

**Spectators or Citizens? British Political Culture, 1974-1994.**

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**Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that this Thesis represents my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

**Abstract**

This thesis is an examination of different aspects of British political culture from the fall of Edward Heath’s Conservative government in 1974 to Tony Blair’s election as Leader of the Labour Party in 1994, defined for the purposes of this thesis as the ‘long 1980s’. Seeking to move beyond traditional narratives of the period, dominated as they are by the figure of Margaret Thatcher and narratives of the collapse of the ‘post-war consensus’, this thesis adopts a political culture approach, seeking out changes in the conduct and operation of the political system itself. Examining three distinct ‘sub cultures’ of the wider political culture, namely politics on television, citizenship discourse and scandal culture, this thesis paints a picture of a polity in which the agreed rules of political conduct were in a state of considerable flux, defined overwhelmingly by a decline in automatic deference to political elites. In taking such an approach, this thesis draws upon wider social and cultural changes from the period, including the ubiquity of consumerism, the developments in mass media and wider discussions in the public sphere. It draws from a rich variety of sources, including newspapers, magazines and periodicals, television programming, opinion polling, contemporary academic literature, and archival material, to demonstrate how the debates generated by these changes in political culture played themselves out in the public sphere. The thesis concludes by illustrating how, in so many ways, the convulsions of political culture in the long 1980s, and the developments of the three aforementioned ‘sub cultures’, find their purest expression in the period which followed it: that of the ascendancy of New Labour.

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It is fair to say that writing this thesis has been a considerable personal challenge, not least due to an unexpected global pandemic and unforeseen and protracted bouts of ill health on my own part. In the worst of times, I did not believe submission would ever be possible, and that I have been able to do so is down in no small part to a number of wonderful people.

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**Introduction**

The period from 1974 to 1994 in Britain was one of profound political transformation. In the decades after the Second World War, and despite the fact that many differences continued to divide the main political parties, there nevertheless existed a broad consensus centred around the use of Keynesian demand management, a mixed economy and a universal welfare state. In early 1974, marred by industrial action and economic malaise, Edward Heath, Conservative Prime Minister since May 1970, requested a dissolution of Parliament from the Queen and called for an early general election to be held in February. Famously, Heath sought to test his authority with the electorate, asking them in the election, ‘Who governs?’, to which their reply is usually reported in retrospectives of the time as, ‘Not you, mate’.[[1]](#footnote-2) The election, which saw the Labour Party emerge as the largest party in a hung parliament, followed by a second election in October where the party managed to secure a tiny overall majority of three seats, initiated a process of political change that did not settle until twenty years later. The Labour government elected in 1974, which ran under the leadership of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan until the election of 1979, was a paradoxical entity, reflective of a political and economic consensus in flux, and with a policy legacy that simultaneously reached forward and back. From its use income policies of national wage restraint to hold down inflation, to its corporatist attempts to negotiate with the trade unions that eventually collapsed into the ‘Winter of Discontent’, the Wilson and Callaghan governments were in many respects a ‘last gasp’ of the postwar consensus. However, Prime Minister James Callaghan addressed the Labour Party conference in 1976, declaring ‘we used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession, and increase employment, by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists’, and that such an approach only worked ‘by injecting a bigger dose of inflation into the economy’.[[2]](#footnote-3) In saying this, Callaghan was taking a hammer to that postwar consensus his party had helped to forge and was making a statement which would come to be seen as much more reflective of the decade that followed.

With the Conservative election victory in 1979, the titanic figure of Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street. Described by one writer as ‘the guiding spirit of the age’, Mrs Thatcher’s period of office from 1979 to 1990 witnessed the wholesale dismantling of decades of settled economic and domestic policy, with the best definition of what came to be known as ‘Thatcherism’ remaining that given by her second and longest-serving Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson: ‘A mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, “Victorian Values” (of the Samuel Smiles self-help variety), privatisation and a dash of populism’.[[3]](#footnote-4) Industries that had been under state control for decades were returned to the private sector, direct tax rates were slashed, subsidies to industry scaled back (accelerating a process of deindustrialisation already well underway), and a raft of new restrictions placed upon the ability of the trade unions to take industrial action. Despite a deep recession lasting until 1981, the signs of economic recovery coupled with success in the Falklands War of 1982 helped Mrs Thatcher secure re-election in 1983. Further Conservative election victories followed in 1987 and 1992, both further entrenching this profound policy shift, with this entrenchment being aided in some respects in 1992 by the fact Mrs Thatcher had been replaced seventeenth months earlier by the more amiable figure of John Major. 1994 serves as an endpoint for the thesis, with the election of Tony Blair as Leader of the Labour Party. While he would not gain power for another three years, there was no doubt upon Blair’s election that the Labour Party would preserve the vast bulk of the Thatcherite legacy if it were to return to office, having successively shed more and more of its traditional ‘socialist’ policies and attitudes. It had taken twenty years after Edward Heath’s roll of the dice, but in those critical twenty years a new policy consensus emerged on not just who governs, but *how* Britain is governed. This twenty year period will form the focus of this thesis.

**The Long 1980s: Historiographical Trends**

It is a central contention of this thesis that this 1974 to 1994 period can be seen as a ‘long 1980s’. This conception seeks partly to correct the tendency in historiography and political literature to bend the 1980s around the premiership of Margaret Thatcher: histories of the period inevitably begin with her election in May 1979 and end with her defenestration by parliamentary colleagues in November 1990. In some ways, Mrs Thatcher exists in both historiography and the national consciousness as the last vestige of a long since discredited school of historiographical thought, that of the ‘great man’ (or woman!) theory of history so beloved by the historians of the Victorian era. From Marxist critics on the left to sycophantic supporters on the right, Mrs Thatcher is often seen as the sole driver of political change in this period, with she and she alone either saving or destroying Britain, dependent on the ideological sympathies of those making the charge.[[4]](#footnote-5) Such were undoubtedly the scale of the changes presided over by her administrations that it is difficult to conceive of writing a political history in which we she does not predominate, despite being ten years after Stephen Brooke acknowledged the need for historians to reconceptualise our understanding of the period, to ‘excavate the politics of everyday life, to get at how and where that political change was absorbed’.[[5]](#footnote-6)

The very notion of consensus in politics, so keenly attached to understandings of post-war Britain, is itself one worth briefly interrogating at this juncture. In his 1999 article ‘The Rise, Fall and Rise of Political Consensus in Britain Since 1940’, Brian Harrison noted how ‘historians of Britain since 1940 have for many years found ‘consensus’ a useful organising theme’.[[6]](#footnote-7) Harrison rejects Ben Pimlott’s view, articulated in 1989 that ‘consensus is a mirage, an illusion that rapidly fades the closer one gets to it’, as ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’.[[7]](#footnote-8) Instead, Harrison differentiates between what he terms the ‘direct route’ to consensus, where politicians ‘discover what policies the electors now support and then cater for the demand’, versus an ‘indirect route’, which ‘estimates where consensus can be most securely based in the future, and then leads public opinion through short-term dissension towards it’.[[8]](#footnote-9) Harrison makes this distinction to distinguish between the route taken to achieving the social democratic consensus of the immediate post-war decades, and the free-market consensus led by the Thatcherites in the 1970s and 1980s, with the former being ‘direct’ and the latter ‘indirect’. Harrison does caution against the ‘recurring dream that one day the parties will no longer diverge on major areas of policy, but only on administration’, arguing that ‘no democratic society can realise the dream, as new lines of dissension inevitably emerge’.[[9]](#footnote-10) Overall, Harrison’s analysis has much to recommend it, not least his insight that ‘Britain’s political system highlights short-term inter-party disagreement with the aim of moderating it, thereby securing reconciliation in the longer term’, a perceptive reading of the influence of competitive party systems on political culture.[[10]](#footnote-11)

In more recent years, Phil Tinline’s *The Death of Consensus: 100 Years of British Political Nightmares* (2022) represents a fascinating study of the role consensus has played in twentieth century British politics. Tinline’s key insight is to present a view of consensus that is underpinned not by what politicians and voters are *for*, but what they are *against*, with the concept of the political ‘nightmare’ being an anchor in his view of how political consensus evolves, endures and, eventually, disintegrates. The political nightmare, argues Tinline, ‘encompasses fears based on past disasters, and fears based only on possible future ones, threats that are actually present, and possibilities that exist only in the imagination’.[[11]](#footnote-12) The consensus exists around avoiding what becomes intolerable and unthinkable, a nightmare that cannot be permitted. By the 1970s, every alternative was exhausted to avoid a return to the mass unemployment of the 1930s which had so shaped the political generation of the post-war years, be that Keynesian demand management, prices and incomes policies, nationalisation and a corporatist approach to trade union affairs. For Tinline, Mrs Thatcher’s key role in the 1970s was to shift the unthinkable, the nightmare, away from mass unemployment and towards the more presently visible existence of soaring inflation and industrial unrest. ‘No matter whether they are based on memories, precedents or imagined fears’, Tinline notes, ‘these nightmares have hemmed politicians in, and shaped what they thought they could and could not do’.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Perhaps inevitably, given the wider trend in popular culture of slicing the recent past in terms of decades, historiography on the three different decades encapsulated in the long 1980s invariably tend towards the assertion of particular narratives. The 1970s are inevitably cast in terms of economic decline, industrial unrest and stagnation: that the cover illustration for the much welcome and needed corrective collection *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (2013) featured four workers on a picket line is illustrative of this. As Dominic Sandbrook has put it, the 1970s were a time of ‘strife and the good life’.[[13]](#footnote-14) As previously discussed, discussion of the 1980s lays in the long shadow cast by Mrs Thatcher, with emphasis placed on a nation divided as a result of her radical policies and tough, uncompromising style. As for the 1990s, where any historiography exists at all, the focus is on an affluent society coming to terms with the changes of the previous decade, expressed by John Major’s desire to build ‘a country at ease with itself’, as well as the socio-cultural phenomenon of ‘Cool Britannia’, with all its associated evocation of 1960s popular culture. In addition, Alwyn W. Turner has argued that the decade of John Major and Tony Blair can be seen as one when politicians tried to ‘depoliticise’ politics, citing Labour MP Giles Radice’s diary entry predicting that Major was ‘clearly going to be the Baldwin of the 1990s, taking the politics out of politics’, and Blair’s vision of New Labour as the ‘political wing… of the British people’.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Much of the literature surrounding Thatcherism and the period with which this thesis concerns itself is centred around the notion of neoliberalism, individualism and the self. This is perhaps unsurprising, with the 2008 financial crisis and its aftershocks exposing foundations of the Thatcherite policy consensus which were not quite as firm as they might have appeared in the 1990s and early 2000s. The term ‘neoliberalism’ in particular has generated considerable interest and commentary. For Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, ‘at stake in neoliberalism is nothing more, nor less, than the form of our existence, the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves’.[[15]](#footnote-16) The term is one that has come to be synonymous with the work of Marxist and postmodernist historians. While Dardot and Laval’s definition is supremely indicative of postmodernist attitudes to the term, David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as ‘the political and ideological project of a class seeking to change the balance of power in global capitalism and create new means of capital accumulation’ is as good a definition of Marxist understandings as one could hope to find.[[16]](#footnote-17) Discussions of neoliberalism invariably place on emphasis on the shift from Keynesian, social democratic and corporatist economic policies and modes of governance towards the free market, deregulatory and liberalising ones of the 1970s and 1980s. Viewed in this context, the ascent of Thatcherism loses much of its specifically British character, being viewed as a local manifestation of an overall shift in global political economy, embodied as much by figures such as American President Ronald Reagan, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet as by Mrs Thatcher herself. For many scholars, building on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, neoliberalism should be considered as a shift in the totality of power relations, in which man becomes ‘*homo economicus*’ with ‘cost-benefit calculations and market criteria being applied to decision-making processes within the family, married life and professional life’.[[17]](#footnote-18) Historians such as David Priestland have also considered neoliberalism in terms of power relations: in his work *Merchant, Soldier, Sage*, Priestland envisages the ascendancy of neoliberalism as a victory for the merchant caste in his tripartite conception of shifting power throughout human history.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Aled Davies, Ben Jackson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's collection *The Neoliberal Age? Britain Since the 1970s*, published in 2021, attempts to nuance understandings of the term neoliberalism within the specifically British context of recent history. In their introduction to the collection, Davies, Jackson and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argue that their aim with this collection is to show that ‘the story of the ‘rise and triumph of neoliberalism’, which is often repeated in contemporary political discourse, and which often structures survey histories of Britain after 1945, is partial and problematic’.[[19]](#footnote-20) Essays in the collection refract topics such as welfare, market failures, unemployment policy, anti-racism and housing policy through the lens of neoliberalism. While David Edgerton argues in the collection’s first chapter that the term is ‘best dispensed with’, Tehila Sasson concludes by arguing that the term, understood as the ways in which ‘the economic reason that extended economic values, ideas and practices to various spheres of life’, offers to be ‘powerful and fruitful work for all kinds of historians’.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Nonetheless, neoliberalism as a term still runs the risk of being utilised as a catch-all explanator for wider political and social change, with mystical free-market impulses capable of being detected in virtually any wider social development, at the expense of a properly historicised explanation. It is undoubtedly the case that developments tracked by historians in works such as *The Neoliberal Age* intrude on the subject matter of this thesis, with Sarah Mass’s chapter on consumer culture and Helen McCarthy’s on changing gender relations being the most prominent examples in the chapters that follow. However, for the reasons outlined above, this thesis will eschew use of the term neoliberalism, for the simple reason that it does not concern itself with the history of political economy, the field from which the term neoliberalism draws its key analytical value. This period was undoubtedly one whereby national political cultures remained resilient in the face of wider global economic change, with the conduct of politics remaining idiosyncratic and specific across nations. From the changing coverage of politics on television, the rise of citizen politics, to the emergence of political scandal culture, all of these were developments in which Britain’s specific political culture mattered, and where the term neoliberalism is of, at best, peripheral value.

Returning to focus solely on the term Thatcherism, Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders’ work on the topic has done a great deal to nuance our understanding, perceptively noting that ‘it has long been a cliché that Thatcher was the first Prime Minister to give her name to an ideology, yet talk of “Thatcherism” obscures as much as it reveals’.[[21]](#footnote-22) They provide a number of cautionary qualifications to any historian of the period, including the conviction that Thatcherism should not be utilised as ‘an explanatory tool for every social development’.[[22]](#footnote-23) In addition, their work is helpful in reminding us that the popular image of the 1980s, long associated with a transformation of popular attitudes in favour of get-rich-quick, ‘loadsamoney’ selfish individualism, encapsulated by Mrs Thatcher’s infamous statement that there was ‘no such thing as society’, is not borne out by any degree of evidence. ‘The British electorate was not significantly ‘Thatcherised’, nor was it persuaded of the Thatcher governments’ ideological claims in relation to full employment and the welfare state’, as the authors put it.[[23]](#footnote-24) Ivor Crewe first articulated this caution back in 1989, during Mrs Thatcher’s premiership, who recognised the need not to ‘impute’ characteristics about society:

*‘Airy generalisations about cultural change are the most superficial form of social comment. Take a few casual impressions, add some personal hunches, sprinkle with someone selected statistics, and a plausible case can be made for almost any thesis about how the values of the British have changed’*.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Crewe’s piece, entitled ‘The Crusade That Failed’, utilises a number of opinion polling sources in order to judge whether it could be claimed that Mrs Thatcher succeeded in her stated goal of ‘changing the soul’ of Britain, as Jackson and Saunders rightly point out is often claimed. To test this, Crewe cites a 1988 survey carried out which asked respondents to choose between two statements, A and B, covering a range of topics such as welfare, employment, economic equality and wealth creation, with one of these statements being designated as ‘socialist’ and the other ‘Thatcherite’. On all but one of the sets of statements, the ‘socialist’ statement was the more popular choice.[[25]](#footnote-26) Crewe also utilises Gallup Political Index polling to track change over time. In this particular polling, respondents were asked to choose between cutting taxes (a ‘Thatcherite’ policy) and extending public services (a socialist one). While tax-cutting was the most popular in May 1979, when the Thatcher government first came into office, from March 1980 onwards there was a consistent preference for extending public services, which grew to such a degree that in October 1987 only 11 per cent would opt for tax cuts while 66 per cent chose the extension of public services, despite being just four months after the re-election of the Conservative government with a majority of over 100.[[26]](#footnote-27) Crewe argues that rather than embracing the ideals of Thatcherism, the public moved further away from them throughout the 1980s. In making this argument, Crewe makes a valuable point about the sources of attitudinal and social change, declaring that ‘the values of the ordinary public are beyond the control of government, even when it is a missionary one. They are shaped by experience, not theory, and mutate slowly in response to real change, not government exhortations.’[[27]](#footnote-28) In addition, as Jon Lawrence has argued, ‘the problem with surveys, even good ones, is that they strongly shape the terms of discourse, making it less likely what we will gain a clear sense of how people conceptualised issues *for themselves*’.[[28]](#footnote-29)

This insight is crucial to Lawrence’s study *Me Me Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (2019), a fascinating study in which he interrogates the supposed tension between individualism and communitarianism in contemporary British history. ‘Many commentators tell us that everyday life has become selfish and atomised in recent decades, that individuals now live only to consume’, Lawrence notes, before declaring ‘they are wrong’.[[29]](#footnote-30) Lawrence’s study repeatedly makes the point that historians ought to be sceptical of viewing the period covered by this thesis, and indeed the years that followed, as one which the neoliberal market agenda embodied by Mrs Thatcher transformed the British people into rampant, selfish consumerists, destroying any notion of community belonging or obligation. In this, he echoes Crewe’s arguments made at the time, and discussed above, that social change is both more complex and contradictory than as to ever work in such a binary, simplistic way. Lawrence acknowledges an undoubted shift, such as the fact that ‘people are always twice as likely to live on alone in the 2010s as they were in the 1970s’, but he points out that this statistic, which could be taken as proof of atomised individualism, ‘is largely a consequence of personal choices made possible by increased affluence’.[[30]](#footnote-31) While Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson did find evidence in the 1970s of a greater degree of ‘popular individualism’, they caution against viewing it as leading ‘inexorably’ towards Thatcherism, and ‘could in many ways point towards an expanded politics of equality. In rejecting class snobberies and hierarchies as outdated, many from younger generations suggested they wanted to live in a society less marked by cultural divides’.[[31]](#footnote-32) In addition, they perceptively suggest that popular individualism, driven by greater affluence and choice, is more likely to have created and boosted the political success of Thatcherism, rather than the other way round. The importance of affluence and consumerism, which long predates the period of the long 1980s, will be discussed further in this introduction. With this and the other points made above in mind, this thesis is reflective of a viewpoint that holds that an excessive focus on Mrs Thatcher, Thatcherism and individualism is not always a helpful one for understanding broader political changes in the long 1980s. The periodisation of the thesis, 1974 to 1994, addresses this problem.

It is also worth considering the degree to which there was an obsession in this period with measuring public opinion, as it will have implications for the sources utilised in the chapter case studies. Public attitudes and opinions towards politics are a crucial component of a nation’s political culture. Not merely do they determine the result of elections, and therefore the choice of government and policies, but they also help to mould the environment within which the political system operates. If political culture is ‘the outcome of ‘negotiated interactions’ between top-down and bottom-up exercises of power’, as Charles Tilly terms it, then the attitudes of the public to the political system represent the bottom-up half of the equation.[[32]](#footnote-33) David Broughton has traced such supposed ‘scientific’ approaches of social survey to the social inquiry work of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree at the turn of the twentieth century.[[33]](#footnote-34) It was only with the establishment of British Gallup in 1937 did such work widen to political issues, however. After the 1945 general election, Gallup established what Broughton describes as the ‘omnibus surveys’, with ‘questions paid for by a variety of different organisations at a cost of a few hundred pounds per question. The answers to each client’s particular question or questions are supplied along with the basic demographic data of the sample covering social class, region, sex and age’.[[34]](#footnote-35) Not only did these become the backbone of Gallup’s operation but also became the model which other polling firms were to follow. Polling quickly began to influence the behaviour of politicians, with the prime example being Harold Wilson’s decision to call a general election in 1966. Three years earlier than required by law, it was private polling for Labour which had indicated such a poll would be favourable to his party. In the event, the Labour government increased its wafer-thin parliamentary majority of four to a much larger 96. Therefore, by 1974 the ubiquity of opinion polls had become an increasingly central feature of the way British politics was conducted. By the end of the period of this study, there were five main polling firms operating in Britain: Gallup (founded 1937), Harris (1965), ICM (1989), MORI (1969) and NOP (1958). All belonged to the Market Research Society and adhered to the society’s code of conduct, regularly publishing their methodology, sample sizes and dates of fieldwork.[[35]](#footnote-36)

The period also witnessed the rise of the ‘focus group’ in politics, a tool for measuring opinion within a selected demographic constituency, having their roots in American market research of the 1940s, before being used in the United States by sociologist Robert Merton to test the effectiveness of wartime propaganda.[[36]](#footnote-37) Unlike opinion polling, which is usually done via the presentation of fixed questions in a written format, the focus group consists of a group interview, led by a moderator who stimulates open conversation among the attendees to ascertain their beliefs and opinions in a way that is more enlightening than polling about specific questions: it allows for dialogue. Given that the average voter does not tend to obsess over politics and may hold a range of confused or contradictory opinions, ‘focus groups seem an especially appropriate method for studying how people talk – and therefore think – about politics’.[[37]](#footnote-38) As with so many techniques, it took a while for such methods to make their mark in Britain. Joe Moran has traced the roots of this ‘crossover between market and political research’ to ‘the work of the eclectic social research organisation Mass-Observation’, which from its inception in 1937 sought to catalogue the views, experiences and perspectives of ordinary people. By the 1950s, market research had become a ‘highly visible feature of people’s daily lives’, helping to drive the consumerism of postwar affluence.[[38]](#footnote-39)

Though initially tested by the Conservative Party, focus groups were first regularly utilised for political means by the Labour Party in the mid-to-late 1980s, when the advertising executive and political consultant Phillip Gould, an appointee of Peter Mandelson, recruited Deborah Mattinson of the Shadow Communications Agency to run such groups, which were focused on the elusive ‘floating voter’ whose support Labour would depend on for a future election victory.[[39]](#footnote-40) Colm Murphy has written of how the focus group was instrumental in convincing the Labour leadership to ‘downplay, if not abandon’ its emerging interest in the identity politics of sex, race, sexuality and disability.[[40]](#footnote-41) This was because the focus groups had demonstrated that in the 1980s ‘Labour was perceived to exist only for a coalition of the ‘poor’ and ‘unemployed’, and ‘the disabled’, ‘immigrants’, and ‘minorities’, or in other words ‘not me’, while the Conservatives now represented ‘everyone else’.[[41]](#footnote-42)‘We never have any difficulty getting a good cross section’, Mattinson told *The Observer* in August 1996 when talking about recruitment, ‘people are prepared to give up their time. They really enjoy it’.[[42]](#footnote-43) By the mid-1990s, discussion of the ‘focus group’ had become common in political discourse and editorials. A common theme of criticism was that the parties had become addicted to their use, formulating policy on the basis of the preferences expressed within focus group discussion. A 1995 Labour policy announcement by Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown, which had infuriated his shadow cabinet colleagues, captures the tension perfectly. Brown’s justification, said a *Sunday Telegraph* piece reporting on the announcement, was that ‘the announcement had gone down brilliantly with the focus groups!’[[43]](#footnote-44) Another criticism was that the focus group could not be as natural or spontaneous as its organisers claimed. Simon Jenkins argued in *The Times* that ‘anyone who has attended a focus group knows that it is artificial. Most politically active electors will call themselves waverers’. [[44]](#footnote-45) Nevertheless, politicians did come to regard the focus group as an essential component of planning and executing a campaign, even if this led commentators to lament for an era ‘before every utterance was tested on a focus group before delivery’.[[45]](#footnote-46)

This thesis will argue that the long 1980s is therefore a more historically coherent conception of the period, moving away from both the pre-defined narratives of each individual decade and the dominance of Mrs Thatcher and her ideals to the exclusion of other trends and developments in the nation’s political history. Central to the argument of this thesis is that this period witnessed not only the collapse of an economic and policy consensus, but of a political one, too, with period witnessing some significant shifts in its wider political culture. Profound questions concerning how the structures of British governance should operate, as well as the operation of British democracy itself, were thrown up during these shifts. This thesis will adopt a political culture approach to the period, being an examination of various aspects of that culture where questions were asked about the operation of the political system, the values underpinning Britain’s democracy, and the expectations placed upon political elites. In addition, this thesis will stress the importance of conceptualising Britain throughout the period as a new democracy, in contrast to long-held narratives of Britain as long-standing democratic nation.

