio-economic change, the cyclical pattern of female Conservative support implies that ‘parties have to mobilize their potential support and painfully construct coalitions of interest groups’. In the period from 1951 to 1959 there can be little doubt that the Conservatives were more successful in harnessing potential support from women. As Girvin notes, the ‘strong consumptionist message’ of Conservatism during the 1950s proved highly popular amongst those female voters who benefited from increased consumer choice; the party magazine Onward featured a torn ration book and a full bag of shopping on the front cover in April 1954, whilst local Conservative Associations offered women advice on the purchase of consumer goods. More significantly, the Conservatives recognized that the female experience of ‘affluence’ was not limited to consumerism and actively pursued the support of the new class of professional women. Whilst the 1949 Conservative women’s charter A True Balance: In the Home, in Employment and as Citizens expressed sympathy for ‘feminist demands such as equal pay and equal citizenship’, in government the Conservatives made good on their promises by granting equal pay in the public sector in 1954 and admitting women into the House of Lords in 1958. The political salience of such legislation was heightened by the previous Labour government’s failure to meet the demands of professional women. Overall, the Conservative party appeared to have successfully constructed a popular appeal to female voters on the basis of its professed commitment to free consumer choice and the improvement of conditions for women in the work-place.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that ‘affluence’ did not pose its own problems for the Conservative party. Whilst it has already been noted that by the late 1950s Conservatives feared that experiences of ‘affluence’ might stimulate a renewal of socialist support amongst the critical working-classes, mainstream Conservative opinion was not always comfortable with the perceived social impact of increased spending and the ‘consumer culture’. Middle-class reactions to the alleged moral

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8 Black
13 Girvin
corruption inherent within the ‘permissive society’ led to the organization of Mary Whitehouse’s ‘Clean Up TV’ Campaign, the ‘Keep Britain Tidy’ movement and a worrying exodus of the young middle-class to the Labour-dominated CND. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that Conservative voters were more critical of MPs who failed to deliver the prosperity they promised. Goldman’s shock-defeat at the 1962 Orpington by-election to the Liberal candidate was blamed by CRD on the fact that the local Tory establishment was blamed for the ‘lack of provision of shopping facilities to serve rapid population growth’. Yet, if the Conservative party was to some extent ‘hostage’ to the political situation it had had a role in shaping, the Labour party was positively ‘haunted’ by a vision of ‘affluence’ that it left largely uncontested. Indeed, Labour’s electoral difficulties in the 1950s were predominantly the result of the party’s inability to adapt its political discourse and ideology to the newly affluent conditions of the electorate. Vitally, Labour’s resistance to affluence extended from the upper echelons of the party down to the grass roots of local organization. For Nye Bevan, the golden age of prosperity and consumerism in Britain was inimical to civic values altogether: ‘this so-called affluent society is an ugly society still. It is a vulgar society. It is a meretricious society. It is a society in which priorities have all gone wrong’. In Labour in the Affluent Society Crossman argued that Labour should be ‘refusing in any way to come to terms with the affluent society’. Such thinking was invariably linked to the impression, strong amongst many Labour leaders on the left-wing of the party in the 1950s, that the experience of ‘so-called affluence’ was illusory, that its influences were not being felt at the lower levels of society and that it based on a corrupt system of credit and hire-purchase - which not only seduced the working-class into neglecting their own precarious economic situation, but also threatened to cause major problems if the boom should be abruptly brought to a halt.

Labour’s propensity for the refutation and criticism of ‘affluence’ (and the ‘Americanization’ of values that was thought to accompany it), however valid it may have been, led to the Left adopting an impolitic discourse of rejection for the majority of the 1950s; Mervyn Jones, in the first issue of New Left Review in 1960, envisaged socialism as a ‘total rejection of the practice and values of the existing society’. ‘Affluence’ was perceived to be entirely incompatible with traditional socialism; Perry Anderson declared that ‘full employment and rising incomes rendered the classical socialist solutions - in particular social ownership of the means of production - redundant’. At the core of this mode of contemporary Leftist thought was the assumption that extended private ownership of consumer goods engendered a more domesticated, self-concerned electorate that was ‘less community conscious’ and therefore less likely to accept socialism; Potter argued in his 1960 work The Glittering Coffin, it is ‘not the most natural thing in the world to be a radical when surrounded by suburban hedgerows and new supermarkets’; it was accepted as a basic truism that car ownership was strongly correlated with Tory voting. Fears of working-class embourgeoisement were renewed by observations that ‘a majority of the population is gradually attaining a middle-class standard of life and distinct symptoms even of a middle-class psychology’, whilst in 1959 Labour’s election sub-committee concluded: ‘We were defeated by prosperity: This was without doubt the prominent factor’. Whilst such defeatism amongst Labour supporters invariably shared a mutually influential relationship with dominant pschepological and political trends – which ‘commonly assumed that social change was the motor of politics’ – there is strong evidence to counter this deterministic view. Rather than viewing the Labour party as the passive victims of social change, it is more plausible to hold that Labour’s resistance to ‘affluence’ was a serious factor in its electoral failings. Extensive research on the myth of the ‘affluent worker’ in the 1960s revealed that he was perhaps ‘not so bourgeois after all’ and that experiences of affluences simply made available a ‘new way of being working-class’. As Hoggart contested at the time, many were asking ‘How does one live in the new conditions?’. The right had benefited the most from ‘affluence’ because it had given ‘some sort of answer’. As Black notes, the key to this Labour revisionism was in thinking ‘affluence a condition whose political effects were not fixed but contestable’. The possibilities of left-wing electoral success under conditions of affluence were certainly recognized at the time; Jenkins argued that ‘The satisfaction of material wants was at least as likely to free people's thoughts from material things as to concentrate them there’, while Crosland declared that ‘As conspicuous