**Britain’s New Democracy**

*‘I don’t think we realise sufficiently how new our present democratic system is. We still have comparatively little experience of the effect of the universal franchise which didn’t come until 1928. And the first election in this country which was fought on the principle of one person one vote was in 1950. So we are still in the early stages of dealing with the problems and opportunities presented by everyone having a vote’.*[[46]](#footnote-47)

In her speech to the Conservative Political Centre in October 1968, from which the above extract is sourced, Mrs Thatcher herself sets out a conceptualisation of the period in question that is absolutely correct, and this study will be driven by a conviction in the need to reconceptualise the nature of British democracy in this period. One of the most potent myths the British have told themselves about their political system and their national story, known as a ‘Whiggish’ interpretation of history, is that Britain is the world’s oldest democracy, centred on the ‘Mother of all Parliaments’ in Westminster, and that a path can be traced back to the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215 in the story of English, and then British, democracy.[[47]](#footnote-48) Such a path takes in a multitude of different and disparate political events and figures from across the span of British history. These have included the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the Levellers and Diggers of the 1640s and the Chartist movement of the 1840s and 1850s, all pushing the nation towards a universally franchised democracy that finally emerges in the early twentieth century. In this narrative, the momentum towards democracy seems unstoppable after the first ‘Great’ Reform Act of 1832, establishing for the first time a national system of qualification for the franchise, gradually and surely being extended in 1867, 1884 and finally to all men in 1918, with all women ‘incorporated within the pale of the constitution’, to use Gladstone’s phrase, ten years later. The Second World War itself was cast as a war for democracy, a ‘people’s war’ reflective of the democratic age in which it was fought. Winston Churchill is quoted as having responded to the news of his election defeat to Labour in 1945, immediately after the end of the war in Europe, with the retort ‘We have no right to feel hurt. This is democracy. This is what we have been fighting for’.[[48]](#footnote-49) By the mid-twentieth century, J. K. Galbraith was able to confidently declare that ‘like the family and truth and sunshine and Florence Nightingale, democracy stands above doubt.’[[49]](#footnote-50)

As Dennis Kavanagh puts it, ‘the whole story of the emergence of the civic culture is told in British history’.[[50]](#footnote-51) There are many reasons however to believe that such a story of British political history is misleading. For one, it confuses institutions with the existence of a democratic culture, for it is the institutions of British politics which have remained enduring, not the fact that such institutions were inherently democratic. L. S. Amery recognised this in 1947, writing that ‘our system is one of democracy by consent and not by delegation, of government of the people, for the people, *with, but not by,* thepeople’.[[51]](#footnote-52) The aforementioned mentioned studies of political culture which venerate Britain fail to make this distinction. Quentin Skinner has rightly warned scholars against making ‘the unhistorical assumption that any direct line of descent can be traced’ from earlier forms of government to modern representative democracy, and Charles Tilly has written extensively that there exists in European history no generalised, overarching road to democracy, but it is instead highly contingent and dependent of differing conditions and circumstances.[[52]](#footnote-53) The Victorians, for example, believed that the term democracy ‘smacked of continental abstraction and implied an excess of equality characteristic of American society’.[[53]](#footnote-54) It is understandable, yet utterly ahistorical, to view each of the successive reform acts as inevitable consequences of the one that preceded it. They are instead expressive of the particular political climates in which they were often contentiously enacted. It is for this reason, in combination with the way the vote was granted ‘on high’ from above rather than won from ‘below’ by revolution, that Kevin Jefferys is able to astutely claim that Britain has ‘never possessed anything that could be described as a “vibrant” political culture’.[[54]](#footnote-55) Such a sentiment can be found in the writings of historian E.H. Carr, who wrote in 1951:

*‘To speak today of the defence of democracy as if we are defending something which we
knew and had possessed for many decades or many centuries is self-deception and sham…
Mass democracy is a difficult and hitherto largely uncharted territory, and we should be
nearer the mark… if we spoke of the need, not to defend democracy, but to create it’*.[[55]](#footnote-56)

This outlook was also evident in the writings of historian and critic R. H. Tawney, who often talked of ‘Henry Dubb’ being his avatar of an idealised, engaged citizen, an essential prerequisite for a democratic culture. In the early 1950s, Tawney wrote that ‘I have not yet despaired of Henry… I consider it not impossible that he may one day wake up, make an angry noise like a man, instead of bleating like a sheep’.[[56]](#footnote-57) So, while the reform acts of 1832 through to 1928 do signify Britain’s transition to a representative democracy, they are more than that. It is the argument of this thesis that the extensions of the franchise are an attempt to draw the boundaries of the ‘political’, to define who is and who is not worthy of full citizenship. However, this thesis does not assume that such questions are answered in 1928 with the dawning of a universal democracy. As Mrs Thatcher herself highlighted in 1968, the first election fought on the principle of one person, one vote was not until 1950, with the abolition of the university constituencies. If we conceive of Britain in 1974 as a relatively new democracy, then implicit within this is that the questions thrown up by the debates over suffrage were ongoing, and that it is in the very nature of a democracy to keep asking itself how it conducts its political affairs and how society should approach the notion of the ‘political’. The advent of universal suffrage does not mark a fixed end point when such questions are no longer salient or relevant. As David Marquand has noted, conflicting narratives of Britain’s road to democracy are ‘fundamental to Britain’s political culture’.[[57]](#footnote-58)

Emily Robinson expands upon these themes in her 2012 study *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics*, a work which explicitly interrogates the uses to which politicians and political actors have used the past in recent British history. ‘Previous understandings of the political past emphasised its capacity to make demands upon the present’, Robinson argues, be that ‘for conservatives a duty of continuity and tradition, and for progressives an obligation to right past wrongs’.[[58]](#footnote-59) The key change, Robinson persuasively argues, is that history in British politics has become ‘a tool to be mastered’, representative of a political culture in which the main political parties ‘compete for the same place in the national story’ and where ‘the parties’ narratives of their histories has increasingly become the preserve of an interested minority of partisans who have more in common with one another than with the wider population’.[[59]](#footnote-60) Robinson’s study remains a touchstone for reminding historians of the ways in which the ‘past’ and its various narratives can be critical to the articulation of a political programme, and by implication the norms and expectations of a nation’s political culture. ‘History is a fundamental part of political positioning’, Robinson concludes, ‘whether as conservative inheritance, radical obligation, affirming grand narrative, lost ‘golden age’ or the backdrop against which revisionism can take place’.[[60]](#footnote-61)

Utilising a conception of Britain as a relatively new democracy has profound consequences for any study of political culture in the long 1980s. In 1974, Britain had only been a full democracy for 46 years and was governed by leaders older than the democracy that they served. Therefore, throughout the period which the study concerns itself with, far from being fixed, the contours of British democracy were still up for definition as the nation continued the process of learning how to be a democratic nation. In his memoir of his time working as a Labour activist in 1980s inner London, John O’Farrell notes that a common view amongst the public was that they ‘treated the vote as it had always been there and always would be’.[[61]](#footnote-62) This was, however, clearly not the case, and nor were the questions thrown up by universal suffrage so easily answered: the chapters in this thesis address many of the ways such questions were grappled with in this period, such as the tone of political programming on television, the political rights of citizens in a democracy and whether politics could be legitimately viewed as a form of entertainment.

**Utilising a Political Culture Approach**

Political culture is a term that is often repeated in political discourse, but rarely defined outside the academic literature: this thesis follows the definition of Dennis Kavanagh, who defined political culture as ‘the emotional and attitudinal environment within which the political system operates’.[[62]](#footnote-63) It is by using a political culture approach that this thesis makes it clear intervention into the historiographical field of this period. In a democracy, a nation’s political culture is formed by a constant and ongoing interaction between political elites and the mass of ordinary voters. If the parameters of what is considered acceptable for political debate are defined by ordinary citizens casting their ballots at elections, voters must navigate between choices presented to them by political elites, a cyclical process by which public attitudes to the political system are forged. Attitudes to the political system will in turn influence the degree to which ordinary voters engage with it. The mass media plays a particularly crucial role in this, acting as the critical mediator between ordinary voters and their political masters, this was especially important in the long 1980s. ‘The political culture is, of course, an analytical abstraction’, as Kavanagh notes, adding that ‘we abstract information from the larger environment about the knowledge, feelings and evaluations of the people to their politics’.[[63]](#footnote-64) While conventional political histories have tended to emphasise certain policies and the actions of governments, a study of political culture has by necessity a greater interest in the operation of, and attitudes to, the political system as a whole. Historians working in the field of contemporary British history have often taken too narrow a view of what constitutes politics. Whilst elements of the political culture can be found in the assumptions and practices of political elites, it also has what one study deemed ‘subtler cultural components.’[[64]](#footnote-65)

Political culture, being an ‘emotional and attitudinal environment’, consists of a vast array of components and influences. These can include attitudes to the operation of the system, degree of satisfaction with structures of governance, the media environment and its outlook towards politics, degree of popular engagement and understanding, and societal norms on what constitutes good and proper behaviour in politics. However, narrative political history tends to disaggregate these factors and silo them into difference aspects of study: thus, we have studies of political movements, the mass media, the history of government, and so on. In so doing, it becomes harder to identify prevailing political culture trends which may underpin several or all of these separate areas of study. A number of crucial works which have approached recent British political history have provided key sources of inspiration for the approach of this thesis, in taking a political culture approach. One of these is David Marquand’s *Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy* (2008), which distils four normative ‘visions’ that can be used to identify different strands of assumption among British political elites. In Marquand’s words, the four responses are geared ‘to the problem of how a political class forged in the pre-democratic era would cope with democracy’.[[65]](#footnote-66) These four visions were ‘Whig imperialist’, ‘Tory nationalist’, ‘democratic collectivist’ and ‘democratic republican’, with each one, according to Marquand, displaying a distinct conceptual attitude to the proper functioning of the political system and the values that should underpin it, and is evident in various periods of modern British history.[[66]](#footnote-67) These four visions allow for a conception of modern British political history that can see continuities between administrations of different political parties, and tensions and contradictions within administrations of the same party.

Kevin Jefferys’ *Politics and the People* (2007) also takes a political culture approach, being ‘the story of the British people and how they perceive and interact with politics, politicians and the political process’.[[67]](#footnote-68) Jefferys writes from a viewpoint that ‘none of the events and forces that came into play after the First World War fundamentally altered the nation’s lukewarm approach to all things political’.[[68]](#footnote-69) For Jefferys, there has been no ‘decline’ from anything better, but a consistent scepticism from the British public towards political involvement. For political historians, who understandably and invariably tend to be avid followers of politics themselves, this note of caution is worthwhile, that politics is rarely central to most voters’ everyday lives. Jefferys also warns historians against ‘allotting people to rigid categories’ when trying to explain involvement (or a lack of it) in politics:

*‘The person taking an active role in a party or pressure group might be motivated by ideological commitment, family tradition, self-interest, thoughts of personal advancement – or any combination of these and other forces. At the opposite end of the scale, those who take little part and routinely express ‘no interest’ might do so through lack of exposure to politics at home, school, or work, but they might equally have reached the considered conclusion that involvement is futile and that there are better things to do with one’s time.’*[[69]](#footnote-70)

There have been a number of excellent studies with regards to other periods of British history that take a wider, political culture-based approach. Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo’s *England Arise!* (1995), for example, ‘reveals the extent to which the British public, whilst voting Labour, rejected the party’s vision of a socialist society’ during the 1940s, and represents a powerful contribution to the historical study of political culture.[[70]](#footnote-71) James Vernon’s *Politics and the People* (1995), a study of English political culture in the early-to-mid nineteenth century, utilises postmodern theory, astutely noting that ‘narrative forms of language construct political subjectivities as stable and coherent’, with this having echoes of Walter B. Gallie’s famous statement that all political phenomena are ‘essentially contested’.[[71]](#footnote-72) Lawrence Black’s ground-breaking *Redefining British Politics* (2010) situates British political culture between the years of 1954 and 1970 within the wider economic, cultural and social context of post-war affluence, covering topics as diverse as the Consumers’ Association, the Young Conservatives and Mary Whitehouse’s crusade to ‘clean up’ television, all of which influenced and reflected political culture and popular attitudes to politics.[[72]](#footnote-73) This study was a considerable influence on the approach of this thesis, with the notion of political culture serving as a unifying concept as the book ranges across different, but never disparate, socio-cultural case studies. In addition, all of these studies situate politics in a wider timeframe, which is necessary to track changes over time. This is an approach conspicuously lacking in work covering the post-1970s era, with much of the literature preferring to segment each decade into separate studies, ignoring the imprecise nature of utilising a decade as a subject for historical study as addressed above. In his latest volume of post-war British histories, *Who Dares Wins*, Dominic Sandbrook has written convincingly about the conception of ‘ordinariness’, which he describes as having ‘played a central part in the political culture of the 1980s’. Whilst in the twenty-first century we are accustomed to politicians addressing their concerns towards ‘ordinary people’ and ‘ordinary working families’, ‘it was Mrs Thatcher who turned them into clichés’, Sandbrook argues.[[73]](#footnote-74)

Claire Langhammer’s ‘Who the Hell Are Ordinary People?’ (2018), is particularly revealing on this point of ‘ordinariness’ as a category of historical analysis. Langhammer traces its roots to the Second World War and its aftermath, with the category in wartime being ‘necessarily loose because its rhetorical power rested upon its inclusivity’, allowing for an ‘easy mapping onto the new wartime identities, with experiences and forms of expertise that did not always correspond to existing social structures’.[[74]](#footnote-75) This then spilled over and permeated society, the economy and the politics of the post-war world, with Langhammer noting the terms use in the rapidly expanding consumer market, as well as its use as a justification for the continuation of wartime rationing, austerity and scarcity.[[75]](#footnote-76) Langhammer quotes Raymond Williams’ discussion from his 1983 work *Keywords* that:

*‘The use of ordinary in such expressions as ‘ordinary people’ has a curious history and implication. What ordinary people believe can, in different contexts, mean either what ‘uneducated’ or ‘uninstructed’ people know or think, in what are then clearly seen as limited ways, or what ‘sensible’, ‘regular’, ‘decent’ people believe, as distinct from the views of some sect or of intellectuals’.[[76]](#footnote-77)*

Its political implications, though, were not always as conservative as the appropriation of the term by Mrs Thatcher in the 1970s and 1980s would suggest, as Langhammer illustrates, arguing that ‘intervening as an ordinary person legitimated both opinion and knowledge claims. As a social category, the ordinary performed significant political work in terms of defining, cohering and excluding; it recalibrated the extraordinary as it went.’[[77]](#footnote-78) ‘If ordinariness was defined in opposition to learned expertise, political power and possession of a public voice’, argues Langhammer, ‘then these categories were themselves shaped by the developing character of ordinariness’.[[78]](#footnote-79) Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite further demonstrates this in her 2017 article ‘Discourses of ‘Class’ in Britain in ‘New Times’’. Utilising the oral histories of the 100 Families project and the written testimonials of Mass Observation correspondents, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite demonstrates how ‘ordinary’ was used both by the poor, the working classes and the middle classes to demonstrate what they were and what they were not, with ‘class’ denoting either ‘pretentiousness’ or ‘inferiority’.[[79]](#footnote-80) These interventions are a welcome reminder of how political culture is an essential ingredient in shaping these normative categories that can then be utilised as stable, objective ones for political purposes.

With this in mind, this thesis definitively rejects any conception of political culture that seeks to differentiate between ‘high’ and low’ variants. As discussed above, the entire value of taking a political culture approach is that it recognises that the attitudes, norms and expectations of any political system is influenced by the world ‘out there’, beyond the world of ministerial meetings, legislative assemblies or indeed the infrequent (in a representative rather than direct democracy) act of voting. In many respects, this thesis reads as much as a work of social and cultural history as political, but it is a key contention of this thesis that these fields are not and should not be so easily separated and siloed off from each other. It is precisely for this reason that a political culture approach is attractive and relevant.

Much of the previous work on political culture, dominated as it is by political scientists rather than historians, is preoccupied with answering the question of what factors are necessary in a nation’s political culture for the maintenance of a healthy democracy. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s *The Civic Culture* (1964) is a foundational text in the field, being a comparative study of five nations (Britain, Germany, Italy, Mexico and the United States). By arguing that ‘a democratic form of participatory political system requires as well as a political culture consistent with it’, the authors attempt to distil what they view as the essential components of this ‘civic culture’.[[80]](#footnote-81) This was reflected in wider trends in the literature produced in the 1950s and 1960s, given the close temporal proximity to the Second World War and the ongoing communist dictatorships at the time of publication. As Dennis Kavanagh noted nearly two decades later when reviewing the work, it ‘takes deference for granted’, as Britain is venerated by the authors as a prime example of a successful civic culture, with the right balance of political interest and apathy being achieved via the maintenance of a pluralistic culture in which authority emanated from other sources than political leaders.[[81]](#footnote-82) The study remains of use, however, in reminding scholars of the lack of importance in which many ordinary citizens in a democracy assign politics in relation to other concerns. Almond and Verba ascribe three ‘orientations’ within an individual towards society: ‘parochial’ (attitudes to daily life and business), ‘subject’ (willingness to obey the law and defer to state authority) and ‘citizen’ (engagement with politics), with the authors arguing that the citizen orientation is easily the least important of these three to the vast majority of voters.[[82]](#footnote-83)

When observed through the prism of contemporary literature, three phases with regards to the health of British democratic culture can be observed. As Charles S. Maier has observed, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s ‘social scientists tended to predict that under conditions of perpetual economic-growth, political issues would be transformed into administrative and noncontroversial issues… politics would dissolve into social engineering’, this capturing perfectly the technocratic spirit of that period.[[83]](#footnote-84) The second of these phases, linked into wider concerns about the nation’s decline (exploited ruthlessly by Thatcher’s Conservative Party), was a deep pessimism about the future of democracy. Samuel Brittan’s *The Economic Contradictions of Democracy* (1977) is a classic of the declinist genre, arguing that the structure of British industrial relations and attitudes to the economy meant that liberal democracy ‘is likely to pass away within the lifetime of people now adult’.[[84]](#footnote-85) Much of the political science literature of the 1980s and 1990s, by contrast, was much calmer, and expressed a lack of concern about the health of British democracy (unlike contemporary reform groups such as Charter 88, explored in Chapter 2). This lack of concern is perhaps unsurprising given the context of an economic revival in the mid-1980s and the end of the Cold War, in which liberal democracies appeared to be ascendant. Writing in 1997 and summing up the mainstream view at the time amongst academics, Budge and Newton observed that ‘there is little evidence to support the various theories of crisis, contradiction and catastrophe. There are few signs of a general decline in trust, confidence in public institutions or political interest, nor is there much evidence of an increase in apathy, alienation or declining faith in democracy’.[[85]](#footnote-86)

A note must be made here concerning the use of the terms Britain and British, for there is inherent tension in the period of the long 1980s as to what these terms cover. Throughout the period in question, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was a unitary state, with the Westminster Parliament in London legislating on behalf of the four ‘home nations’. Politics was universally conceived to be conducted on a ‘British’ scale, and for several reasons it does make sense to talk of a British political culture. As Brian Harrison has argued, ‘in most respects up to 1990 England, Scotland and Wales shared economic, demographic, cultural, environmental, social, and even political experience’, concluding that ‘the United Kingdom was still for practical purposes united’.[[86]](#footnote-87) There were, however, notable differences across the territorial constituents of the UK which have implications for the scope of this study. Firstly, the unique constitutional arrangement, party politics and political instability of Northern Ireland immediately marks out the province as having a substantially different political culture to mainland Britain, with a strong sectarian element simply not in evidence on the other side of the Irish Sea. In addition, the period witnessed a revival of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. Whilst first emerging in the mid-to-late 1960s, demands for self-government in Scotland and Wales appeared to have become unstoppable by the 1990s, with the continued re-election of Conservative governments at Westminster on the basis of minority support in both Scotland and Wales being an undeniable factor in the growth of this sentiment. Indeed, the establishment in 1998 of a Scottish Parliament and a National Assembly for Wales were potent examples of how the long 1980s had shifted political culture in those two countries, and are evidence of developing separate ‘Scottish’ and ‘Welsh’ political cultures which would gather apace once the institutions of devolution had matured.

It has been an inevitable consequence of the beginning of this separate development in Scotland and Wales that most of the examples in this thesis drawn from this period come from England, with a London-centric media and political elite assuming to speak on behalf of the whole of Britain and often not making the distinction that things operated differently in Scotland and Wales. This thesis will not, however, use the term ‘English’ to describe the political culture which it studies. More than anything else, it is simply anachronistic: few in this period talked about an English political culture, beyond fringes on the far-right, and the days of using England and Britain interchangeably had long since passed. Like Scotland and Wales, England had no separate political institutions of its own, but unlike the former two nations, there were no widespread demands for greater English autonomy or self-government, nor much evidence of an awakened ‘English’ national identity comparable to the developments in Scotland and Wales. Sources invariably refer to a ‘British’ politics, even if their subject matter is entirely English. With these important caveats and distinctions in mind, this thesis will therefore refer to the changing political culture of Britain, with distinctions made for Scotland and Wales where appropriate.

**Consumerism, Media and the Decline of Deference**

Several developments underpin the trends in British political culture in this period, as examined by the three main chapters. The first of these is the nature of Britain as an affluent, consumer society. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s 1957 quip that most British people had ‘never had it so good’ is never far from discussion of the affluent society, and it is undeniable that the majority of the population of Britain, and indeed much of the Western world, achieved a level of prosperity and material comfort in the postwar years beyond the imaginings of previous generations. This is not to deny or underplay the continued existence of real poverty, as in many ways the period of the long 1980s serves as the starkest contrast between affluence and deprivation since the 1930s, with many areas of Britain scarred by unemployment and a profound feeling of hopelessness that came with deindustrialisation and economic malaise. This became particularly pronounced in the recession of the early 1980s. After income equality had reached historic lows in the middle of the previous decade, the rest of the period was to experience a growing disparity in both income and wealth between the richest and the poorest in British society.[[87]](#footnote-88)

Nevertheless, this period saw consumerism develop in myriad ways, with an explosion in credit and a proliferation of different consumer goods as the age of globalisation dawned, with the period witnessing the ascendancy of the microwave, the video recorder, the home computer and satellite television. Much of the demand for these new consumer goods was driven by rising rates of home ownership, something gleefully encouraged by the Conservative government with its ‘Right to Buy’ scheme for council houses. Few aspects of society were not remoulded by these trends, and as Chapter 1 will point to, politics and politicians came under considerable pressure to repackage themselves for the age of the consumer. Charles Moore details in his authorised biography of Mrs Thatcher how in the late 1970s advertisements for the Tories were placed in women’s magazines, giving one example entitled ‘Do this quiz to find out if you’re Labour or Conservative’, whereby ‘after a series of questions about policies, the quiz ended: Which of these people is more likely to know what it’s like to do the family shopping?’ The three listed options were James Callaghan, then Labour Prime Minister, the reader’s husband, or Mrs Thatcher.[[88]](#footnote-89)

There was a proliferation in public discourse of the language of ‘consumer rights’ and of a ‘consumer age’ throughout this period, with growing expectations that the purchase of goods brought entitlement to a high-quality level of service and product. Sarah Mass, in her contribution to the 2021 collection *The Neoliberal Age*, takes the figure of retailer John Bloom, whose aggressive business model placed an emphasis on putting the consumer first, as an emblem of this new age of consumer rights. Bloom, being ‘a pioneer of direct sales in Britain’, emphasised choice which Mass sees as being emblematic of ‘the short life of social democracy, [moving from] a national polity comprised of ‘consumers’ rather than ‘producers’.[[89]](#footnote-90) In December 1990, in arguing for the permittance of Sunday trading, even the *Catholic Herald* conceded the existence of the consumer society, arguing that ‘the debate must not be allowed to centre on the view of the Sabbath held by a vociferous minority who would prefer to turn the clock back to a pre-consumer age, now gone for ever’.[[90]](#footnote-91) As the irritatingly ungrammatical idiom put it, ‘you pays your money and you takes your choice’.[[91]](#footnote-92) In an age of such conscious and pronounced consumer choice, it is no wonder the political system appeared distinctively unresponsive by comparison: an ICM Research poll conducted in March 1994 for Channel 4 found that 71 per cent agreed with the statement that ‘the voting system produces governments which do not represent the views of most ordinary people’.[[92]](#footnote-93) Given that throughout the period of this thesis the Conservative Party was able to win sizeable majorities in general elections within the 41 to 43 per cent mark of the popular vote, using the lens of consumerism can illustrate why to so many this was such an unsatisfactory outcome (even if those who objected the most to this, as will be detailed in Chapter 2, would likely be aghast that their objections could be framed in the language of consumer choice).

In his 2009 study *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, Jon Lawrence charts the ‘changing dynamics of political interaction in modern Britain’ in ways which have a significant degree of resonance for this thesis.[[93]](#footnote-94) Central to Lawrence’s argument is the notion of the hustings, a traditional meeting of candidates at an election where local electors gather to question, interrogate and challenge their prospective representatives: it is an institution often taken as symbolic of British representative democracy. Lawrence cautions against viewing the rise of the mass media of newspapers, radio and television as being inherently detrimental to the democratic process, rejecting a narrative of ‘loss’: as he points out, traditional political hustings in Britain always placed ‘a strong premium on boorish masculinity, while even the wittiest, most decorous exchange between heckler and politician rarely managed to elevate debate much above the level of the modern sound bite’.[[94]](#footnote-95) While Lawrence categorically rejects any notion that the decline of the traditional hustings has diminished the interactions between politicians and public, he recognises the *crucial* development is the way newspapers, radio and television act as a ‘mediating role’ in this process. This mediating role in the political process played by modern, mass media is a theme to which this thesis will return throughout.

Another development in the changing media landscape is the development of ‘celebrity culture’, a phrase which first began appearing regularly in the British press at the end of the 1980s. Of course, the concept of the celebrity was nothing new: for thousands of years celebrities have existed in human societies, but never before had media been so geared towards the production of celebrity stories. As is argued in Chapter 3, much of this was driven by an aggressive new style of tabloid journalism, driven by papers like *The Sun* and the *Daily Star* but reflective in longer-standing titles like the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*, all of which found the topic of celebrity an undeniable lure for readers, with every detail of celebrity life being deemed of interest to its audience. As Dermot Purgavie reflected in the *Daily Mail* in November 1988, ‘once stars were distant and mysterious but now, to meet the needs of the celebrity culture, you can read about the contents of their medicine cabinets in the papers… celebrity dirt may not be an especially intimate link to the glamourous and gilded but in the matter of star mystique nothing is too remote.’[[95]](#footnote-96) Particularly in the downmarket titles, an emphasis was placed on snappy, condensed journalism, punchy and to the point, avoiding long passages of prose. Political culture could not escape from celebrity culture any more than it could from consumerism: Judi Atkins and Alan Finlayson have written about the emergence of the anecdote in political speeches, which serves to mirror the development of personalised, ‘quick hit’ news stories in the popular press.[[96]](#footnote-97) Gordon Reece, Mrs Thatcher’s media advisor during her time as Leader of the Opposition, understood how such an entertainment culture placed new expectations on politicians: ‘any aspiring Prime Minister had to go to them, and not expect them to come to her’.[[97]](#footnote-98) In addition, not only were politicians increasingly eager for celebrities from the worlds of music, sport and light entertainment to endorse them in their campaigns, but politicians themselves came to be viewed by the press as fair game much as any other celebrity. A generation of politicians came to fear being embroiled in a tabloid scandal, particularly if sex was involved.

The intensification of the consumer society and the development of celebrity culture undeniably have their roots before the period of the long 1980s. However, in tandem they came together to have a considerable corrosive effect on deference in British society. Eric A. Nordlinger’s influential 1967 study *The Working-Class Tories* had placed hierarchy and deference at the centre of British political culture, arguing that Britain was ‘a democratic anomaly: the country’s gradual political development has allowed traditional attitudes to authority to become fused with more recent democratic values to form a government tradition in which leaders are expected to lead’.[[98]](#footnote-99) In much of the historiography, discussions of the concept of deference have centred around that of social class. Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, in her comprehensive and persuasive survey of the topic in England from 1968 to 2000 concludes that ‘class remained a defining theme in English culture and politics in these years’.[[99]](#footnote-100) As noted above, Mrs Thatcher much preferred to talk about ‘ordinary people’, or ‘ordinary working people’.[[100]](#footnote-101) This was a canny political move, as it was a language that elements of both the working and the middle classes could identify with, allowing for intra-class distinctions to be made by the upper, more mobile sections of the working class versus those lower down the social scale. For Mrs Thatcher, such talk was more than rhetorical packaging: she had a genuine abhorrence of the whole concept of class, which she believed to be a Marxist imposition that exacerbated divisions within society. Nevertheless, the concept of class has been intrinsic to understandings of declining deference, with a perceived breakdown in the power of social class to condition different sections of society to ‘defer’ to those above them. This can be observed via a number of social indicators, including declining rates of religious observance, an unwillingness to automatically accept authority, and, most relevant for the purposes of this study, more sceptical attitudes towards political elites. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite correctly observes that ‘it is important to note that deference to authority may be a performance made out of necessity, rather than a deeply held conviction of the rightness of deference’.[[101]](#footnote-102) Even with this in mind, if there is a shift whereby such a performance is *not* deemed a necessity, this has the potential to be just as revealing.

This point, on the decline of deference, is worth briefly expanding upon, as it is a theme that undoubtedly permeates many of the case studies discussed in this thesis. The work of American political scientist Ronald Inglehart, director of the World Values Survey and specialist in comparative Western political and social trends, is particularly pertinent here. His 1990 work, was driven by his conviction that ‘whereas previous generations were relatively willing to make trade-offs that sacrificed individual autonomy for the sake of economic and physical security, the publics of advanced industry society are increasingly likely to take this kind of security for granted – and to accord a high priority to self-expression both in their work and in political life’.[[102]](#footnote-103) Inglehart’s work sweeps across topics such as postmaterialism, changes in mass belief systems, social class and religious observance, and his findings consistently track a decline in deference in this period.

In addition, and extremely pertinent to the story of declining deference, is that the long 1980s inherited a legacy from the decades immediately preceding it of minority and other interest groups seeking to claim their rights through concerted political action. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of second-wave feminism, campaigns for racial equality and the dawn of the modern gay rights movement, all of which managed to secure substantial legislative victories. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 enshrined the principle of equal pay for equal work between the sexes, the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 sought to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of race, and the Sexual Offences Act 1967 decriminalised male homosexual acts for those over the age of 21. Of course, given this thesis has argued previously against viewing legislative reforms as inevitable consequences of previous enactments, it is necessary to caveat this with an acknowledgement that many of the reforms were a product of specific circumstances and consideration on the part of political elites. The Sexual Offences Act, for example, largely created the gay rights movement rather than the other way round, and the attitudes of those who passed the bill towards homosexuality itself could hardly have been described as progressive.[[103]](#footnote-104) However, it is for good reason that the overall progressive flavour of the social reforms of the 1960s are some of the most enduring and resonant achievements of that era, and did undoubtedly propel movements grounded in a discourse of claiming rights. In addition to this, as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite notes, the dawn of the welfare state and full employment led to a pervasive feeling that those living in Britain in the decades after the end of the Second World War had a keen sense of their social ‘rights’, and were less deferential as a consequence, termed a ‘state of de-subordination’ by academic Ralph Miliband in 1978.[[104]](#footnote-105)

Despite the claiming of these types of social rights being seen as much more noble than those of the consumer, it is impossible to fully separate them in this period. Such was the pervasive effect of the consumer society throughout this period that many of the expectations and assumptions were similar between the two: the right to a certain level of service and quality of product and the expectations of increased choice. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, such notions were to reach their apex with John Major’s ‘Citizen’s Charter’ initiative for the public services. However, it is important to note a decline in deference is not necessarily met by a Newtonian equal-and-opposite rise in assertiveness. Indeed, the growing development and expansion of celebrity culture and of ‘quick hit’ popular media meant that many groups pushing for political and social change often found their cries met by a general populace who did not have the inclination to engage.

**Thesis Structure: Political Sub-Cultures**

As previously detailed, the potential areas for consideration in a field such as political culture are phenomenal. In 1972, Dennis Kavanagh wrote that ‘the political culture is but a part of the larger culture of a society. In a sense it is subculture, influenced by the general culture’.[[105]](#footnote-106) In this spirit, this thesis will be centred around a series of ‘subcultures’ itself, being three studies of distinct political subcultures which each speak to the different ways British political culture was changing in the long 1980s.

Chapter 1 concerns itself with the changing nature of political programming on British television throughout the period. Television is perhaps one of the most underappreciated and underexamined areas of post-war British history: while a vibrant literature exists within the field of media studies, on the whole historians have not fully appreciated the extent to which television is a rich resource for exploring so many aspects of the postwar British experience. This chapter argues that British television’s political coverage in this period can best be defined as a simultaneous contraction and expansion. Politics on television contracted in the sense that issues and policies became to be discussed in much less depth than had been at the case in previous decades. However, the political simultaneously expanded to a considerable degree, in that politics began to appear in a much wider variety of programming beyond that of strictly current affairs output. In addition, politicians were expected to open themselves and their personal lives up to scrutiny and to the television cameras. The chapter will make this argument by examining the resurgence of political satire in the period, the changing nature of current affairs programming and the emergence of a distinctive type of political style in popular entertainment programmes.

Chapter 2 is an examination in the explosion of citizenship rhetoric and discourse at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s. Emerging from a growing culture in which people had wished to assert their rights as consumers, and following trends of minority and other groups in pushing for equal rights, the chapter considers the factors which led to the concept of the citizen being so prevalent in this period. These include the Thatcher government’s attitude to governance and the fear of many on the Left that it might never manage to undo a Conservative dominance that felt hegemonic. It considers movements that pushed for constitutional reform and for the establishment of citizenship education in schools. It will argue that the rhetoric and discourse of citizenship in this period was often vague, contradictory and easily-appropriated, and despite it being preached by a certain section of intellectual society, it became prevalent to such a degree that both the major political parties felt that they had to respond to it. As the chapter argues, both the Labour and the Conservative parties were influenced by, and reached for, the language of citizenship to fashion for themselves a new political message and persona for the post-Thatcher period of the 1990s, with varying degrees of success. This chapter will make its argument by examining newspaper coverage and editorials, political literature and archival material from local activist groups in Sheffield.

Chapter 3 turns the focus towards the political scandal. This chapter argues that the period, particularly the late 1980s, witnessed the emergence of a scandal culture, driven by some seismic changes within the newspaper industry. Whereas newspapers had once reported the political scandal, and particularly the political sex scandal, once legal proceedings had begun, Chapter 3 demonstrates a significant shift, whereby tabloid newspapers themselves began to initiate the reporting that uncovered political scandals. This development was driven by a newly competitive, cut throat market, with salacious details being printed about all aspects of a scandal that would have been unimaginable just decades before. Driven by the need to boost circulation and increase profits, such coverage contributed considerably to a political culture that was less deferential and much more personalised around the individual characters of politicians, and had an effect on the ways in which politicians presented themselves to the public.

With regards to sources, this thesis draws heavily on press coverage (including editorials and advertisements), television programming, party manifestos, speeches, memoirs, and the archives of local centres of political activism. This is because each of the separate case studies located in each of the three chapters concern themselves with a political conversation played out in the public sphere, be that on television, in the press or in political campaigns. It avoids examining the internal mechanics of the political parties or government departments to any great extent. Of course, there is much valuable evidence to be gained for the contemporary historian from inquiry of this kind, but conversations in private are not useful in telling us about changes in a political culture when the three case studies are very much grounded in the public sphere. With regards to the sources from archives, that of local groups of political activists, emphasis is placed on the success of their ability to engage with the wider public. Newspapers are a fascinating resource in that they exist on so many levels. An editorial is very different from advertising, but both can tell a great deal about whom the newspaper is trying to reach, as is the emphasis in its language and the types of stories upon which it decides to focus. This applies also to television programming, with the added stipulations for impartiality actually demonstrating prevailing trends and views, as what is considered ‘impartial’ at any one time is so culturally and temporally contingent. Both of these products of media culture had phenomenal reach across the population throughout the period, including television, and as such ‘the political’ could not help but involve itself. Ultimately, this thesis aims to demonstrate that there are diverse ways to write political histories of a period which is still highly contentious and ideologically charged, almost uniquely so in the field of British contemporary history. By taking a deep political culture approach, it is possible to trace changes that move the narrative away from conventional accounts of the rise of a new policy consensus and the dominance of one particular politician.

Britain in 1994 stood on the brink of the information age. Developments in satellite television would lead to the rise of the 24-hour news cycle, where television news reporting was available 24 hours a day and became faster paced and quicker to ‘churn’ through events. Even more seismically, the internet was to revolutionise communication and wider society in ways we are still coming to terms with. While these two developments were critical in forging the modern political system, this thesis will argue that all three of political subcultures examined point the way for what is to follow. Chapter 1 demonstrates that a greater superficiality towards politics on television, often associated with the fast pace and assumed short attention span of viewers in the information age, in fact has its roots earlier, and can be observed in the period of this thesis. When turnaround at the general election of 2001 fell to 59 per cent, there was a considerable degree of worry about the health of British democracy, with calls for technology to rehabilitate it. As Chapter 2 illustrates, concerns for the health of British democracy had been a common concern for over a decade, and had already achieved some significant reforms after the Blair landslide in 1997. As for Chapter 3, the information age was to prove both the peak and the nemesis of political scandal culture, culminating in the twenty-first century with the phone hacking scandal that led to the closing of one newspaper and the perhaps irreversible tarring of the reputation of many others. In so many respects, Britain in 1994 had already had its political culture remoulded to such a degree that the information age was only to accelerate changes that were well underway.

In addition, all three chapters point the way for what came next: namely, the rise of New Labour and the ascendancy of Tony Blair. Understandably, most of the work concerning New Labour tells a particular story, with its roots traced back to the Labour Party’s repeated electoral drubbings in the 1980s at the hands of Mrs Thatcher. In such accounts, the unexpected defeat for the party to John Major in 1992 serves to crystallise and confirm the views of a committed band of modernisers, such as Blair himself, Gordon Brown, Peter Mandelson and Philip Gould to name a few, that Labour had to fundamentally reposition itself in the centre ground if it were to ever make itself electable again. This involved the continuation and culmination of a process, begun under Neil Kinnock, and continued under his successors John Smith and Tony Blair, of accepting many of the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s that Labour had so bitterly opposed at the time. ‘We ran for office as New Labour’, Blair declared after his landslide victory in 1997, ‘and we will govern as New Labour’, indicative of his determination to keep Labour firmly anchored in a style of politics that accepted the vast bulk of the Thatcher inheritance. However, each of the three chapters demonstrate how, in many ways, New Labour was a product of the deeper changes in political culture that marked the long 1980s. Its emphasis on telegenic presentation, most notably of Blair himself but of Labour as a whole, with snappy slogans geared for news bulletins speak clearly to the transformations outlined in Chapter 1. New Labour’s embrace of a significant degree of constitutional reform, and the grounding of much of its policy proposals within a language of citizenship, whilst able to keep its image moderate and its appeal open to voters who were uninterested in such proposals, demonstrate the influence of the citizenship culture of the period, as detailed in Chapter 2. Finally, it is undeniable that New Labour gifted to the political lexicon the phrase ‘spin’, denoting an obsession with media management and a horror of the perceived damage that a hostile newspaper industry could do to its political brand. Chapter 3, with its focus on the emergence of a scandal culture, illustrates the degree to which New Labour was terrified of its potential for damage, with the hounding of members of John Major’s Tory government for ‘sleaze’ serving as a much more potent symbol than the newspapers’ earlier attacks on the Labour Party itself.

**COVID & Circumstances Declaration**

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has affected virtually everything, and this thesis is no exception. Resource trips had been booked, planned and arranged, due to commence at the end of March 2020 when lockdown was instituted, and these were naturally cancelled. In addition, during the period of the pandemic and subsequently, I have had significant issues with my own personal health, partly triggered by the pandemic and due to other factors also, which have limited my ability to travel to undertake archival work and necessitated the use of sources available online. Both of these factors have had a big impact on the research and writing of this thesis. There were plans for a fourth chapter, on Outreach Culture, considering the revolutionary changes in political communication which allowed political parties to reach their voters in new ways: as discussed above, opinion polling proliferates across political discourse in this period, as does the focus group, with political parties and media outlets seemingly obsessed with ‘reading the pulse’ of the nation. Unfortunately, time, health and availability of resources have scuppered these plans. However, the methodological approach to this thesis has been underpinned since its conception by an interrogation of public facing sources, including newspapers, television programmes, memoirs and life writing, and the online availability of these sources means this thesis makes no compromise with quality in terms of the selection and interrogation of sources included. It is my firm conviction that with the range of sources that have been utilised, and the breadth of areas of Britain’s political culture touched upon, that this thesis makes a persuasive case for reconceptualising our understanding of such a crucial moment in contemporary British history.