15 Ibid
16 Ibid
17 Ibid
18 Goldthorpe and Lockwood, ‘Not So Bourgeois After All’, New Society, 18 October 1962
19 Tiratsoo
consumption of cars, holidays, TV became widespread,’ so became ‘stronger the subjective feeling of equal living standards’. The existence of a contemporary alternative Leftist discourse on affluence implies that there was no inevitable correlation between the experience of affluence in the 1950s, and the decline of support for Labour. Rather, as Crosland himself suggested, the greater problem rested in demonstrating to the public that socialism did not present a threat to the electorate’s newfound economic security. Critically, Crosland argued that the necessity of adapting to the socio-economic changes of the 1950s did not involve ‘basic party principles’ and had little to do with ‘detailed party policy’. Rather, it concerned ‘the way in which the party presents itself and its policies to the public...the tone and content of its propaganda generally...the impression which it makes on the voters’. Fielding’s study of Labour organizations during the 1950s reveals the great extent to which local associations and supporters remained staunchly critical of the ‘so-called affluent society’ and were encouraged to advocate the wartime spirit of collectivism as an alternative to the temptations offered by increased prosperity; Reigate's Labour monthly publication warned the party faithful against the dangers of complacency amidst the climate of increasing material gain – ‘If we want to keep what we have won and to win even more...we must be prepared for a little self-sacrifice’ - whilst Tribune urged the party faithful to remind others of ‘the ideals they prized fourteen years ago’. The widespread reluctance of party activists to renegade on the values which had originally drawn them to the Labour Party in the 'hungry thirties' and during the war itself represented a major ideological rift between the party faithful and the new beneficiaries of affluence - particularly the young and newly married - who were of critical importance in Labour's attempts to reverse the electoral setbacks of the 1950s. Given the broad failures of local organizations and prominent Labour figures to come to terms with the politics of affluence in the 1950s, it seems highly likely that, as Fielding’s research implies, the Labour party’s ‘response to change’ rather than the socio-economic basis of ‘affluence’ itself – was the determining factor in its inability to challenge Conservative dominance from 1951 to 1964.

The political impact of affluence between 1951 and 1964 is often difficult to disentangle from the plurality of discourses provoked by the understanding of ‘affluence’ at the time. ‘Affluence’, the ‘affluent worker’ and the ‘affluent society’ became the Left’s justifications for its own political decline just as Conservative researchers continually feared lest ‘affluence’ would stimulate demands for an expansion of the welfare state. Yet, as a clear fact that the political meaning of ‘affluence’ was contested during the period itself – a process exemplified in debate between Labour traditionalists and ‘revisionists’ – should at least serve as a warning to those with an inclination for electoral sociology who would otherwise assume the existence of a positive causal link between increased material prosperity and conservatism. The contestability of ‘affluence’ implies that it is possible to see the years from the debate over postwar decontrol into the Wilson years as a continuous battle between the two dominant political parties for definitional hegemony of ‘security’. Conservative electoral dominance between 1951 and 1964 was, then, primarily a product of the party’s superior ability to manipulate the meaning of affluence both to strengthen the appeal of its traditional concerns – the preservation of freedom of the individual, property, choice and family values (often from socialist expropriation) – and to frame Conservative commitment to full-employment and the welfare state in terms that traditional supporters and the new beneficiaries of prosperity could understand in a distinctly conservative way. Equally, Labour electoral failure before 1964 was in large part due to the party’s incapacity to rearticulate – or repackage - the message of British socialism in a manner that could resonate amongst an electorate whose aspirations had been dramatically altered.

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