**1. Television Culture**

*‘We are becoming a more private society: abandoning constituency meetings for the jousting of party leaders on Panorama’.*[[106]](#footnote-107)

There can be little doubt that the introduction of television to British society was transformative. No other form of media that had preceded it had expanded so quickly nor reshaped so many aspects of societal experience: communication, entertainment, leisure time, the domestic setting, consumerism or, indeed, the nation’s political culture. While the rapid expansion of the format is often remarked upon within academic studies, figures are quoted often without appreciating the truly breakneck speed of change. In the early 1950s, to own a television set put you within a small minority (14 per cent in 1952), while by the mid-1960s the situation was a complete reversal (90 per cent of households reporting ownership by 1964).[[107]](#footnote-108) The growth of television was, of course, expressive of the unprecedented affluence that reshaped much of British society in the 1950s and 1960s, as the consumer society began to make its mark, not just via the availability of new consumer goods but also the development of hire-purchase schemes which enabled ordinary people to buy such luxuries affordably. Unlike the growth of literature and publications that accompanied the development of the printing press in the early modern period, not only did television spread wider in an exponentially faster time period, but, like radio before it, it was a much more democratic format, with literacy being no bar to accessibility, cutting across both social class and educational divides. All manner of images and ideas were beamed straight into the comfort of the living room and the family home. This naturally had a profound impact across British society, and this chapter shares Jack Williams’ conviction that ‘if we wish to understand post-war Britain, we have to pay due regard to its television’.[[108]](#footnote-109)

These rapid changes that television wrought naturally had an impact on the conduct and operation of British politics, as television attempted to grapple with the political realm, and politicians likewise attempted to navigate this new medium in its first decades of broadcasting. The first instinct among executives at the then-monopoly provider, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which in 1946 had resumed broadcasting after a wartime hiatus, was to restrict political programming as much as possible. Grace Wyndham Goldie, a pioneer of the Corporation’s political (and especially election) coverage, remarked in her memoirs that such an approach reflected the attitudes of the heads of the BBC in that they ‘distrusted the visual and associated vision with the movies and the music hall and were afraid that the high purposes of the Corporation would be trivialised by the influence of those concerned with what could be transmitted in visual terms… [television] was not suitable for news or current affairs’.[[109]](#footnote-110) In its early days, the sole type of political programming to be permitted (aside from news bulletins) were party political broadcasts, in which ministers and opposition spokesmen broadcast to the nation without any form of scrutiny or challenge. The effect these party political broadcasts, which could run up to half an hour in length, had on the audience can be gauged by noting that from 1956 the political parties insisted that both BBC and the newly-established ITV showed party political broadcasts simultaneously. Peter Black has commented that before this change, up to 80 per cent of viewers had been moved to change channels upon the commencing of such a broadcast, and an internal ITV report had commented that party political broadcasts ‘kill audiences stone dead’.[[110]](#footnote-111)

Two developments in the late 1950s were crucial for what can be called the ‘first wave’ of expansion of politics in television broadcasting. The first of these was the demise of the ‘Fourteen Days rule’, first contained in a 1947 aide-mémoire by BBC executives, which stipulated that no topic due to be debated in Parliament could be discussed or referenced in broadcast until more than fourteen days had passed. That the Fourteen Days rule was formulated and defended by BBC executives, rather than legislated for by politicians, gives a good indication of the deferential nature which with the Corporation interacted with political elites. This vastly restricted the scope with which news and current affairsprogramming could cover the world of politics, and was critiqued as such at the time: lawyer and MP Dingle Foot, elder brother of future Labour leader Michael, wrote to the editor of *The Times* in March 1955 over the matter. Foot disagreed with the notion that the abolition of the Fourteen Days Rule would ‘diminish the prestige and influence of Parliament’, arguing that any prestige Parliament held was only dependent ‘upon the extent to which the debates are followed and understood by a well-informed public opinion’.[[111]](#footnote-112) The rule was to lapse the following year, however, but only due to the insistence of Prime Minister Anthony Eden, who wished to make a broadcast concerning the Suez crisis which was the sole topic of debate within Parliament at that time. What Eden did not consider was that this would allow the Leader of the Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell, a right of reply, which he swiftly used to condemn the government’s military response to the nationalisation of the canal by the Egyptians. The 1947 aide-mémoire, which had strictly forbidden the Corporation from broadcasting on any topics deemed ‘controversial’, had thus been discarded within ten years.[[112]](#footnote-113)

The second crucial development in the ‘first wave’ of political expansion in broadcasting was the introduction of ITV. Independent Television (ITV) had begun broadcasting the year before the Suez crisis, and the attitudes of its opponents speaks to previously illustrated concerns about the potentially corrosive effect of television upon the general public. ITV was championed by Conservatives who, according to Labour MP Christopher Mayhew (‘commercial television’s most enduring opponent’), having been forced to accept much of Labour’s 1945 settlement, ‘found television was one area in which [they] could encourage a bit of private enterprise’.[[113]](#footnote-114) On the other hand, many on the left, believing that commercialism was the antithesis of social improvement, strongly resisted the introduction of television financed by advertising. The influential Marxist critic Raymond Williams spoke for many on the left when he wrote in 1959 that the Labour Party had made ‘a shameful decision to compromise with commercial television’ by abandoning its opposition to ITV.[[114]](#footnote-115) Lawrence Black has argued that ‘cultural elitism and nationalism accorded with belief in public ownership… less for economic democracy and accountability than cultural control and responsibility’, with a belief that commercial television was inherently trivialising and the opposite of the ‘high’ culture that would epitomise an idealised socialist society.[[115]](#footnote-116)

The significance of ITV for the coverage of politics on television was via the organisational structure of the fledging company: its news service, Independent Television News (ITN), was split off and kept separate from the ITV regional franchises which controlled the rest of programming. A combination of this and the advertising income generated meant that ITN bosses had a considerably greater flexibility to experiment and innovate. Presenters such as Robin Day pioneered a style of questioning of politicians in interviews which, while positively tame by contemporary standards, was considerably more vigorous than facing no challenge at all as had previously been the case. Despite the opposition from elites and intellectuals, particularly on the left, the public took to ITV immediately, with the channel commanding an enormous audience share of 72 per cent by 1957.[[116]](#footnote-117) The BBC was quick to react, particularly in the field of current affairs. In her memoirs, Wyndham Goldie described ITN as ‘effective’ in promoting a rapid rethink at the Corporation in its stance towards covering political affairs.[[117]](#footnote-118) Veteran broadcaster Michael Cockerell noted that the BBC followed ITN in changes such as no longer sending politicians an advance copy of questions they were to be asked. A small change, perhaps, but one symbolic of the less deferential attitude to political elites that was to accelerate into the 1960s.[[118]](#footnote-119) By 1962 the Pilkington Report, commissioned two years previously to pass judgement on television standards and the future of broadcasting, was able to report that the BBC had increased the amount of current affairs programming by 45 minutes per week. While this might not sound like a great deal, this must be placed within the considerably shorter broadcasting times of the era.[[119]](#footnote-120) The relaunch of the BBC’s *Panorama*, with Robin Day at the helm (having jumped over from ITV), was symbolic of this greater emphasis.

It is necessary to understand this context to the period in question, and to also appreciate that, by 1974 and throughout the 20-year period of this thesis, Britain had a good claim to be a nation addicted to television. As Jack Williams has illustrated, from the 1960s onwards ‘people in Britain were spending more of their waking hours watching television than on any other non-work activity’.[[120]](#footnote-121) The nineteenth edition of *Social Trends*, published in 1989 and compiled from official statistics, estimated that in the 1980s over 70 per cent of the population watched at least three consecutive hours of television every day.[[121]](#footnote-122) It was also an activity with remarkably slight variation between differing social groups and categories. According to data from the 1970s and 1980s, women were slightly more likely to watch television than men, lower income groups more likely to watch than higher, and the very young and very old watched more than the middle aged. It is important to note however that the difference amongst these variants was never more than a few percentage points, indicating a remarkable breadth of reach across the nation.[[122]](#footnote-123) In addition, it is worth considering the media landscape in both 1974 and 1994 to consider the pace of change in the sector, which invariably had wide-reaching consequences. In 1974, viewers in Britain had access to three channels (BBC1, BBC2 and ITV), with an overnight broadcasting ‘closedown’. By 1994, Channel 4 had been added to the terrestrial mix and many viewers had access to satellite TV offering a plethora of new channels, including a 24-hour rolling news channel in Sky News. 1983 had witnessed the launch of breakfast television on both BBC1 and ITV, and in 1986 the BBC launched its first full daytime service featuring programming from 6am to midnight, seven days a week. As with virtually all other aspects of the 1980s consumer experience, television was affected considerably by the dual revolution in technology and consumer choice that characterised the decade.

These changes were also underpinned by considerable legislative change during the era, as the Thatcher government turned its restructuring and reforming gaze towards the television sector. The 1954 Television Act had created the Independent Television Authority (ITA) to oversee the creation of independent television, and the Independent Broadcasting Act of 1973 duly abolished the ITA and created the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA). The IBA was to take a much more interventionist approach with regards to the regulation of ITV and its franchises and was empowered by the Broadcasting Act of 1980 to oversee the creation of a second independent station, which would become Channel 4 upon its launch in 1982. With regards to the BBC, the Peacock Committee was established by the Thatcher government in March 1985, to take a view regarding its future financing in a world where satellite television loomed close in the distance. Jean Seaton argues that the report, produced a year later, ‘instead of destroying the economic basis of BBC independence, produced a resounding and coherent defence of it’.[[123]](#footnote-124) Whilst not quite as enthusiastic as Seaton suggests, the report did not recommend abolition of the licence fee as had been widely anticipated, describing the charge as the ‘least-worst option’. Despite cursory references to a more competitive future, ‘it said in the immediate conditions of imperfect competition, public service broadcasting compensated for market failure by delivering programmes that the market could not’.[[124]](#footnote-125)

The cautions outlined above did not mean that reform was off the agenda however, for both the BBC and ITV. At a 1987 seminar with television executives on the future of broadcasting, Mrs Thatcher had lambasted ITV as the ‘last bastion of restrictive practices’, a term which she had employed again and again with disdain towards the nationalised industries and the trade union movement.[[125]](#footnote-126) In her memoirs, she elucidated her views on the matter, writing that ‘broadcasting was one of a number of areas… in which special pleading by powerful interest groups was disguised as high-minded commitment to some greater good’.[[126]](#footnote-127) There was some caution within Downing Street at the thought of radical restructuring of the sector. In a memo sent by Press Secretary Bernard Ingham to the Prime Minister on 19 April 1989, he warned her that ‘You, of all people, must not go down in history as the person who ruined British television’.[[127]](#footnote-128) Despite these concerns, the 1990 Broadcasting Act, one of the last major pieces of legislation passed before Mrs Thatcher’s ejection from office in November of that year, duly reflected the Prime Minister’s instinct to open up closed models to competition and reform. The Act chiefly concerned itself with two areas. The first of these was the regulation of television: under the terms of the act, the interventionist IBA was abolished, and replaced with the Independent Television Commission (ITC), whose ethos was much more ‘light touch’ than its predecessor had been. Given the government and the Prime Minister’s tendency to moralise with regards to standards, and the fact it had introduced strict regulation into the VHS market as a response to the ‘video nasties’ panic (when there was a worry that children were accessing extreme material via unregulated VHS tapes), this is perhaps surprising, and illustrates how Thatcherism in practice always prioritised deregulation over moral conservatism. Along with regulation, the structure and ownership of television was to be radically altered as a consequence of the Act. ITV regional franchises were permitted to merge from 1994, eventually leading to the effective nationalisation of ITV into one entity by the early twenty-first century, destroying ‘the fragile ecology of ITV’s admired regional system’, as Chief Executive of Thames Television Richard Dunn argued in a 1995 lecture.[[128]](#footnote-129) The government had introduced a system of compulsory competitive tendering for local government in the early 1980s, mandating local authorities to ‘outsource’ public services to the private sector in the belief this would increase efficiency and standards. The 1990 Broadcasting Act extended this ethos to television, with a stipulation that 25 per cent of the BBC’s output be made by independent production companies, a figure which was quickly far exceeded and led to the rapid decline of ‘in-house’ production staff at the corporation.

Both the centrality of television and changing landscape of the sector naturally had a profound impact upon the conduct of politics, as the television became the main medium by which most of the public became aware of political events and by which politicians attempted to interact with the electorate. Election campaigns increasingly became fought on the airwaves, with the ability of a politician to perform well on television becoming a crucial attribute for their perceived potential for success. This was evidenced as early as 1964, when Conservative leader and Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home had a notorious exchange with a make-up assistant before a television appearance. Complaining that ‘I look rather scraggy, like a ghost’ on television, the Prime Minister’s request to be made more visually appealing was rebuffed by the assistant who informed Douglas-Home that little could be done as he had ‘a head like a skull’.[[129]](#footnote-130) Television’s importance only intensified as the decades wore on. Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 campaign was famously handled by professional advertisers Saatchi & Saatchi, who observed that, ‘though naturally combative and fast on her feet, her natural debating style was also too long-winded and too repetitive for television’s short attention span’, in the words of an *Observer* article.[[130]](#footnote-131) The importance of television was noticed by the international press, too: the *Washington Post* commented two days before polling day that television was the format ‘around which her professionally packaged, image-conscious campaign has been built’.[[131]](#footnote-132) In addition, *Maclean’s*, one of Canada’s leading current affairs magazines, reported Labour leader James Callaghan’s dismissal of Mrs Thatcher as being ‘packaged like cornflakes.’[[132]](#footnote-133) By the 1983 election campaign, so widely disseminated was the recognition of television’s importance that the phrase ‘donkey jacket’ is sufficient for many to recall Michael Foot’s disastrously perceived performance on television as leader of the Labour Party, referring to the jacket Foot wore when attending the 1981 Remembrance service at the Cenotaph, which caused the *Daily Express* to christen him the ‘Rt. Hon. Scruff’.[[133]](#footnote-134)

The launch of breakfast television was a significant innovation in the new televisual approach to politics, and the anxieties it elicited from certain sections are useful in understanding how such novel formats approached the topic of politics. Initially, television executives had been unenthusiastic about the format: in 1972, after any legal restrictions on broadcasting times were dropped the director-general of the ITA Brian Young told the *Daily Mail* that ‘I don’t think it’s the right medium for that time of day’, and that ‘Newspapers would be concerned if we moved into breakfast time in a big way’.[[134]](#footnote-135) A poll for the same paper a year later, when the format was being trialled on ITV’s London franchise Thames Television, showed that 80 per cent of respondents stated that they would not watch breakfast television, with a hopeful executive opining that ‘On the face of it there is little demand, but often people have to have the chance to get something before they want it’.[[135]](#footnote-136) Further experiments included a six-week run of *Good Morning Calendar* by Yorkshire Television in spring 1977 and by 1982 both the BBC and ITV confirmed that permanent breakfast television services would be available from the following year.[[136]](#footnote-137) Writing in the *Daily Mail* in January 1983, Paul Donovan reflected on the American experience of the introducing the format, with the initial serious-minded tone of programming meaning that ‘the ratings were disastrous… until Mr J. Fred Muggs, the roller-skating chimpanzee, joined NBC’s Today programme!’[[137]](#footnote-138) This was the approach that the BBC’s *Breakfast Time* adopted, with Donovan previewing that it would ‘work to a fast-moving, populist philosophy’, consisting of ‘news, travel, weather, keep fit, previews, astrology and cooking’.[[138]](#footnote-139) Despite reports before launch that the BBC’s internal research that showed viewers were unenthusiastic about tuning in, the BBC’s *Breakfast Time* launched to respectable viewing figures of eight million, with 80 per cent of viewers who tuned in liking the programme and 62 per cent saying ‘they would continue to watch it every or most days’.[[139]](#footnote-140) *TV-am* launched a few weeks later on ITV, with its ‘mission to explain’, as put by chief executive Peter Jay, was ‘quickly, quite ludicrously quickly, adjudged a disaster’, and the programme in-part only managed to survive after introducing the puppet Roland Rat to appeal to children: ‘by the year’s end’, reflected a television roundup at the end of 1983 in the *Financial Times*, ‘*TV-am* was reinforcing the old adage that nobody ever went broke underestimating public taste’.[[140]](#footnote-141)

In December 1982, Downing Street had circulated a five-page note from Mrs Thatcher’s press secretary Bernard Ingham at her request, to all private secretaries of Cabinet ministers, on the question of breakfast television, to ‘ensure that the Government as a whole takes advantage of the opportunities its presents to put over its policies’. Recognising that the format was likely to be influential in ‘setting the agenda’ for the day’s political discussion via ‘a fast moving, up-to-the-minute programme’, the note reflected that ‘the timing of its launch is politically opportune since we are now in the run-up to a General Election’, and that ‘Ministers will need to ensure that the Government’s point of view does not go by default’.[[141]](#footnote-142) Politicians were quick to take advantage of the format. In 1988, when discussing plans to televise the proceedings of the House of Commons, Labour MP Frank Dobson ‘said he could not understand how MPs could vote against bringing the cameras in when they were so keen to get on television that they would stand in the rain on St Stephen’s Green to be interviewed, and get up so early to be on breakfast television only to be upstaged by Roland Rat’.[[142]](#footnote-143) Given the magazine-like nature of the format of breakfast television, aimed at an affluent viewership that could afford appliances and foreign holidays, there was an understandable fear at how the medium would approach the topics of politics and electioneering. The noted psephologist David Butler, in an April 1983 article for *The Times*, recognised the potential of the new format, stating that breakfast television ‘may offer a powerful new element in the next election campaign, as politicians rushed to be consumed with the breakfast cereals’.[[143]](#footnote-144) He was not, however, optimistic for the role that breakfast television would play in shaping political discourse, arguing that ‘it will further elongate the campaigning day. Leading figures, bleary though they may be, will not be able to resist the chance of nationwide exposure’, and that even if the audience is a small one, ‘whatever [politicians] say on each channel will be monitored and provide material for the next broadcast or press conference’.[[144]](#footnote-145) Addressing those who would argue that more platforms for debate would be an inherently beneficial development, Butler argued:

*‘It does not work like that. There is a herd instinct in media coverage which encourages everyone to plagiarise everyone else and to follow the same story. There is also a lust for news that is new. Politicians find they can win headlines by saying something fresh, even if it is trivial. An accusation, a refutation, a counter-accusation all can sound original, even if they are worth no more than a quip at question time. The quick “quote” always seems to triumph over the reasoned paragraph. Old truths and fundamental issues can be ignored as boring, while new trivia wins bold type.’*[[145]](#footnote-146)

Butler’s view, that the political tone of coverage on breakfast television would only hasten the speed at which the conduct of British politics and the discussion of political issues was moving in a more superficial direction, is expressive of the more general anxieties many held at the time. In June 1983, at the height of the election campaign, television reviewer Herbert Kretzmer wrote in the *Daily Mail* of his fear that the style of breakfast television ‘may be gradually leading us to the personal style of U.S. politics where those unable to perform with charm and persuasion on television may never again hope to gain the glittering prizes.’[[146]](#footnote-147) Kretzmer recognised that the Prime Minister herself was best suited for the format, arguing that ‘Mrs Thatcher… is generally a lot softer and more agreeable in her approach to the TV cameras than she was during the run-up to the ’79 election, although no less insistent that her views are the only ones that matter’.[[147]](#footnote-148) The advent of breakfast television was an expression of the way British television was changing throughout this period, expanding across the day and prefiguring the rise of 24-hour news where the whole concept of a ‘shutdown’ would be thinkable, and threw up considerable anxieties for how politics would be covered.[[148]](#footnote-149)

Breakfast television was not the only format that was a site of change in British politics. Given the previously-discussed consensus among virtually everyone involved with the creation, production and transmission of party political broadcasts, ‘killing audiences stone dead’, it is worth considering the way the Conservative Party began to redefine the parameters of what a party political broadcast could be. This process began in the late 1970s after the advertising gurus Saatchi & Saatchi had been brought in by Mrs Thatcher’s media relations advisor Gordon Reece to help propel the Tories to victory. Charles Moore, Mrs Thatcher’s official biographer, has written of a ‘Saatchi-Reece doctrine’ underpinning the Conservative approach to the party political broadcast in this period, with ‘advertisements full of ingenious innovations like film running backwards (to show the direction in which Labour was taking Britain) and little dramas acted out (of people in a cinema queue complaining about inflation, for example).’[[149]](#footnote-150) These were designed to stand in direct contrast to the types of broadcast that voters had previously found so off-putting, with a politician monologuing at length directly to the camera. Instead, it was agreed that no politician should appear for more than thirty seconds at once, with Reece aiming for the broadcasts to be ‘untraditional, stylish and funny’.[[150]](#footnote-151) This was to set a trend that was to accelerate into the 1980s. In the 1987 election, Labour was determined to overcome the ramshackle image that had plagued its campaign four years previously under Michael Foot, and Oscar-winning director Hugh Hudson was commissioned to direct a party political broadcast that came to be known as ‘Kinnock the Movie’, featuring images of Labour leader Neil Kinnock and his wife Glenys walking along a cliffside, set to a stirring orchestral accompaniment with Kinnock talking about his political principles and convictions. Despite being mercilessly mocked by the puppets of *Spitting Image* as ‘Progressive social change – but nothing too radical’ on behalf of the ‘Ahem… Ahem… Party’, the broadcast was a success, being repeated later in the campaign and spooking the Conservatives into thinking Labour was much closer to victory than turned out to be case. Whilst it might be an overstatement to describe this new breed of party political broadcast as setting the audience alight, the creators were clearly striving to find a formulation that would not kill them ‘stone dead’.

Elections, however, despite arguably being the fullest expression of a democracy, are atypical political events, occurring once every four to five years. As a result of this, the ‘political’ was much more typically concentrated on television in this period via news coverage and specialist current affairs programming (such as *Panorama* and *Newsnight* for the BBC and *World in Action* for ITV). Debate shows such as BBC’s *Question Time* made its debut in 1979, and Parliament, which had been broadcast on radio on a permanent basis since 1976, finally opened its doors to the TV cameras in 1989, allowing for a visual record of the dramatic events surrounding Mrs Thatcher’s fall from power the following year. As indicated earlier, the coverage of politics on British television was tightly regulated, with political impartiality a key requirement. This considerably differentiated its coverage of politics from that seen on American television, and therefore many of the theories in the literature concerning American television are difficult to apply to a British context, most notably the impact of opinionated news ‘anchors’ so common in the United States. This stipulated impartiality is largely a result of the funding model of the BBC, with impartiality being a necessary precondition for feasibly enforcing a mandatory licence fee, as opposed to pay-as-you-view subscription models predominant in the United States. As previously discussed, party political broadcasts were the main outlet for politics on television, with the opposition’s right of reply cemented by the BBC’s decision to grant Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell broadcast time at the height of the Suez Crisis. How precisely impartiality is to be defined and measured has proven to be a bone of contention throughout the history of British broadcasting. H. F. Rawlings elucidated the tension inherent in the notion of impartiality in a 1985 article as thus:

*‘Impartiality and equality of exposure are not the same thing, and broadcasters must decide how valuable television news coverage time is to be shared out, consistently with the impartiality obligation on the one hand and the desire to maintain a properly newsworthy coverage of political affairs on the other’.*[[151]](#footnote-152)

The question of impartiality became something of a hot topic in the 1980s, as the Conservative government became convinced that broadcasters, and particularly the BBC, were systematically biased against them. After an infamous exchange on the BBC’s *Nationwide* in May 1983 between Mrs Thatcher and a Cirencester housewife, Diana Gould, in which the Prime Minister was questioned about the sinking of the Belgrano in the Falklands War of the previous year, Denis Thatcher was reported to have lambasted the producer, claiming the BBC was run by ‘pinkoes’ and ‘a nest of long-haired Trots and wooftahs’.[[152]](#footnote-153) Jean Seaton’s *Pinkoes & Traitors*, taking its title from this infamous comment, expands upon how these tensions shaped the Thatcher government’s relationship with the BBC throughout the 1980s, with Seaton coming to the conclusion that ‘the Corporation never managed to steer itself into a more comfortable relationship with her [Mrs Thatcher]: maladroitly, it fell into the trap of being defined as an enemy’.[[153]](#footnote-154) As with many areas of state bureaucracy and internal Tory politics to which Mrs Thatcher turned her withering gaze, the higher echelons of the BBC were dominated by the all-male, public-school, paternalistic, overflowing-with-bonhomie elite that excluded her, and she in turn despised. ‘Wet’ and ‘waffly’ was her opinion of such executives, a fatal judgement from Mrs Thatcher’s perspective.[[154]](#footnote-155) Stephen Hearst, advisor to the Director-General of the BBC from 1982 to 1986 and speaking to ITN’s *World in Action* for a programme entitled ‘The Taming of the BBC’, noted that ‘until the ‘80s it wouldn’t have occurred to the professional staff of the BBC to suspect that the governors were anything other than independent. After the ‘80s, one began to suspect that the governors were more likely to be appointed for Conservative sympathies than for other reasons.’[[155]](#footnote-156) If, as Press Secretary Bernard Ingham claimed, ‘the BBC was the wettest and waffliest’ of any institution in the eyes of Mrs Thatcher and her government, this attitude towards appointment is perhaps not surprising.[[156]](#footnote-157)

And yet, sometimes the very existence of broadcasting impartiality was enraging to the government, most notably over the BBC’s coverage of the Falklands War of 1982, in which presenters referred to ’British forces’ and ’Argentine forces’ in neutral terms and felt obliged to give airtime to the significant minority of public opinion which opposed the sending of the British Task Force to retake the islands. In a pointed reply to a Tory backbencher at Prime Minister’s Questions, who complained about an edition of *Panorama* on the war, Mrs Thatcher stated that ‘I share the concern that has been expressed on many sides... I know how strongly many people feel that the case for our country is not being put with sufficient vigour... on certain programmes’, and that she hoped that the recent words of BBC Chairman George Howard that the corporation was ‘not neutral on this point... will be heeded by the many who have responsibilities for standing up for our task force, our boys, our people and the cause of democracy’.[[157]](#footnote-158) It is hard to imagine BBC presenters ever using the phrase ‘our boys’, and therein encapsulated the complete difference of worldview which permeated and informed the relationships between Mrs Thatcher and the corporation throughout her tenure in 10 Downing Street. Such was the suspicion of bias that an amendment to the 1990 Broadcasting Act incorporated a requirement of ‘due impartiality’ into statute for the first time, even though the code itself did recognise that the ultimate arbiters of this would be ‘editorial judgement’.[[158]](#footnote-159)

The concept of the ‘attention span’ bears some consideration here, as it was to drive considerable changes in the nature of programming on British television throughout the period. As discussed previously, whilst television sought and attracted large audiences, television executives had little control over how audiences watched and interacted with television programmes, as viewing figures cannot distinguish between the most avid follower of a particular programme, and one who is paying no attention because their activities and energies are focused somewhere else entirely. Thus the concept of the attention span became increasingly crucial in the production of television, with producers concerned to produce programmes that would grab and hold the attention of their viewers. In this, as in so many aspects of television production in Britain, the lead was taken from America. American current affairs producer Don Hewitt spoke to the BBC’s *Listener* magazine in December 1981, saying that ‘We deal with attention span. Anyone who tells you that the television viewer has a long attention span is kidding you. Current affairs programmes have to reach people who don’t read. People who don’t read don’t have much of an attention span!’[[159]](#footnote-160)

However, the overwhelming way in which the term proliferated throughout the period was in its use by those who sought to complain about a faster pace of programming than they would have liked. John Naughton complained in a May 1983 edition of *The Listener* about current television programmes that were ‘designed for people with the attention span of newts’, whilst a viewer of the BBC lamented that ‘the Corporation seems to fear that the attention span of its listeners is vanishingly short and must be tempted with an endless supply of titbits now and hints of goodies to come. The law of diminishing returns cannot be disregarded’.[[160]](#footnote-161) Again and again the complaint occurs that it was an insult to the viewer’s intelligence to keep reducing the scope and depth of programming in order to maintain a faster pace. In Neil Postman’s 1986 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the author argues for a ‘romantic vision of an earlier time, when the attention-span of voters was longer than the 60 seconds of the average television news item and where print was the dominant medium of communication’.[[161]](#footnote-162) A piece by Dennis Barker in *The Guardian* in January 1989 was prompted by a BBC2 series called ‘3 Minute Culture’, presented by academic Michael Ignatieff, in which Barker proclaimed that ‘the most alarming aspect of present day life is arguably not that the nuclear warning is as little as four minutes, but that the average human attention span is seemingly down to three’.[[162]](#footnote-163) In the programme, Ignatieff wanted to explore what he describes as ‘short attention span culture’ and how it affected ‘our capacity to enjoy life. I have a feeling that everything comes at us in 90, 30 and 20-second packages and that is a culturally new phenomenon’.[[163]](#footnote-164) ‘People from my culture look down their noses at this stuff,’ reflected Ignatieff, ‘but clearly a great amount of money, energy and ingenuity is being poured into these tiny bits of time’.

The historiography on British television has several predominant focuses and features, which this chapter will respond to, and draw upon the different narratives of media history that are well established in the field. Three main narratives exist within wider media historiography which seek to explain the role of the media in public life and political culture. The first of these is the liberal narrative, which casts the media as ‘the servant of a maturing democracy’, with ‘the baton passed… from the press to broadcasting in the final lap of the democracy relay race’.[[164]](#footnote-165) The emphasis in this narrative is the emancipating potential of the mass media, whereby newspapers, and then radio and television, provided the public with information, liberating them from ignorance and empowering them as citizens in a democracy. This approach, Whiggish in nature, chimes with the mythologising of Britain as a centuries old and mature democracy, ignoring the comparative newness of universal suffrage. The second major narrative is a radical one, which casts mass media as a coercive tool, utilised by special interests and powerful elites to hold back the advance of the oppressed. Work utilising a radical narrative tends to draw attention to the press barons of the twentieth century and the supposed ‘dumbing-down’ of content, particularly political content, across a variety of media platforms. The third and final major narrative is the populist one, which takes the empowerment narrative of the liberal narrative but strips away its earnest ethos of democratic improvement: if political content is dumbed down or side lined, this is merely a reflection of consumer tastes and preferences, according to the populists. The story of British media history, according to the populists, is one where the public were liberated from previous restrictions and able to access media ‘that had been denied to them by a paternalistic elite’.[[165]](#footnote-166)

The difficulty with these models is that they have been largely formulated and utilised with newspapers, periodicals, and the popular press more widely in mind, and do not always easily map onto television programming. It is easy to see why, particularly in this period, this is the case: the newspapers took a clear partisan line that was simply not available to television news and political programming, and the undoubted importance senior politicians attached to courting press barons and magnates, most particularly Rupert Murdoch, owner of *The Sun*, *The News of the World*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times.* Articles such asHelen See’s ‘Guardians of the Public Sphere?’ (2013) are an example of the work being done by historians to show how popular media forms influenced and informed the political culture in which they were created, with See arguing thatthe Thatcher governments and the tabloid press, by creating a ‘shared moral discourse’ centred on anti-permissiveness, ‘laid the groundwork for the eventual fall of the Major administration, in the wake of a long series of financial and sexual scandals’.[[166]](#footnote-167) Drawing on such an approach, which considers how media forms have reshaped political culture, has considerably informed the argument and focus of this chapter.

It is also the case that previous work by historians has had a heavy focus on the organisational structure of British television, as exemplified by Asa Brigg’s *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, published in five volumes from 1961 to 1995, and even this only takes the story up to 1974. As Lawrence Black puts it, these are ‘authoritative accounts of personnel, policy and structures, but in which programming itself is less prominent’.[[167]](#footnote-168) Horrie and Clarke’s *Fuzzy Monsters* and Goodwin’s *Television Under the Tories* are similar examples of how studies of television are often studies of organisational structures.[[168]](#footnote-169) A similar focus for historians has been the policies of political elites with regards to television, particularly Labour, as shown in Des Freedman’s *Television Policies of the Labour Party, 1951-2000* (2003). The wider literature on British television, and television theory more generally, is dominated by media theorists rather than historians. Differing models have been developed by media theorists which attempt to explain the influence television has on its viewers, a concern which first reared its head at the inception of television as a mass form of communication, and one that has not abated since. Jack Williams has characterised these as two broad models: the ‘effects’ model, as developed by Adorno and Horkheimer, and the ‘uses and gratifications’ model, associated with scholars such as Blumler and Halloran.[[169]](#footnote-170) The former warns against the inherent passivity of television as a medium, by which viewers can be manipulated in their thinking in ways that benefit the political and economic status quo. The latter, on the other hand, is more nuanced, downplaying the manipulability of television audiences, and emphasising that they ‘were not a homogenous mass and that different viewers derive different meaning from television’.[[170]](#footnote-171) In terms of the narratives of media history as previously discussed, the clearest and most influential way in which this has been applied to television is via the work of the Glasgow Media Group, which has taken a strongly radical perspective, particularly on the production and reception of television news programming. As Jack Williams explains, the Group used a case study of the coverage of industrial action on television news to illustrate how, in their view, trade unionism was demonised by the media. Such studies were not uncontested, however, with ‘words such as ‘demand’ and ‘threat’, which the Group regarded as depicting trade unions unfavourably, [being] the sort of language that trade unionists themselves used in confrontation with employers’.[[171]](#footnote-172) Accusations of a predetermined viewpoint do somewhat undermine many of the works which take this radical stance, and expose just how hideously difficult it can be to measure any idea of ‘objectivity’ in a medium in which it is stipulated. There is by comparison relatively little work considering television programming and televisual culture as historical sources in and of themselves, and what they can tell us about the time in which they were produced.

There are, of course, considerable methodological challenges which present themselves to any would-be historian of television. While the process of wiping – whereby both the BBC and ITV regional franchises, concerned about storage costs, destroyed the master tapes of hundreds of early programmes – had been largely abandoned by the late 1970s, there is a considerable difficulty in terms of access. Whilst scholarly studies of the popular press have been aided and rejuvenated with the digitisation and online arrival of hundreds of years of newspaper archives, no such televisual equivalent is forthcoming. Instead, we must rely on a patchwork of online availability, commercial DVD releases and access to physical archives such as those of the BBC, which are extremely restrictive. In addition, the type of archive programming most readily available is largely that of sitcoms and drama rather than current affairs or political pieces. Whilst it may be culturally beneficial to have vintage episodes of *Dad’s Army* or *I, Claudius* easily to hand, it does not aid the work of the political historian. There is also the question of volume, as Jack Williams has pointed out, noting that ‘no one can have watched more than the tiniest fraction of all the programmes that have been in Britain… at present [time of writing, 2004], anyone watching terrestrial television for twelve hours every day would only see 10 per cent of its output’.[[172]](#footnote-173) At best, examples used can only be indicative, as it is impossible for anybody to access or watch even a majority of what was broadcast on British television. Finally, there is no way of knowing how content is received even when people are watching. Research conducted in the 1980s by Peter Collett illustrated the range of tasks viewers undertake while ‘watching’ television, including ‘ironing, knitting, sewing and talking’, which considerably impact the attention with which people afford the programmes in front of them.[[173]](#footnote-174) These are all factors which must be accounted for and considered when discussing the history of television.

It is the contention of this chapter that the long 1980s witnessed a simultaneous expansion *and* contraction of politics on television, one which speaks to broader changes in the nation’s political culture. This at first appears contradictory, but this expansion and contraction were very much intertwined. The *expansion* was in terms of the breadth with which political issues and figures spread across a broad range of programming, beyond their usual confinement to strictly news and current affairs output. This speaks to wider changes in the nation’s political culture, including the rise of the politician as celebrity. This is inextricably intertwined with the simultaneous political *contraction*, in that, partly because of this, the depth with which political issues were discussed lessened considerably: dense policy discussions, commonplace on primetime weekly television in the mid-1970s, were a rarity by the early 1990s. Given the methodological challenge in terms of sheer volume of programming, and the issues around access, this chapter will focus on three areas of broadcasting to illustrate the ‘contraction and expansion’ thesis, and what this tells us about Britain’s changing political culture in this period: satire, current affairs programming, and popular programming. Whilst not claiming to be exhaustive, certain programmes and moments will be highlighted which elucidate and are more widely indicative of these changes in attitudes to politics on television. The main omissions of the chapter are news and election coverage. The former is excluded because it is a topic worthy of discussion in itself, and has already received considerable academic attention, most perceptively in Jackie Harrison’s *Terrestrial News in Britain* (2000), which argues that in the early 1990s news programmes diversified their content at the expense of depth, with a greater emphasis placed on human-interest stories of the sort that dominated in the pages of the tabloid press.[[174]](#footnote-175) On the other hand, election coverage is excluded for the same reason as for the rest of this thesis: that elections are atypical political events, and are not really representative of either political engagement among everyday citizens nor, in this context, on television programming. Our emphasis must remain on the coverage of politics and reception of political events on a more ordinary, day-to-day basis.

**Satire**

Britain has a long and proud tradition of political satire. One need only take a cursory glance at the vicious caricature and mockery in the cartoons and pamphlets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to see that the satire of the long 1980s had a clear ancestry. In 1973, Thomas Milton Kemnitz, in studying the political cartoons of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, noted the effect on satire of the rise of the popular newspaper at the end of the latter century. The incorporation of the political satirical cartoon into mass market newspapers, with its respectable middle-class audience, Kemnitz argued, meant that it lost ‘its scurrilous and bawdy character, as well as most of its viciousness and much of its bite… publishers could not allow the cartoons to offend potential buyers’.[[175]](#footnote-176) Williams concurs, arguing that ‘in the first half of the twentieth century political satire was not strong in Britain. Newspapers printed political cartoons but no magazine that tried to ridicule parliamentary politicians sold enough copies to last for very long’.[[176]](#footnote-177) By the long 1980s, satire found its teeth again, most notably in the form of Central Television’s *Spitting Image* and brought it to a mass audience in a way that was utterly unique in British history.

It is impossible to consider *Spitting Image* without first briefly recognising *That Was The Week That Was* (TW3), Britain’s first satirical programme which aired some twenty years previously in the early 1960s at the height of the so-called ‘satire boom’, a time of widespread distrust of the Conservative government and the ‘establishment’ more widely. Featuring a mix of sketches, monologues and music, the virtue of TW3 was described byHugh Carlton Greene, the Director-General of the BBC throughout the 1960s, in its ability to ‘prick the pomposity of public figures’.[[177]](#footnote-178) Some historians, most notably Dominic Sandbrook, have argued that the importance of TW3 has been overstated, that it was ‘the most derivative and restrained of all the instruments of the satire boom… [whose] real heyday lasted a very brief five months.’[[178]](#footnote-179) It was significant however to be the first *television* programme to attack politicians in any overt way, though it was comparably tame in comparison to the puppetry of *Spitting Image*. Ian Trethowan, BBC Director-General from 1977 to 1982, agreed that TW3 ‘swept through British broadcasting as a cleansing agent, scouring away the last of the bland and the banal... in the longer term, the programme contributed to a feeling among politicians that the BBC was not so much hostile to any party as contemptuous of the whole parliamentary process’.[[179]](#footnote-180) It also proved to be highly popular, reaching a peak of 12 million viewers in April 1963, an impressive feat given its late airtime of 10:50pm.[[180]](#footnote-181) Despite this, controversy surrounding a monologue delivered by David Frost, dressed as Benjamin Disraeli and attacking the current occupant of Number 10, Alec Douglas-Home, combined with an anticipated election, ensured TW3 came to an end in late 1963 after just two series.

Satire of the same significance would return on ITV as opposed to the BBC. *Spitting Image* was produced by Central Television, the ITV regional franchise covering the Midlands of England, and aired largely on Sunday nights in half-hour instalments, over eighteen series and supplemented by several specials, between 1984 and 1996. The programme focused on short puppet sketches, lampooning politicians, celebrities, the Royal Family, and others in the public eye, often exaggerating physical features, mannerisms or vocal ticks to a degree which was, at least initially, genuinely shocking. Labour Deputy Leader Roy Hattersley, for example, who had been afflicted with a lisp since childhood, was infamously depicted as having hosepipe-like spittle showering anyone he spoke to, whilst a fawning and diminutive David Steel, leader of the Liberals, literally resided in the front pocket of SDP Leader David Owen. The undoubted political star of the show was Margaret Thatcher herself, portrayed as a domineering, often violent, bully, physically assaulting her cabinet of ‘vegetables’, whilst clad in a suit, smoking a cigar and using a urinal. *Spitting Image* did not shy from showing a level of violence towards public figures that would be unacceptable in any other medium: in one sketch, Mrs Thatcher asks her hairdresser to style her hair in a way that will be universally popular. The hairdresser, with little hesitation, proceeds to decapitate her with a scalpel.[[181]](#footnote-182) This went for nudity, too: pop singer Madonna, for example, was portrayed as being unrecognisable to the general public until she reveals her naked breasts, at which point she is mobbed by an adoring public. The form this took – puppetry – was critical for understanding how *Spitting Image* was able to get away with these levels of violence and nudity, and in many ways, what puts the programme in greater lineage with cartoons rather than previous televisual satire. As Kemnitz recognised, ‘the cartoon is used for attacks on politicians that would be difficult to sustain in any other medium’ whereas Kiene Brillenburg concurred that the puppets ‘were a handy means to say everything without being held liable for it’.[[182]](#footnote-183)

The key creative forces behind the show were Peter Fluck and Roger Law, who had been creating plasticine caricatures of politicians and celebrities to accompany features a *Sunday Times* magazine supplement. The show was first referenced in the press in an article in *The Times* on 6 December 1983, declaring that ‘world politicians will appear as puppet caricatures’ and noting that ‘the series is one of the few innovations in the independent television schedules, which feature mainly the material which has given the network its recent ratings lead over the BBC’.[[183]](#footnote-184) In previewing the series in February 1984, *The Times* described the show as ‘a cross between *The Muppets* and *Not the Nine O’Clock News*’, and while the reference to the former was unlikely to be made once the show had actually been viewed, the latter was a good one. *Not the Nine O’Clock News* had run on the BBC from 1979 to 1982, featuring a similar mix of satirical sketches as *Spitting Image*, and shared a producer in John Lloyd. A 1995 retrospective of *Spitting Image* described how ‘although it was Fluck and Law’s genius as puppet makers that caught the public imagination, it was Lloyd’s highly-strung, anti-authoritarian driving force which gave the show its cutting edge’.[[184]](#footnote-185) It was, however, considerably less savage than *Spitting Image* was to be, certainly towards political figures. In a piece for the *Daily Telegraph* from 29 December 1979, Richard Last noted that while *Not the Nine O’Clock News* was superficially ‘designed to arouse strong passions, mostly of a disapproving nature’, he believed that ‘the offensiveness count for this kind of satirical revue was remarkably low’.[[185]](#footnote-186)

In terms of popularity, the programme reached its zenith in 1986, though it was to continue running for another ten years. *Spitting Image* was the fourth most watched programme on television for the week ending 30 March 1986, with an audience of 14.25 million, with 12.55 million tuning in for the following week’s episode, amongst the highest viewing figures the show ever recorded, and the tenth most-watched programme on British television that week.[[186]](#footnote-187) It was also a highly lucrative business operation, with an annual revenue of £2 million in 1986, and by 1990 *The Independent* gleefully noted that ‘Mrs Thatcher has had her revenge’ in reporting the appointment by Fluck and Law of a chairman and chief executive to run their production company, applying ‘the rigours of business efficiency’ so favoured by the Prime Minister.[[187]](#footnote-188) In addition, there was a large market for merchandise for the show. Tony Samstag, reporting at the Pet Product Marketing Exhibition in October 1985, remarked that ‘chewy vinyl dog toys reproducing the *Spitting Image* puppets of Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan are runaway best-sellers’.[[188]](#footnote-189) Meanwhile, vendors at the 1986 Liberal Assembly were given strict instructions *not* to sell puppets depicting their leader, David Steel, in the pocket of SDP leader David Owen, much to the disappointment of attending assembly delegates.[[189]](#footnote-190)

It is the extreme controversy that *Spitting Image* supposedly generated which dominates popular memory of the programme, and such viewpoints are commonly found on retrospectives such as 2006’s *Best Ever Spitting Image* and in the media coverage which surrounded the programme’s revival for the streaming era in 2020. Was the original *Spitting Image* as controversial as such folk memory holds, though? By examining the tone and extent of contemporary newspaper coverage, it is possible to interrogate these claims. *Spitting Image*’s greatest coverage in the press spanned its early years, which is perhaps not surprising: novelty naturally breeds interest.There was, as perhaps to be expected, greater attention paid to *Spitting Image* in tabloid newspapers rather than broadsheets. Anne Robinson, writing in the *Daily Mirror* in March 1984, declared that ‘their caricature of the Queen [is] looking grotesquely ugly… [it] proved tasteless and offensive even to those of us who are self-confessed, faint-hearted royalists’.[[190]](#footnote-191) This was followed by an even more bellicose front page in a Saturday edition the following year, declaring its verdict that it was ‘SPITTING MAD!’ that ‘TV’s *Spitting Image* is ready to plunge to new depths of bad taste… by taking the mickey out of the Queen Mother!’[[191]](#footnote-192) The *Daily Mirror* seemed to be particularly touchy on the subject of Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, running a piece entitled ‘We Are Not Amused’ in October 1985 scorning the publication of a book which displayed her latex facsimile as sporting separate “Gin” and “Tonic” tattoos.[[192]](#footnote-193) This faux-outrage even reached the foreign press, with the Canadian *Globe and Mail* reporting the verdict of several Conservative MPs on the decision to include a caricature of a baby Prince William: ‘wholly offensive’ was the verdict of Jill Knight, whilst John Stokes went as far as to suggest that ‘there is something almost sick about the way people attempt to denigrate what we hold most dear’.[[193]](#footnote-194) The almost pantomime tone of scorn, wholly disproportionate to the impact of a Sunday night satirical show, suggests that, as common with many tabloid controversies, the outrage was performative rather than genuine, almost a game that the press played with the programme and its creators, and one which would attract readers to purchase the papers. As noted in the Diary column of *The Times* in April 1984, the previous Sunday’s edition of *Spitting Image* ‘had a puppet caricature of Princess Margaret attempting a saucy strip. No more than five people complained about the entire show’.[[194]](#footnote-195)

These undercurrents are detectable in terms of the ways in which the producers of the programme interacted with the media, and there was a definite shift almost perfectly coinciding with the growth in its popularity. Early statements and interviews had played down the shock factor of the show. While expecting controversy, producer John Blair went out of his way in February 1984 to state that ‘I don’t think we are being too outrageous’ in a feature in the *Daily Express*, perhaps aiming to counter the rhetoric of the papers, which emphasised *Spitting Image*’s shocking qualities, and thus reassure the potential audience.[[195]](#footnote-196) By 1986, however, when the programme was well-established and extremely popular, the producers had realised that this ability to ‘shock’ was a key part of its appeal. A 1986 feature in the *Daily Mirror*, also entitled ‘Spitting Mad!’, detailed Jimmy Tarbuck’s complaints against the programme for its portrayal of the Queen, in which he declared himself to be ‘disgusted’. Producer John Lloyd was unrepentant, declaring that ‘he is using it as an excuse because he is upset over the way we portray him… And he’s got a nerve complaining about our jokes. Have you seen his show lately? It’s so feeble.’[[196]](#footnote-197) This sentiment was echoed by producer Geoff Perkins promoting the launch of the fourth series in October 1987, with Perkins promising ‘that *Spitting Image* will be bitchier, more biting and funnier than ever – despite the inevitable complaints!’[[197]](#footnote-198) This is all said with a knowing wink to the reader, that it is in everyone’s best interests to oversell just how outrageous the show will be.

There are essentially two ways in which comedy can incorporate the world of politics. The first of these is humour which is political in the sense that it makes light of political issues and ideas. A sketch in which the puppet Mrs Thatcher reprimands one of her Cabinet for stealing is a perfect illustration of this. The latex Prime Minister asks the assembled group of schoolchildren-like ministers, “What do we call it when people go around stealing other people’s property?”, to which Leon Brittan (then-Home Secretary) nervously responds “a free market economy?”[[198]](#footnote-199) The humour arises from making comment on a political issue, and therefore demands a certain level of political understanding to find the joke amusing, namely the policies and outlook of the Thatcher government. The second type of political humour features politics in a much more superficial sense, that is to say, humour at the expense of political actors, be that Roy Hattersley’s lisp, Mrs Thatcher’s domineering personality or Neil Kinnock’s Welsh windbaggery. The humour is gained by mocking and exaggerating physical or other features of the politicians themselves and their personalities, rather than making any wider point about political issues. It is decidedly more populist and more accessible, and it is no coincidence that *Spitting Image*’s increasing shift from the former to the latter aligned with rising viewing figures. Jokes which required a certain degree of understanding of political ideas and issues were increasingly sidelined in favour of Punch and Judy style slapstick. The same 1987 article, in which producer Geoff Perkins had promoted the launch of *Spitting Image*’s fourth season, starts with a description of the portrayal of its cast of characters: ‘Princess Di was having her eyelashes trimmed. Maggie Thatcher was strangling a cat. Norman Tebbit was late for a spot of underwater bonking. Lester Piggott’s prison clothes were still being run up. And Ian Botham’s bare bum was on fire.’[[199]](#footnote-200) It is a perfect encapsulation of the shifting tone of the show’s humour over its time on air. The programme’s 1987 election special in many ways perfectly typifies the attitude of *Spitting Image* towards the political class, portrayed as incompetent, venal and wallowing in scandal and vice. In one sketch, Tory MPs urge young unemployed men to offer themselves up as rent boys, in a spoof of the many job-creation scheme adverts common in a decade scarred by persistently highly unemployment. At one point, the narrator intones, ‘don’t just sit on your backside. SELL IT!’[[200]](#footnote-201) With such an attitude, it is not surprising that the programme produced merchandise featuring the slogan ‘If we all spit together, we’ll drown the bastards!’

In addition, and what is barely commented upon in most discussions of *Spitting Image*, is how quickly political sketches – in any sense – declined over the show’s run, most notably in the jump from first series to second. It was previously noted that it was with the second and third series of the programme, aired in 1985 and 1986 respectively, that it was at its peak in terms of viewers. 1984’s debut run had attracted decidedly mixed reviews: in March 1984, the *Financial Times’* Christopher Dunkley remarked that ‘after three editions ITV’s *Spitting Image* still has me baffled: why isn’t it funny?’[[201]](#footnote-202) This sentiment was echoed in the *New Statesman* diary in July, commenting that the scripts of the series were ‘another demonstration of how it is not easy to make political humour really witty and cutting’.[[202]](#footnote-203) There was a deliberate move by the creators of *Spitting Image* to move away from political figures and encompass a wider range of celebrities and people in the public eye. In a memo written to himself sketching out his ideas for a second series, producer John Lloyd noted ‘*Principles:* less politics (and less anti-right stuff where we do politics at all), no sketch to last over 2’ 15”, far more quickies, higher visual content, use new characters’.[[203]](#footnote-204) Many of the programme’s puppet-makers were tasked with creating puppet caricatures of celebrity figures of whom they knew little, a task they found considerably harder than the political caricatures which they believed to be their original remit. Puppet-makers-in-chief Fluck and Law were particularly dissatisfied. While recognising the second series of *Spitting Image* ‘certainly had more pace than the earlier shows, it lacked something… to them it looked more like low targets being comfortably hit rather than the comedy of risk and edge they preferred’.[[204]](#footnote-205)This approach paid dividends with regards to critical standing: Alexander Chancellor of *The Spectator* was able to report byMay 1986 that ‘*Spitting Image* continues to improve. Last Sunday’s edition contained one or two really good bad taste jokes… I am thinking in particular of the dialogue between the two breasts of Samantha Fox about whether they should continue in show business as a team or go their separate ways’.[[205]](#footnote-206) The show was able to attract international acclaim, winning in the popular arts category at the International TV Emmy Awards in November 1986.[[206]](#footnote-207) Christopher Dunkley of the *Financial Times*, however, never really took to the series, complaining in July 1987 that the programme had never ‘done an item on the remarkable connection between physical unattractiveness and the shrillness with which feminist causes are preached’, possibly the most niche complaint about the programme ever made.[[207]](#footnote-208) *Spitting Image* itself became a byword for savagery and satire across the media, often being referenced in pieces that had nothing to do with the programme itself. *Today* newspaper editor Dennis Hackett defended an advertising campaign featuring billboards of Mrs Thatcher and David Owen hanging from nooses by stating that ‘you have to remember this is the *Spitting Image* age.’[[208]](#footnote-209)

When *Spitting Image* returned in 1987 for its fourth season, its episode count had been more than halved from thirteen to six, possibly due to the staggeringly high costs of production, with Lewis Chester reporting these sometimes topped £250,000 an episode.[[209]](#footnote-210) This reduced episode count would be the standard template for the remainder of the show’s original broadcast run. Viewing figures remained solid for the rest of the 1980s and into the early 1990s. With Mrs Thatcher’s departure from Downing Street in November 1990 the producers initially struggled to decide how to portray her successor, with John Major at first being portrayed as ‘a radio-controlled zombie with a Frankenstein-style stitching across his forehead’, a gag on Mrs Thatcher’s comment that she planned on being a good backseat driver from the backbenches.[[210]](#footnote-211) This was before the show settled on its now-infamous portrayal of Major as an all-grey dullard, sat in awkward silence with his wife at dinner with a plate piled high with garden peas. Throughout this period of the later 1980s and early 1990s, there was a sense that politicians actively *wanted* to be portrayed on the programme, as a sign of having ‘made it’ in the political world: as early as 1986, Roy Hattersley was quoted as embracing his Spitting Image caricature, ‘putting his arm round [the puppet], Roy confessed “I rather like the little chap”.[[211]](#footnote-212) (Given the headline for the piece is entitled ‘I Don’t Spit, Says Roy as he Brushes Up His Image’, and that Hattersley still felt the need to clarify that he didn’t really spit, it suggests that he was not *entirely* comfortable with his immortalisation in latex.) ‘Being included in *Spitting Image* can be hurtful’, opined Tony Purnell in the *Daily Mirror*. ‘But being ignored is the unkindest cut of all…’[[212]](#footnote-213) This is not an attitude unheard of in politicians. Over twenty years previously, Harold Macmillan had written to the Postmaster General instructing him that he ‘will not, repeat not, take any action about “That Was The Week That Was” without consulting me. It is a good thing to be laughed over. It is better than to be ignored.”[[213]](#footnote-214)

Yet did this embrace by its supposed targets do *Spitting Image* more harm than good? Martyn Harris of *The Spectator* certainly agreed so, writing in November 1993 that ‘when all the letters you get are complimentary you have to worry, and *Spitting Image* has a serious problem here. The show is watched avidly at Westminster and is always getting tapes and photographs from politicians who want to become serious in styrofoam. Michael Heseltine so liked his puppet that he tried to buy it.’[[214]](#footnote-215) There was certainly a sense by the mid-1990s that the programme was past its best, with the arrival of Tony Blair as Labour leader in 1994 providing a seemingly impossible target for the producers to skewer: ‘the latex Mr Blair is a grinning boy scout, small yet perfectly formed and spouting inanities which drive his deputy John Prescott into paroxysms of fury’.[[215]](#footnote-216) Savage this was not, and pieces reporting the demise of *Spitting Image* were unanimous for the reason why: ‘increasingly unfunny’ according to the *Daily Mail*, ‘predictable’ was the verdict of *The Independent.*[[216]](#footnote-217) The programme’s eighteenth season, concluding on 18 February 1996, would turn out to be its last, to little public outcry. A revival, premiering on the streaming service BritBox in 2020, failed to receive any comparable attention from media or indeed from audiences as did the original 1984-1996 run.

Ultimately, the changing content and fortunes of Central Television’s *Spitting Image* illustrate the changing nature of how television approached the world of politics. In one respect, it was responsible for spreading knowledge of political figures far wider than would have been the case. As Chester pointed out, the ‘youth vote’ was highly significant in saving the programme early on: ‘Central’s market research shows that the 12 to 34 age group is consistently the most appreciative of *Spitting Image*’.[[217]](#footnote-218) Yet the fact that political coverage of any kind was deliberately toned *down* speaks volumes about the changing way audiences were prepared to deal with the political in their television programmes. The show soon became a by-word for ‘grossness and offensive humour’, with targets such as the Royal Family unimaginable even at the height of the satire boom of the 1960s.[[218]](#footnote-219) With regards to the impact the programme’s portrayal of David Owen and David Steel had on the fortunes of the SDP-Liberal Alliance, *The Guardian*’s Polly Toynbee was able to reference this in a piece written after the 1987 election by offhandedly referring to ‘the *Spitting Image* trouble. David Owen was constantly accused of dominating. What no one saw was the extent to which David Steel contributed to that unfortunate public image.’[[219]](#footnote-220) Did it really affect the outcome of political events? The case of the two Davids appears to be the exception rather than the rule. As Harry Enfield, who contributed the voices of the puppets in the 1980s, wryly commented,‘Look at Mrs Thatcher, portrayed week after week as a callous hectoring bully, and what happens? She wins three elections in a row’.[[220]](#footnote-221) As Gavin Schaffer has noted, ‘comedy was inherently unreliable as a political weapon’.[[221]](#footnote-222) As a record of television’s changing attitude to political affairs, it is far more significant: a decline from jokes about politics to jokes about *politicians*, an increasing focus on celebrity, and a cynical outlook towards the integrity and ability to trust political elites.

**Current Affairs Programming**

Current affairs programming, of course, encompasses a very wide variety of programmes, thus it is important to define the parameters of the term in order to make clear what shall and shall not be considered. Given the previous rationale for not considering news, this case study will utilise programming that is explicitly political in content but falls outside the remit of news broadcasts: namely, this section will focus on a case study which illustrates the aforementioned shift in attitudes to politics and coverage of political issues. It will do this by considering two programmes, both featuring panel show formats discussing big political issues of the day: *Panorama* in the 1970s and *Question Time* in the early 1990s. What topics are discussed, and in how much depth? Is policy the focus of discussion, or more abstract political issues? Again, it must be stressed that these case studies can only ever be indicative: it is impossible to access the vast majority of programming of this kind in the archives, and such is the quantity nobody could hope to watch it all: unlike satirical programmes like *Spitting Image*, they are not even available commercially. This genre of factual programming, it must be noted, never set the ratings alight. Writing for the BBC magazine *The Listener* in April 1981, Brian Wenham stated that ‘the early-evening magazines have shown only modest resilience in the face of genuine showbusiness alternatives on BBC2. The major magazines – *Panorama*, *World in Action, TV Eye* – are stuck on BBC audience figures with a viewership of about the four-million mark, and have been so stuck for years, and a whole clutch of programming barely pokes a head above the parapet – *Newsnight*, *Newsweek, Weekend World*, all give thanks whenever they reach more than a million.’[[222]](#footnote-223) These lower figures, compared to the previous case study, are a useful reminder of how often hard politics was a turn-off for audiences, but that does not render them an unimportant study: on the contrary, these examples are useful litmus tests of the expansion and contraction thesis of this chapter, illustrating that the terrain of political programming expanded while the depth with which issues were discussed contracted simultaneously.

*Panorama* was first broadcast on 11 November 1953, as a fortnightly arts magazine programme, though according to one article in the BBC’s *Listener* magazine in February 1960, ‘the first two years of “*Panorama*” do not really count… the men concerned with it today claim no credit or responsibility at all’.[[223]](#footnote-224) It was only from its relaunch in 1955, presented by Richard Dimbleby, that ‘some 7,000,000 people sat back to be instructed, interested, entertained, irritated, bored, or made downright angry by the B.B.C.’s [sic] pet television programme’.[[224]](#footnote-225) From then on, there was no doubt that Panorama was the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme, fronted by a number of different presenters over its time on air (still ongoing at time of writing), including Richard Dimbleby’s son David Dimbleby, Sir Robin Day, and Robert Kee.[[225]](#footnote-226) It has always placed personality-led investigative journalism front and centre in its offering.[[226]](#footnote-227) *Panorama*, as befitting its flagship status, helped launch the BBC’s coverage of the February 1974 general election campaign, with ‘Edmund Stillman, the Director of the Hudson Institute, which is preparing a report on the British economy’.[[227]](#footnote-228) In a decade of economic woes, this is not surprising, but featuring such a technocratic guest first, ahead of even the Chancellor of the Exchequer Anthony Barber, speaks volumes about the willingness of broadcasters to place policy detail front and centre of its political programming.

For the first few decades of its existence, *Panorama* was also one of the forefront programmes in political debate between panellists. Mrs Thatcher herself appeared several times throughout her period as Leader of the Opposition, being interviewed by both the presenter and a panel of experts, with policy discussed in quite rigorous detail, such as a 50 minute edition in July 1977 entitled ‘The Alternative Prime Minister’. As Mrs Thatcher features in the next case study, the edition examined here shall be a 1975 debate between Labour politicians Tony Benn, Industry Secretary, and Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary, during the 1975 referendum on Britain’s membership of the-then European Economic Community (EEC): though of the same party, they were on opposite sides of the referendum question, with Jenkins advocating a ‘Yes’ vote (Remain) and Benn making the same case for ‘No’ (Leave). 8 million viewers tuned in to witness this clash between fellow Cabinet members, shocking Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who had ‘assumed ministers on either side would keep a relatively low profile, given the need for them all to get back together again at the end of the campaign’.[[228]](#footnote-229)

With regards to this *Panorama* clash, three areas make it worthy of consideration here. The first of these is the depth in which policy was discussed. The debate itself centred around three main areas in relation to Britain’s membership of the EEC: the question of sovereignty versus influence, the effect on jobs and employment, and the ability of British governments to influence the economy. Watching this debate with the hindsight of knowing what comes next, Benn and Jenkins’ profoundly different approaches to economic management displayed here appear to presage the roles they were to play in the 1980s, with Benn as the spearhead of the Labour left’s assault on the leadership, and Jenkins leading the breakaway of the centrist Social Democratic Party (SDP). Benn makes the case for the need for import controls, import surcharges and capital controls as ‘weapons’ essential for a future Labour government, stating that EC membership prohibited and hindered the implementation of such policies. Contrastingly, rather than contest whether EEC membership would affect the ability of carrying out these policies, Jenkins questions their validity in economic policy, stating that they were ‘much more likely to lead you down a rather endless road of increasing un-competitiveness’. The crucial point for us here is that this is a real and genuine debate, covering policy in both abstract concept and considerable detail, and there is real engagement between the two over the points of argument and disagreement. From the start Benn makes his case in terms of British sovereignty and democracy, and in his view that EEC membership ‘devalues and downgrades’ the vote, whereas Jenkins’ case is couched in terms of control, with EEC membership essential to prevent British governments from being ‘buffeted by forces over which it has no control’.

The second feature relevant to our discussion is the politeness with which the two combatants in debate interacted with each other throughout. While this may be explained by the fact that they were both serving cabinet ministers, who might have wished to avoid generating extra publicity from any falling out, this is not especially convincing given their well-known mutual dislike and indeed loathing for each other. The respect on display here does seem genuine and is fairly consistent throughout, with one of Jenkins’ first contributions praising Tony Benn as having ‘outlined the issue extremely well though I don’t agree with the conclusion on it’. A disagreement over the use of figures, and the way it is handled, shows this perfectly. Benn claimed that Britain’s current balance of payments deficit was due to its EEC membership, and a result of this deficit was a loss of 500,000 jobs. While Jenkins dismisses these claims as ‘nonsense’, and places the blame on external economic factors, he goes out of his way to state that ‘of course I don’t suggest for a minute you make up figures of trade statistics, you take those figures accurately… but I do query absolutely the deductions which you draw from them’. As might be expected, Jenkins exudes slightly more bonhomie than Benn, who took issue with Jenkins making a somewhat laboured joke comparison between figures and the weather, stating that ‘a joke about weather is not really right when we’re talking about people’s jobs, their security, their future, and so on’. However, he quickly undercuts this by assuring Jenkins that, over discussion of figures, ‘you’ve been quite fair about it and I’m not grumbling’. At the end of the debate, when David Dimbleby asks Benn why he changed his mind on the EEC, Jenkins brushes this aside, stating that it is ‘not the issue’. It is hard to imagine a politician actively undermining a potential line of attack on their opponent today, and Benn and Jenkins accord each other a respect in this debate that those in the same party who found themselves on opposite sides of the 2016 EU referendum scarcely accorded each other.

The third and final feature of the debate was the limited and relative lack of need for intervention from the chair, in this case David Dimbleby. Indeed, he makes no successful intervention in the debate until the 12-minute mark, with Jenkins’ having successfully fended off an interjection two minutes previously. Benn becomes slightly irritated with Dimbleby towards the end of the programme, when questioning him on his change of attitudes towards the EEC, telling him to ‘read all your quotations which you prepared before the programme’. Even then, Dimbleby’s moderation can only be described as light-touch: Benn and Jenkins are given pretty much free-reign to interact with each other as they see fit. This can only be ascribed to Dimbleby’s belief that he did not need to steer the debate in any great way. In fact, he says as much at the end of the programme: ‘there are occasions when the interviewer has to sit back and let the two protagonists discuss and that’s what I’ve done this evening and I’ve been quite happy to as a matter of fact’.[[229]](#footnote-230)

A few years after this debate, David Wheeler, writing in *The Listener* in November 1978 to mark 25 years of *Panorama*, argued that 25 ‘in television terms is certainly grand-oldmanship, if not outright senility. It does not have the commanding status of yesteryear. Its reporters are more professional, but less interesting. Yet it would be a bold controller of programmes who tried to slay this dragon’.[[230]](#footnote-231) In the 1980s and 1990s, however, *Panorama* was centre of a number of different controversies, including investigations into far-right links on the Conservative backbenches (‘Maggie’s Militant Tendency’), an exposé on the then-unknown Church of Scientology and, most infamously, Martin Bashir’s interview with Diana, Princess of Wales. Panel discussion, as was common in the 1970s and the decades previous as discussed, did become steadily less prominent in the *Panorama* line-up, largely due to the programme which is the focus of the next case study: *Question Time*.

Compared to *Panorama*, *Question Time* was a much later addition to the television schedules, premiering in 1979 under the chairmanship of broadcasting veteran Sir Robin Day. Previewing the series in the *Daily Mail*, Elizabeth Cowley wrote that ‘we’re assured that this new series with Robin Day is not just a repeat of radio’s Any Questions? – although comparable pundits will be answering questions from the audience assembled at London’s Greenwood Theatre’.[[231]](#footnote-232) The interaction of politicians with an audience of ‘ordinary’ voters has been crucial to the programme from the beginning, and became a crucial part of its brand and appeal, with the *Daily Mail* claiming before the show’s return in 1983 that as a result ‘this new series is guaranteed to be lively viewing’.[[232]](#footnote-233) In 1989, original producer Barbara Maxwell argued that ‘it’s a dangerous programme… senior people appear without their usual protection and run the absolute risk of being picked up on something by members of the public’.[[233]](#footnote-234) It quickly established itself in the television schedules, with *The Listener* describing Question Time in November 1981 as the ‘All Souls of chat shows’.[[234]](#footnote-235) The introduction to this section of the thesis quoted Brian Wenham in *The Listener* illustrating the relatively flat viewing figures of current affairs programming. However, in the same article he highlights *Question Time* as an exception to this general trend, with a ‘clear rising star’ for a programme that is ‘lively, well-produced and normally civil’.[[235]](#footnote-236)

Early controversies included Denis Healey using the programme to withdraw claims he had made that Mrs Thatcher had ‘gloried in slaughter’ during the Falklands War, as well as Foreign Secretary Francis Pym claiming on-air in the run-up to the 1983 election that he believed that ‘landslides don’t on the whole produce successful governments’, much to the chagrin of his boss given the state of polling at that time.[[236]](#footnote-237) Pym’s comment turned his eventual sacking by Mrs Thatcher from probable to almost certain: he was duly dismissed from his post after the landslide Conservative victory at the polls. There was also the question of impartiality, that familiar BBC bugbear, with reports in the *Daily Mail* in 1984 and *The Guardian* in 1986 concerning selection of the public audience and the supposed anti-Conservative slant of panellists, at least in the eyes of Tory party chairman Norman Tebbit.[[237]](#footnote-238) Such was its status as a solid feature of the broadcasting landscape that, as *The Guardian* reported in July 1986, ‘a *Question Time* dust-up’ had been selected as ‘a taste of the range of British television’ at a season of British television in the Soviet Union.[[238]](#footnote-239) When Sir Robin Day stepped down as chair in 1989, there was a flurry of press interest in examining his role in defining and shaping what the programme would become. There was a sense then, only ten years into transmission, that it had become somewhat of an institution. In an article for *The Times* in April 1989, Byron Rogers argued that ‘it has become that final ordeal in a good man’s public life. After the hustings and the portfolio comes the interrogation by Sir Robin Day in front of 5.2 million people with only your wits and your briefing to sustain you. Plus £200 and chicken Veronique from the BBC canteen.’[[239]](#footnote-240) Such was the domineering nature of Day’s chairmanship that Rogers recalled that he ‘helped no-one. He cut them short. He reminded them of what the question was, he supplied the odd bleak paraphrase of what they were trying to say. Meek as schoolchildren, they checked and unlocked their fluency to order. When members of the audience spoke, they stuck “Sir Robin” on the end of their sentences, clearly in awe of this last medieval knight’.[[240]](#footnote-241) Whilst creator Barbara Maxwell publicly questioned the choice of former ITN newsreader Peter Sissons as Day’s replacement, by 1991 *The Times* was able to report that he ‘has presided over record ratings since the departure of Sir Robin Day’.[[241]](#footnote-242) Why did Sissons believe this was the case? He returned to that theme of the centrality and primacy of the public audience: ‘There are very few programmes in the world on which Joe Soap can buttonhole a cabinet minister and tell him he thinks he’s lying. It’s an important part of democracy.’[[242]](#footnote-243)

Two editions of the programme, from 28 November 1991 and 2 April 1992, will be analysed here, to contrast how current affairs programming had changed its in attitude to political coverage. Peter Sissons’ tenure as chair coincided with the BBC’s decision to have the programme broadcast from a different location around the country each week, in an attempt by executives to broaden its appeal, a feature of the programme which remains to the present day. The emphasis on audience engagement and participation is evident from the title sequence, with prominent shots of an animated Peter Sissons jabbing his finger towards an unseen politician and wagging said finger in the direction of the audience in a theatrical manner. Again, it must be stressed that the following examples can only be indicative: when analysing the episodes to compare them to the previously-examined edition of *Panorama*, it is important to note that episodes of *Question Time* varied considerably depending on the panellists and the amenability of the audience. In addition, archival editions of *Question Time*, at least for those from the twentieth century, are difficult to come by.

*Question Time* was broadcasting from the marginal constituency of Swindon on 28 November 1991, with the panel consisting of Conservative Chief Secretary to the Treasury David Mellor MP, Labour Local Government spokesperson David Blunkett MP, Conservative member of the House of Lords Baroness Flather and Margaret Jay of the National AIDS Trust, daughter of former Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan. Topics discussed included a controversy around supermarkets disregarding Sunday trading laws, young people and AIDS education, police trust in the wake of the Broadwater Farm case, tobacco advertising, and the strengths of the different party leaders. There is a strong mixture of predictability and unpredictability in the responses. With regards to the Sunday trading laws, David Mellor defended the recent announcement of the Attorney General that the government would not enforce the existing ban on Sunday trading, as it was a matter for local government. Unsurprisingly, David Blunkett uses this as an opportunity to lambast ‘classic Tories’, blaming local government for their own inaction, with Mellor retorting that the Thatcher government’s failed attempt in 1986 to legalise Sunday trading would have solved the problem. When discussing the education of young people on the topic of HIV/AIDS, there is a surprising lack of moral outrage from the panellists, with Blunkett’s condemning of the recently-deceased Freddie Mercury’s ‘bizarre and in my view quite unacceptable lifestyle’ being the strongest rebuke. Mellor’s distinguishing between the ‘promiscuous homosexual’ and people with a ‘normal sexual lifestyle’ seems tame by comparison, even if his ideas of what constituted a ‘normal’ sexual lifestyle were to be opened to much wider public scrutiny later that year.[[243]](#footnote-244) There is panel unanimity in the need for police reform and for tougher restrictions on the advertising of tobacco, with Baroness Flather telling the audience that if they wish to moralise to their children, that they should do so about smoking rather than AIDS. Finally, the panel is at its sharpest with each other during the final question on the relative strengths of the different party leaders. David Blunkett’s advice for his party leader, Neil Kinnock, is that ‘he needs to be nice to people who are not nice to him… that even when David Mellor makes rude remarks he has a very clever riposte, rather than what some of us would like to do, which is to give him a thump on the nose’.

It would be far-fetched to claim this is a revolution in television debating when compared to the *Panorama* interview of 1975: we are still a world away from the more raucous examples of twenty-first century broadcasting. However, there are areas which are indicative of the changes to political culture that were fomenting in this period. The style of debate is sharper when compared to *Panorama*, with David Blunkett and David Mellor in particular trading blows with each other, as might be expected in the run-up to a general election: a joke about wanting to inflict mild violence as told by Blunkett is undoubtedly intended to be humorous, and is taken as such, but it is a type of joke that would not have been acceptable just a few decades previously. Policy is discussed in less detail: much of this is format, given multiple issues are discussed with a higher number of panellists to fit in, as well as the views of the audience. There is however a sense of having to play to the audience, of trying to put things in a way which the panellist assumes will be best understood: platitudes for a clap line are a common feature (‘We have the best police force in the world and I’m not ashamed to say it’ declares Baroness Flather, as if this were the most controversial thing she could have said). However, the biggest difference is the role Peter Sissons plays as moderator when compared to David Dimbleby in the edition of *Panorama*. Far from being content to sit back and let the panellists get on with it, Sissons plays a proactive role from the start, and often picks up the panellists on what they say, offers suggestions and pushes back. His interventions include nuancing an audience suggestion for a referendum on Sunday trading laws by suggesting to the panellists if local referenda could help solve the problem, asking Baroness Flather if it is not a good thing that AIDS education should instil a degree of fear into children, and asking David Mellor whether he believes that a Metropolitan Police with only 1.23 per cent ethnic minorities in the workforce is a sensible position to be in. There is a sense in the way that Sissons conducts himself that the politicians need an extra hand of guidance to keep them honest. He is hardly Jeremy Paxman in his approach, but considerably more so than Dimbleby was.

The second edition of *Question Time* to be considered here was broadcast on 2 April 1992, just one week before the 1992 general election in which John Major’s Conservative government was re-elected with a small majority, in what is considered one of the most surprising election outcomes of recent times. Broadcasting from London, the panel features Conservative Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine MP, Labour Shadow Chancellor John Smith MP, Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesperson Alan Beith MP and leader of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond MP. What is striking about this edition is how often the questions and discussion that follows concerns the conduct and operation of British politics itself. Questions asked include how the parties would operate in the event of a hung parliament, the viability of the Union in the face of growing support for Scottish devolution north of the border, and the lack of opportunity for interaction between politicians and their electorates. Discussion of tax policy was the only departure from these themes. The discussion around a hung parliament did not focus on policy red lines for each of the parties, but was more abstract: unsurprisingly, both Heseltine and Smith proclaimed their preference for a majority government for the Conservative and Labour parties respectively, Beith expressed the Liberal Democrats’ preference for a coalition over support for a minority government, and Salmond suggested it would be unwise for any party in a campaign to concede that they might not win. Discussion of a Scottish parliament ranged around whether the biggest threat to the continued existence of the Union was the Labour and Liberal Democrat policy of establishing a devolved Scottish parliament in Edinburgh, or the Conservatives’ staunch opposition to devolution. Alex Salmond of the SNP unsurprisingly predicted a strong SNP result at the election would mean the end of the union, commenting that the upcoming changes in Europe (that would see the European Community become the European Union) necessitated reform to the ‘old’ Union of the United Kingdom. Finally, the discussion of the lack of contact between MPs and their electorates focused on the supposed negative impact that television itself has had on the conduct of British politics: all the panel except Salmond bemoaned this, who argued that television coverage of the 1992 election was only poor south of the border due to the ‘sterile’ campaigns of Labour and the Tories. Referring to the recent Sheffield Rally, Heseltine was able to make a gag that he thought ‘it was marvellous to see these prosperous socialists doing so well, with all their razzmatazz’, stating they were adverts for thirteen years of Tory prosperity. When asked about the so-called ‘Americanisation’ of British politics, Smith and Beith were withering, with the former arguing that he thought ‘issues and ideas are not properly canvassed in American politics, which tend to be an examination of the private life of those standing for office – I can’t think of anything worse!’ Beith was similarly pessimistic, stating that ‘we are not electing a President, we are electing a Parliament with a breadth of opinion in it, and our electioneering should reflect that’. Again and again, discussions on this edition were grappling with questions of *how* to do politics as much as policies themselves. As one audience member put it, ‘politics would be far better in this country if it were focused on problem solving rather than the acquisition and maintenance of power!’

The presence of Michael Heseltine on the panel leads to the most memorable and notable moments of the programme. He seems to be treated with a degree of derision and contempt by a large section of the audience, perhaps due to his status at the time as one of the biggest cheerleaders for a Conservative government that was by 1992 thirteen years old. His answers seem to particularly polarise the studio audience, and the rest of the panel often seem to gain enjoyment from ganging together to harangue him. When Heseltine is making his case that coalitions and cross-party cooperation means ‘deals, trimming, hedging of bets, pressure groups to be bought off…’, Peter Sissons elicits an audience reaction of amusement by interjecting that Heseltine’s description is like an internal party split. When Heseltine tries to regain ground by stating that this cannot be compared with issues that are internally divisive, Sissons again jumps in with ‘Europe?’, and Alex Salmond suggests ‘Mrs Thatcher?’, both of which further add to audience laughter. Other jibes from fellow panellists include Beith chiding Heseltine that his own views on Europe are closer to those of the Liberal Democrats than that of the Conservative Party, and Salmond’s derision at his quoting Jacques Delors in defence of Conservative economic management. Heseltine also has the strongest interactions with audience members: his statement that, when discussing the Union, he would ‘answer that question as sincerely as I can’ is met with loud laughter and derision, as is his commenting ten minutes later that the topic of contact between electorate and politicians is ‘an important question’. Heseltine seems to relish arguing with an audience member who describes Heseltine’s claims of more staff and funding for the NHS as a ‘con’, lambasting him by rhetorically asking ‘Do you actually care about the answers at all about anything, or do you just want to make propaganda to support the rotten case the Labour Party is putting forward?’ At one point, Peter Sissons even has to point out to the audience that there are three other panellists who would appreciate some attention, as well as Heseltine. One audience member raises his hand to opine that ‘the more I see and hear of Michael Philistine, the more I feel an affinity to the lamppost which has just been visited by a large Rottweiler with a very full bladder’. There is shock in the audience to such a jibe, for sure, but enough laughter to suggest that for a great many, such insults are considered perfectly acceptable to make to a politician in the year 1992.

Peter Sissons’ role as moderator is even more involved and active than the previous edition. As noted above, Sissons often interrupts politicians while giving their answer to jibe or to question, often to (or for?) the amusement of the audience. He asks Beith ‘what job do you want?’ when discussing the Liberal Democrats’ price of entering a coalition, despite Beith’s protestations the question is much more noble than who gets what job. He also provides context and information as deemed necessary, giving Neil Kinnock’s full quote on taxation and its effect on incentives, and pushes Alex Salmond further on whether it is independence or nothing for the SNP, as opposed to supporting a Labour devolution bill. He also sternly reprimands the audience where he sees necessary, firmly dealing with the ’Michael Philistine’ commenter with ‘that’s not very polite, no, that’s enough of you!’, dismissing further comment with a wave of the hand. When a member of the audience begins to give specific details about candidates in her constituency of Holborn and St Pancras, he chides her firmly that ‘you really cannot mention a specific like that, it is absolutely out of order!’ What permeates Sissons’ attitude is that both panel and audience are in clear need of a firm hand, to elicit information and to keep in check. This is a world away from the more relaxed moderating of previous decades, whereby there was a level of trust in the politicians to stay on topic and in the audience to be polite and respectful. While this had by no means evaporated entirely by 1992, it is clear that changes have occurred.

The comparison of these two programmes from different chronological ends of the period of this thesis are illuminating for the three reasons previously outlined: politeness in public discourse, the depth in which policies and ideas are discussed, and the role of the moderator. These speak to a greater superficiality in political discourse in line with the ‘contraction and expansion’ argument of this chapter: policy is discussed in less depth across the different ends of the period of this thesis. While again emphasising the indicative nature of these examples, they do help illustrate and neatly encapsulate the way in which television programming’s coverage of politics and the political changed over the period of this thesis. It is emphatically *not* the argument of this chapter that policy was never or indeed infrequently discussed on political programming by the mid-1990s, when this thesis reaches its chronological end. Rather, what these examples demonstrate is that during the long 1980s discussions of politics on television would expand to be about more than details of policy as the parameters of that discussion widened, with more abstract discussions of the ‘state of the nation’ and general news stories: this period is indeed the crossover, beyond which politicians were expected to take a view on everything. The tone is somewhat less polite, and the moderator has become more of a participant than previously had been the case, and, as also demonstrated, political interviewers were becoming less deferential in their attitude to political figures, as were audiences of the public who encountered them. The driving factors for this change on television, as have previously been noted, include the growth of politics as entertainment, with politicians playing a crucial role in driving these changes themselves. This can be illustrated by turning to consider the role politicians on popular programming had on overall coverage of politics on television.

**Popular Programming**

In approaching popular programming, particularly when seeking political content, the previously noted methodological pitfalls, in terms of source availability and location, are more evident than ever. If data for viewing figures are anything to go by, by no measure were strictly political or current affairs programmes ever the most popular with viewers. This is not surprising. As has been stressed throughout this thesis, historians often miss the mark when they imagine the past was populated with people as politically interested and committed as they invariably are themselves. For all of the Reithian intent of the BBC, at the foundation of television, to educate and inform its audience, it is for pure escapist entertainment that television has been, and still is, the main draw. It was throughout the long 1980s that politicians first began to appear regularly on popular entertainment programmes, as guests of the week alongside other celebrities and famous faces. Labour’s Denis Healey was an early example, appearing on BBC *Nationwide’s* 1977 Christmas Pantomime as the Wizard of Oz (even adopting the catchphrase of his impersonator, Mike Yarwood, ‘silly billy’, which he had never actually before said). Edward Heath’s appearance on *The Dame Edna Experience* in 1989 alongside Dolph Lundgren and Dusty Springfield surely ranks as one of the most bizarre appearances by a politician on a popular programme, with Barry Humphries’ bespectacled drag creation ridiculing Heath with homosexual navy slang. The Royal Family even got in on the act, with Prince Edward’s ill-fated *‘It’s a Royal Knockout’* of 1988 standing as a particularly excruciating example of figures entering the world of popular entertainment who previously would have been considered above it. As perhaps the towering political figure of the period which this thesis concerns itself, three appearances by Mrs Thatcher drawn from across the ‘long eighties’ will be used to illustrate the way in which politicians began to utilise such programmes to humanise themselves, and in turn the way television producers and interviewers expanded the types of questions which they asked politicians. This is turn led to a narrowing of the depth of discussion that viewers could expect to see.

The fact of Mrs Thatcher’s sex cannot be ignored when considered how she approached interviews and in turn how interviewers approached her: as a prominent female politician at a time when there were scare few, and with no predecessors in such high office, she was inevitably asked different questions to that which a male leader would be asked. Mrs Thatcher appeared to find such questions irritating, particularly as her time in office progressed: she often quipped that she was prouder of being the first Prime Minister to hold a science degree, rather than the first woman.[[244]](#footnote-245) Indeed, the organised women’s movement has lamented, at the time and since, Mrs Thatcher’s apparent detachment from her sex and the wider struggles of women, avoiding using her eleven and a half years in office to further advance ‘women’s issues’. As the feminist scholar Beatrix Campbell wrote in 1987, much of this stemmed from her own preference for male company, arguing that ‘femininity is what she *wears*, but masculinity is what she *admires*’.[[245]](#footnote-246) Helen McCarthy articulated the common grievances of those in the women’s movement towards Mrs Thatcher’s premiership, noting there was ‘no substantial public investment in childcare provision, no strengthening of maternity rights or introduction of paternity leave’.[[246]](#footnote-247)

What much of this analysis misses is a recognition that Mrs Thatcher knew perfectly well how she could use her sex for political advantage. She was aware of this from the start, with her predecessor as Tory leader, Edward Heath, a man who it appears was immune to female flattery, loathing how she utilised her femininity to disarm male colleagues who did not have the social skills or bandwidth to deal with a woman as their equal.[[247]](#footnote-248) She consciously pitched herself as an ordinary housewife, a move which turned out to be a deeply political astute one in an age of rising prices, with photo opportunities aplenty for Mrs Thatcher at a supermarket, lamenting the effect of inflation on household budgets. As previously discussed, she was undoubtedly influenced by the figure of Gordon Reece, her image guru, who sought to pitch the Tory message to ‘people who read *The Sun* and *Mirror*, watched ITV rather than the BBC and preferred *Coronation Street* to *Panorama*’.[[248]](#footnote-249) This ethos, of attempting to appeal to aspirational working-class voters, was distinctive within the Conservative Party at the time, and its success was to make this group (known as the ‘C2s’) a key part of the Thatcher electoral coalition.[[249]](#footnote-250) This approach was reflected in the way that Mrs Thatcher approached appearances on lighter entertainment programmes. As Jon Lawrence has noted, some of these developments predated Mrs Thatcher’s leadership by a matter of months, with ‘informality’, ‘the daily picture’, ‘the daily story’ and ‘special interest activities’ being first emphasised by the Conservatives in the October 1974 general election, in which Mrs Thatcher as a shadow minister played a starring role.[[250]](#footnote-251)

Mrs Thatcher’s 1973 appearance on children’s television programme *Val Meets the VIPs*, when she was Education Secretary,is often remembered due to her confident statement that ‘I don’t think there will be a woman Prime Minister in my lifetime’.[[251]](#footnote-252) She was the only politician to appear on the programme, which ran for three seasons from 1973 to 1974, which featured different celebrity personalities facing questions from presenter Valerie Singleton and an audience of children and young people. As might be expected with a children’s programme, there were hardly any deep discussions of policy, but this in itself is revealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is hard to imagine any of Mrs Thatcher’s Cabinet colleagues agreeing to this type of interview, and perhaps her status as the single female Cabinet minister (along with her Education portfolio) was why she was the only politician to appear on the series. Secondly, it was via appearances on programmes such as this that politicians began to be asked questions which would have been unthinkable a generation previously. This does not precisely relate to the decline of deference – in which interviewers would be much more aggressive in challenging their subjects and pushing back to provoke a debate – as traditionally understood. Rather, politicians would be expected to answer questions beyond policy and about their personal lives and history, how being a politician *feels* and the emotional reactions it may elicit in them. Mrs Thatcher was a pioneering figure in this respect, with the previously-mentioned fact of her sex being an obvious spur to this widening of the topic of discussion in interviews. This is turn led to politicians being asked onto entertainment programmes whereby a premium was placed on asking politicians questions which would entertain the audience, and presumably in the politicians’ interest in order to ‘humanise’ them. Examples in the 1973 interview include being questioned on how to cope with the responsibility of ‘forming the future generation’, contemplating resignation in the face of criticism, how Mrs Thatcher’s children cope with having such a well-known mother, and on her memoires of her schooldays and the role of women in politics.[[252]](#footnote-253)

These themes were very much in evidence in a 1985 interview Mrs Thatcher gave to Miriam Stoppard, occurring around the midpoint of her premiership, for Yorkshire Television and titled ‘Woman to Woman’. The title itself gives away the angle the producers were going for, as did Stoppard herself by declaring at the start of the interview that ‘like other working women, Margaret Thatcher leads a double life: wife and mother, and Iron Lady. How does she fit the two halves together?’ The line of questioning was deliberately focused on her life in the public eye, her upbringing, and her family life. With regards to the former, Mrs Thatcher declared that it was ‘practically impossible to protect your private self from public view’, and reflected upon her portrayal in caricature which she differentiated from critical reporting in the press (wearing a bow and with a nose ‘often larger than I think it is!’). Her discussion of her early years and upbringing is extensive and is notable for our purposes here for two reasons: firstly, it demonstrates that by 1985 it was absolutely *de rigueur* for politicians to expect to be questioned in this area, particularly on this type of television programme: indeed, Mrs Thatcher in the late 1970s as Opposition leader often volunteered the information first. The second reason flows from this: that it was very helpful politically to link anecdotes and stories of her childhood both to her values and her political project. This interview shows Mrs Thatcher using the opportunity to the fullest. When asked how she thought her upbringing prepared her for her future life and career, she stressed it was providing a sense of duty: that, ‘whatever you do, you’re personally responsible for it: you don’t blame society for anyone, society isn’t anyone, you’re personally responsible.’ This almost mirrors her now-infamous comment to *Woman’s Own* in 1987 that there was ‘no such thing as society’, and while that comment became an almost clichéd descriptor of Thatcherism, her 1985 remark has been forgotten. Mrs Thatcher discusses her experience helping her family run their grocer’s shop and discussing with customers the affairs of the day. Again, this leads into a point for the present, insisting that ‘when I hear politicians saying people won’t understand that I say don’t you believe it! We understood it all and we talked about it’. When asked if she inherited any faults from her father, whom she idolised, she instead insisted that she ‘inherited so much that was good about him’, and then goes off to talk about the importance of living within your means.[[253]](#footnote-254)

Another important feature to note is the emotional content of a particular moment, again relating to her father: completely unprompted (the question had actually been about her mother), Mrs Thatcher trails off to talk about the moment her father was ‘turned off’ the local council as Alderman. Her eyes welling with tears, quoting her father’s last speech: ‘in honour I took up this gown, in honour I lay it down’. The emotion affected her well into the next question, with Stoppard changing tack, apparently unsure how to treat a Prime Minister becoming so emotional in front of her, and Mrs Thatcher dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief while talking about the role religion played in her childhood. It is hard to overstate how unusual it was for a politician to become so visibly emotional in public, a charge Mrs Thatcher must have known had been used against the advancement of female politicians for decades. In addition, it happened with little widespread discussion at the time. Whilst hardly likely to win over any of her hardest detractors, it is still a humanising moment from a politician famed for her steel and nerve. She was also asked quite frank questions about whether she knew the sort of man she wanted to marry (‘there’s no point going around with a specification!’), whether she felt guilt in leaving her children to work (‘I was dead lucky, everything in my life went right’), how she relaxes after a crisis has ended (‘you just flop down’) and reflections on being a female Prime Minister (‘I’ve never been a man Prime Minister’). By 1985, Mrs Thatcher was at the height of her powers, and her dislike for being seen as a ‘woman’ politician was well known, and it was surely conceivable that by this time she could have turned down requests for interviews framed in such an overtly ‘womanly’ way. That she was willing to engage with such a programme is incredibly revealing of how, six years into her premiership, Mrs Thatcher still believed she had to engage with the public in this way.

The final thing to note with regards to *Woman to Woman* however relates to the production and style of the interview itself. Mrs Thatcher is sat on the same sofa as Stoppard, facing each other with only a few feet between them, in the 10 Downing Street flat. The intention is to be intimate, relaxed, informal. The camera zooms right into Mrs Thatcher’s face whenever her tone of voice drops, her eyes well with tears, whenever she appears reflective or thoughtful: such camera techniques are much more common in soap opera and drama than current affairs programming, and they are being deliberately used here to humanise their subject. There is no question of Stoppard ever pushing back when Mrs Thatcher makes a political point (and even these are more general), and the most she intervenes is in attempting to get Mrs Thatcher to talk about her mother, and in this she fails. It is a perfect example of an interview which would have been unthinkable just decades before.**[[254]](#footnote-255)**

Finally, we turn to Mrs Thatcher’s appearance on the popular BBC1 chat show *Wogan* (1982-1992), in January 1990, the final year of her tenure as Prime Minister. This sees Mrs Thatcher at her most regal and imperious, displaying a haughtiness that undoubtedly contributed to her downfall later that year. The line of questioning is similar to the previous examples, with the gendered aspect very much in evidence: at one point, interviewer Terry Wogan asks if any public criticism that was ‘really harsh, really personal’ would ‘move you to womanly tears’, a question with more than a hint of misogyny in its formulation (not that Mrs Thatcher would have viewed it this way, merely responding that it ‘is more if grievous things are happening to other people’). There is also a question about her weight (‘are you conscious of your figure, conscious of your weight?’): it scarcely bears repeating it would be unthinkable even in 1974 for an interviewer to question a political interviewee about their weight. Interestingly, Mrs Thatcher also reflects on the role of television, mentioning that she has never looked at her appearances on the airwaves save once, when the House of Commons was about to be televised, when ‘I did go and stand by the Dispatch Box and the cameras very kindly took a film of how it would look, that really was very useful’. In addition, she reflects on the changing nature of the medium itself, noting that ‘we do not have half as much now as right at the beginning of television, when they told you there were all sorts of things that you must not do’. Here is a politician who has been shaped by television’s growth as much as shaping that growth herself.

Out of the three interviews discussed, Wogan pushes back the most on Mrs Thatcher’s answers. Whilst not quite in the realm of a full-blown ‘political’ interview you might expect from a journalist or news broadcaster, it is significant. Wogan questions some of the core tenets of the Thatcher personal mythos (‘I cannot quite see you as a housewife’), and broaches topics that you might expect would arouse annoyance on the part of Mrs Thatcher. There are two examples of this which illustrate the expanding terrain with which light entertainment interviewees believed they could cross. Firstly, Wogan addresses the subject of Mrs Thatcher’s domineering personality, telling her that she has such an image ‘whether you like it or not’, asking her ‘do you not like people who argue with you?’ Mrs Thatcher, looking slightly put out by the question, argued that ‘there would not be much point in being a Prime Minister unless you were a domineering personality… but yes, I do like arguing, absolutely contrary to the image, we argue things out and that is the way we come to a conclusion’. Wogan follows this up with a question asking her about her supposed ‘pig headedness’. The second example is that Wogan broaches Mrs Thatcher’s unpopularity in her party with her, and when asked to comment whether she believes sections of the parliamentary Conservative Party dislike her, she stated that ‘I expect so. I mean, there are always some people in politics who are very ambitious and obviously, they are always looking to the time when there will be a change. Of course they are! That is the nature of politics.’ Whilst hardly representing a tough showdown as might have featured on a news or current affairs broadcast, out of the three interviews discussed the Wogan interview pushes back the most, and is the most willing to approach broad subjects that might antagonise the interviewee. Wogan ends the interview by asking Mrs Thatcher about the forthcoming ambulance workers strike, asking if she has ‘any words of comfort’. Her response is telling, and indicative of how her political instincts were failing her at the end, declaring stony-faced ‘not more than I have done’, before reeling off a list of statistics about public sector pay rounds and wage settlements. It is the closest answer in any of the three interviews to the sort that you might get when questioned by Robin Day or David Dimbleby, or another broadcaster.[[255]](#footnote-256) There is an edge to Wogan’s questioning, particularly in matters of Mrs Thatcher’s sex, that is surprising: after eleven and a half years in power, and at the dawn of the 1990s, it might have been expected that the gendered questioning would appear anachronistic. While it is unlikely if a male politician would ever have been asked if they had ‘shed a tear’, it might have been expected that by this time Mrs Thatcher had moved beyond expecting such questions herself.

What can be drawn from these three examples? The most important factor is that they precisely illustrate a wider shift in the way politicians interacted with the public via the medium of television. By appearing on programmes other than news and current affairs to be questioned on policy, politicians naturally were asked to share more of their private lives: for the producers of such programmes, this was the only way to keep the remit of their programme in the realm of entertainment, whilst for politicians it provided a useful means to ‘humanise’ them. As we have seen with Mrs Thatcher, stories of upbringing and childhood were scarcely left unrelated to some aspect of her political philosophy in these interviews. As a female politician there was an element to the questioning of Mrs Thatcher that was profoundly based on her sex, but often focused upon areas that were politically useful: her supposed background as a housewife was a handy tool to communicate her understanding of the evils of inflation, and the importance of self-reliance. By allowing herself to be questioned on ‘domestic’ matters, questions until then explicitly reserved for female politicians, and long after one might expect the novelty of the first female Prime Minister to have worn off, Mrs Thatcher inadvertently opened up future politicians to those same questions, male or female. By inviting the public to imagine and envisage her in a domestic setting, and by using her role in such a setting for political advantage, Mrs Thatcher created the space which male politicians felt they had to respond to, and would expect to be challenged upon, in turn.

This had been in evidence since Mrs Thatcher stood for the Conservative leadership in early 1975, when she was famously pictured by the press doing the washing-up, sporting her Marigold washing up gloves. Inexplicably, someone advised Willie Whitelaw, Edward Heath’s preferred successor and Mrs Thatcher’s main challenger in the second ballot, to pose for pictures doing the exact same. Whitelaw looked ridiculous, leading one Conservative MP to cruelly quip that the choice for the Tories was ‘between a woman and an old woman’. Nevertheless, that Whitelaw thought copying Mrs Thatcher’s display of domestic activity was worthwhile is itself extremely telling.[[256]](#footnote-257) Throughout this period, politicians and television producers operated in something like a feedback loop, reinforcing each other for mutual benefit until it became *de rigueur* for politicians to share themselves publicly in this way. While the depth of questioning of personal lives in these examples might appear tame by the standards of the twenty-first century, it was a seismic shift nonetheless: after all, a mere twenty years before Mrs Thatcher’s 1973 appearance on *Val Meets the VIPs*, the most penetrating question a politician might expect to be asked in a television interview was ‘what do you wish to say to the nation?’

**Conclusion**

Television has become central to the coverage, and indeed operation, of British politics. From a sterile background of limited reporting, restriction, and deference, by 1994, Britain stood on the brink of the 24-hour news cycle and the Internet revolution which would create the political environment which operates to this day. This chapter has aimed to illustrate that the 1974 to 1994 period must be seen by historians as the period in which such changes were made possible. By examining three areas of programming, namely satire, factual programming, and popular programming, it can be demonstrated that political coverage expanded and contracted. There was an expansion in the types of programmes that politicians and political matters appeared on, and there was a similar expansion in the types of topics with which politicians could expect to be asked, with an expectation that politicians be willing to discuss not only their private lives but have opinions on topics beyond that of the strictly political. The contraction took the form of a reduction of the depth of political discussion, illustrated in this chapter via the changing nature of political satire on television, and the decline of policy discussion in prime-time scheduling. These changes speak to a political culture in which politics and political figures became figures competing with celebrity for the attention of the nation, a political culture that was less deferential, less interested in the minutiae of policy. As Chapter 3 shall illustrate, this was led by the growth of scandal culture, with the misdeeds and exploits of politicians becoming a thing of gossip, fascination and entertainment. This chapter shares Lucy Robinson’s conviction that ‘politicians’ forays into populist media are not just a shadow of the ‘real thing’ but constitute significant historical changes in the relationship between popular culture and the political arena’.[[257]](#footnote-258) The next chapter will consider the response of those who considered themselves considerably more high-minded and strove to reinvigorate these populist developments in political culture via the notion of citizenship.

**2. Citizen Culture**

*‘Citizenship is a plastic world. Its blandness moulds itself into any political perspective. Politicians from all sides have taken it up as a kind of rallying call to virtue, and it means something different every time.’*[[258]](#footnote-259)

Citizenship is a quintessential example of what political theorist Walter B. Gallie famously described as an ‘essentially contested concept’.[[259]](#footnote-260) It is a term often used by politicians, activists, and everyday people in a multitude of different and changing ways, to describe a variety of perceived rights, duties, and obligations of those living within a democratic polity. This chapter will consider the changing use of the term in Britain throughout the long 1980s, a time when discussions and debates about citizenship were unusually and significantly pronounced. These debates went to the heart of questions, norms, and ideals about the relationship between the governing and the governed and are crucial to understanding Britain’s changing political culture at the time. Topics such as the nature of democracy in Britain, the sustainability of its political institutions and the extent to which the nation had a democratic culture featured prominently within a significant strand of intellectual and activist debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This chapter will address the reasons for this, and the myriad competing visions of citizenship advocated by different organisations and pressure groups in response, to show that these notions of citizenship were diffuse, disparate and held different meanings to different sections of society. Indeed, it will argue that the emergence of citizenship as a terrain of discourse, and the vagueness with which it could be interpreted, not only created an environment which both the Conservative and Labour parties felt they had to respond to but also enabled them both to take the rhetoric of citizenship and fashion it according to their own understanding. In so doing, both major parties were able to make the language of citizenship a crucial component of their political message in the 1990s, attempting to craft a fresh political rhetoric for the new decade and millennium that was to follow.

It is worth remembering that, in strictly legal terms, citizenship was a relatively new category in 1974. While the American and French revolutions had been foregrounded in the rhetoric of universal citizenship, historically speaking the British had always been subjects of the Crown, not citizens. The legal category of citizenship first appeared in the 1948 British Nationality Act, which created the new category of ‘Citizen of the United Kingdom and its Colonies’(CUKC). The Act was passed in response to Britain’s withdrawal from imperial projects overseas, and an accompanying perceived need to ‘tidy up’ nationality law given the emergence of the new Commonwealth of Nations. The 1948 Act was to remain the basis of British nationality law until the passing of the 1981 British Nationality Act, passed by the Thatcher government with the consent of both major parties.[[260]](#footnote-261) The 1981 Act was enacted in response to multiple laws restricting immigration from the 1960s and 1970s, and abolished the status of CUKC, creating three new categories of citizenship: British citizenship, British Dependent Territories citizenship, and British Overseas citizenship. The category of British subject was restricted to those who had connections with British India or Ireland before 1949. It is important to consider these legal details, to distinguish the notion of citizenship as legal definition, fixed and observable in British nationality law, from a more political, discursive understanding of the term. While the legal definition of citizenship is codified and amendable only by Acts of Parliament, citizenship as a political term – the responsibilities of the citizen, their role in an active democracy, the relationship between the governing and the governed – is much more fluid, open to be contested and redefined by politicians, pundits, and the people. That is not to say that this legal history has not had a crucial role in shaping British attitudes to themselves as citizens. Bernard Crick, a crucial figure in the field of citizenship studies, has argued that:

*‘Because in our history citizenship has more often appeared as something gained
from on high to subjects rather than something gained from below
as in the American, Dutch, and French experiences, it has been very difficult for us
to see the state as a contract between government and citizens’.*[[261]](#footnote-262)

This notion of ‘top-down’ citizenship, passively granted to subjects, is indeed evident when examining how the political parties utilised and understood the term in the decades immediately following the end of the Second World War. Manifestos are not just useful in that they set out policy proposals and priorities for a political party or give an indication of which faction of a party dominates its agenda, and the rhetoric in which those policies are presented can also say a great deal. As such, examining election manifestos is a useful way to track changes in political rhetoric over time. As Dennis Kavanagh has argued, emphasis in manifestos are a useful tool to decipher those to whom a political party is trying to speak.[[262]](#footnote-263) In both Labour and Conservative manifestos, references to citizens and citizenship are scant in the post-war years, and where the terms do feature, they are undeniably tied towards the parties’ wider ideological agendas. For Labour, whose 1945 manifesto was noticeably larger and more detailed than previous iterations, the terms are often used in relation to economic rights and price controls, promising that ‘every citizen shall get fair play’.[[263]](#footnote-264) By 1950, the term was employed in reference to rights to social security and leisure time.[[264]](#footnote-265) Another crucial feature is that, when discussion of citizens and citizenship does occur, there is usually little detail given to explain how this might be enacted. Labour’s 1964 manifesto, and the first to even mention the term since 1950, declared that a core duty of citizens is to ‘take part in deciding how the community’s wealth is to be shared among all its members’, yet there are no proposals or policies outlined, with the implication being that it is merely an inevitable outcome of Labour’s other policies.[[265]](#footnote-266) By the 1970s, due to the growing influence of the left, Labour manifestos began to talk more about the need for an ‘active’ democracy, but again, this was in economic terms, promising to ‘extend the processes of democracy’ to industry and big business.[[266]](#footnote-267) For Labour, the entire concept of citizenship in this period was heavily tied up with their socialist vision of economic management, the welfare state and social rights.

In ‘Mr Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors’ of 1945, the Conservatives included the terminology of citizenship in relation to rights to health care and education, stating that ‘our aim must be to produce the good citizen of tomorrow’.[[267]](#footnote-268) However by the 1950s the concept of citizenship was defined almost entirely in terms of law and order and policing. The statement in the 1955 manifesto, that ‘justice between citizen and citizen, and justice between citizen and state must be upheld and strengthened’ is an archetypal example of rhetoric utilised, as is 1959’s ‘it will continue to be our policy to protect citizens against lawlessness’.[[268]](#footnote-269) Under the leadership of Edward Heath, the Conservatives began to co-opt the language of citizenship under the guise of protecting individuals from an over-zealous government, declaring in the 1970 manifesto that ‘the functions and powers of government have expanded so much in recent years that the traditional safeguards for the citizen no longer suffice’.[[269]](#footnote-270) This was expanded upon in the manifestos of February and October 1974, with the former proclaiming that ‘citizen’s rights in Britain are far more extensive than most citizens’ awareness of those rights’ and promising vaguely to establish ‘advice centres’ to remedy this.[[270]](#footnote-271)It was not just the Conservatives who reached for the language of citizenship when discussing law and order. In October 1974 the Labour manifesto also stated that it ‘believes that respect for the law must be firmly based on the rights of the citizen and on his or her obligations to the whole community’.[[271]](#footnote-272) What these manifestos show is that the relative paucity of references to the notion of citizenship in political rhetoric, an assumption of its place within a narrative of law and order, and citizenship rights being social and economic rather than political or democratic.

It is fair to say that political and constitutional reform had not been high on the agenda for successive post-war administrations, whose priorities were dominated by managing the economic cycles of boom and bust via tools of Keynesian demand management. Some of the most significant changes were presided over by the 1945-51 Attlee government, whose 1949 Parliament Act established beyond doubt the primacy of the elected House of Commons over the unelected House of Lords, reducing the Lords’ ability to delay legislation to just a year. Until the passage of the 1948 Representation of the People Act, university graduates (7 per cent of the electorate) had been entitled to an extra vote reserved for alumni of their alma matter, with an MP representing this body in the House of Commons rather than a geographical constituency. The 1948 Act abolished the university constituencies, finally ending the right of any elector to vote more than once and enshrining the principle of one man, one vote in general elections for good. Wales had received a dedicated Secretary of State in 1964, matching the parallel post for Scotland that had been established in the late nineteenth century. In response to the rise and growing success of the Scottish National Party in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales, the 1974-79 Labour government legislated for devolution referendums to be held in 1979. While the Welsh voted by 79.7 per cent to reject outright plans for devolved government, the Scottish did narrowly vote in favour of the proposal for a Scottish Assembly (51.6 per cent). However, an amendment to the Act which provided for the referendum had stipulated that if less than 40 per cent of the total electorate voted for devolution, the act would be repealed. With a turnout of 63.7 per cent, the Act was duly repealed, and Scottish devolution was taken off the political agenda at Westminster. The withdrawal of support by Scottish and Welsh nationalists from the Labour government at Westminster because of these failures, upon whom Labour depended for its parliamentary majority, ensured the fall of the government and a general election to be held on 4 May 1979, bringing Mrs Thatcher to office.

By far the biggest change to the political system in the post-war period was the 1969 Representation of the People Act, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, which it currently remains for UK-wide general elections, being the first major democratic nation to do so. Even a cursory glance at the debates around the parliamentary franchise in the nineteenth century shows how controversial they were, how they were often defining political issues of the day, consuming all other affairs of state. What is remarkable is that by 1969 the issue of the qualification for the franchise was such an uncontroversial one. Indeed, the 1969 Act scarcely registers in most histories of the period. Liberal support for the change was evident in 1963, and in November 1965, the national executive committee of the Labour Party proposed the change, with Richard Rose writing in *The Times* that by enfranchising just under 2 million voters by lowering the voting age to 18, Labour could have gained four extra seats at the election held the previous year.[[272]](#footnote-273) By December, the proposals had received some opposition from the County Councils’ Association, yet with the Conservatives offering their support by July 1966 (though at an age in between 18 and 21) change was all but guaranteed.[[273]](#footnote-274) The biggest issue of contention within Parliament appears to have been whether the Labour government would allow its MPs a free vote over the changes, as the Conservatives planned to do for their own parliamentary contingent.[[274]](#footnote-275) Summing up for the government, Home Secretary James Callaghan stated that it was his belief that ‘young people are keen and competent to express their views on matters of government, and there are many matters of government which have a real effect and consequence on them’ and that ‘political rights of young people should take account of their changing social position’.[[275]](#footnote-276) Opposition to the change, such as it was, was articulated by Labour MP for Vauxhall George Strauss, who believed it would increase the number of nationalist parties at the election, and by Conservative MP for Thirsk and Malton Robin Turton, who somewhat vaguely predicted a lower voting age ‘would encourage gimmickry at elections’.[[276]](#footnote-277) Perhaps unsurprisingly, the strongest criticism in the press was evident in the *Daily Telegraph*, with one columnist arguing that ‘what we should be questioning is the wisdom of making in one swoop such an enormous addition to the electorate – six times the number enfranchised by the first Reform Act of 1832’.[[277]](#footnote-278)

Nevertheless, the measure duly became law via the 1969 Representation of the People Act. Given the Labour government decided to whip the vote, and had a large majority at the time, it was unlikely to fail. Reflecting upon the changes in the run-up to the 1970 general election, the first nationwide poll since the voting age was lowered, Richard Rose appeared keen to downplay the significance of the measure, noting that the swing the Conservatives would need to achieve an overall majority was raised from 4 to 5 per cent as a result of the new voters that tended to lean leftwards in their party preferences.[[278]](#footnote-279) Despite evidence as early as 1968 that the Conservatives were aware of this, it does not seem to have harmed their chances: when the election was held in June 1970, the party achieved a surprise victory, with an overall majority of 30 won on a 4.5 per cent swing in votes cast.[[279]](#footnote-280) It is fair to say the lowering of the voting age to 18, despite some cursory opposition, was seen largely as an administrative tidying-up exercise. It was not driven by any grassroots demand or organised campaign. It is hard to escape the conclusion that in an age of affluence, consumerism and soon-to-follow economic malaise of the 1970s, such issues were no longer viewed which such burning intensity as might once have been the case, given universal suffrage for men and women had been enshrined in 1918 and 1928 respectively. As W. F. Deedes perceptively understood in his 1968 oppositional column in the *Daily Telegraph*, ‘whereas voting was once an act of some personal significance, its value has steadily declined with each extension of the franchise’.[[280]](#footnote-281) Loughran, Mycock and Tonge are right to conclude that there is ‘little evidence that the Labour government’s commitment to voting age reform in 1969 was driven by any form of sustained public campaign’, but was instead ‘elite-led’ and ‘motivated by their ambiguous and sometimes contradictory attitudes’ towards 1960s youth culture.[[281]](#footnote-282) Perhaps the most apt summary of the general mood was in the letters page of the *Telegraph* one day after Deedes’ column, titled simply ‘Indifference’.[[282]](#footnote-283)

As previously stated, it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that widespread demands for political and constitutional reform once again became notable, couched in the rhetoric of citizenship. Why was this the case? It is the contention of this chapter that a very specific set of circumstances existed in this period, with the demands for change innately tied to these circumstances. The largest contributing factor was the ascendancy of Mrs Thatcher, whose dominance of British politics entirely reshaped the political scene. Given the divided nature of the opposition in the 1980s, with the SDP-Liberal Alliance snapping at the heels of Labour, the Conservative Party was able to win landslide parliamentary majorities on 42 per cent of the vote in the 1983 and 1987 general elections (of 144 and 101, respectively), a low percentage in historical terms. The *Financial Times* highlighted this in 1987, when it called for a Conservative election victory based on a higher percentage of the vote, to ‘undermine the argument that they are a minority government’.[[283]](#footnote-284) There was a widespread perception throughout the 1980s that the government had a distinctly anti-democratic attitude with regards to ensuring the passage of its policies. For example, given the uncodified nature of the British constitution, and Britain’s position as a unitary state, the Thatcher government was able to severely restrict and curtail the powers of local government, without the checks and balances often provided for in codified constitutions. In 1985 *The Economist* reflected upon this, declaring that ‘a government originally wedded to the good Conservative philosophy of local democracy’ had become ‘increasingly drawn into centralism by its determination to control total public spending’.[[284]](#footnote-285)

From the very beginning of the 1980s, the government introduced ‘rate-capping’, limiting the amount that local councils (nearly all controlled by the left of the Labour Party) could raise in rates to pay for local expenditure, in an attempt to curb government expenditure overall. In 1986, the Local Government Act abolished the Greater London Council (GLC), alongside the five other metropolitan counties. In the first half of the decade, the GLC had been a perpetual thorn in the side of the government under the leadership of Ken Livingstone, who ‘believed in using local government as an anti-Tory power-base’.[[285]](#footnote-286) The impulse of the government to centralise and dominate was evident across virtually all of its policy briefs, introducing a National Curriculum in education for the first time, forcing local councils to put many public services out to competitive tender in the private sector, and introducing a slew of non-elected ‘quangos’ (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations) to regulate the newly privatised industries and utilities. By 1994, the *Economist* reported that 5,521 executive quangos existed, with 70,000 unelected positions on their boards.[[286]](#footnote-287) Reflecting on ten years of Thatcher government in 1989, the *Financial Times* observed that ‘within society more is in the hands of the individual, but within government more is in the hands of the Prime Minister’.[[287]](#footnote-288) Commentator Simon Jenkins has analysed Thatcherism as ‘two revolutions’, with the first being ‘a revolution of political will’ to ‘liberate the “supply side” of the British economy and give new spirit and confidence to private enterprise’.[[288]](#footnote-289) His analysis of the second revolution, however, speaks towards this centralising and anti-pluralistic tendency described above:

*‘The second revolution arose from the management of the first but led in quite a different direction. It was a revolution not of will but of power. Thatcher centralised government, enforced Treasury discipline and regulated both public and private sectors to an unprecedented degree.’*[[289]](#footnote-290)

Yet the Thatcher governments were singularly uninterested in the question of political and constitutional reform. A brief examination of the nature of Thatcherism also gives clues as to why this was the case. Thatcherism was, as Richard Vinen has persuasively argued, was a response to a particular mix of political problems evident in the late 1970s: inflation, trade union influence and relative economic decline.[[290]](#footnote-291) This not only has considerable explanatory purchase for understanding why Thatcherism ran out of steam in the late 1980s, when Mrs Thatcher attempted to broaden its outlook beyond the economic and into the realms of social policy for which her policy solutions were ill-equipped. It is also a significant factor for explaining why Mrs Thatcher was singularly uninterested in the topic of political and constitutional reform: the economy was always of greater importance. Despite her radical and reforming instincts, Mrs Thatcher was absolutely a conservative in matters of the constitution and the operation of the political system, seeing them as a distraction from more pressing matters. An early example of this was evident in 1981, when the Leader of the House of the Lords, Baroness Young, rejected calls made by the National Association of Conservative Graduates for an elected second chamber, with Young’s preference that ‘the party’s priorities should be defeating inflation, improving industrial competitiveness and industrial relations, and increasing employment’.[[291]](#footnote-292) *The Economist* had stated the previous year that ‘Mrs Thatcher fears that any attempt at constitutional reform could lead down all sorts of embarrassing alleys’.[[292]](#footnote-293) As the 1983 Conservative Manifesto put it: ‘the British Constitution has outlasted most of the alternatives which have been offered as replacements. It is because we stand firm for the supremacy of Parliament that we are determined to keep its rules and procedures in good repair’.[[293]](#footnote-294) In 1984, Samuel Brittan lamented the government’s lack of interest in constitutional reform in an article entitled ‘The Unradical British Right’, arguing that ‘constitutional reform is a precondition for reducing the role of the interest group state’.[[294]](#footnote-295) The reluctance persisted throughout Mrs Thatcher’s premiership. When an editorial in *The Economist* surveyed Mrs Thatcher’s perceived faults in November 1990, on the brink of her being challenged for the Conservative leadership, her hostility to constitutional reform is listed as one of them.[[295]](#footnote-296)

This discontent with the state of the British political system was reflected in a slew of ‘state of the nation’ books, articles, and pamphlets in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Adam Lively’s *Parliament: The Great British Democracy Swindle* (1990) is an archetypal example, a furious tract which reflects the dismay many on the left felt at the operation of the Thatcher government, described as ‘the imposition of an ideology on an almost Romanian scale’.[[296]](#footnote-297) It demonstrates that for many the experience of the 1980s was to make them question to the whole nature of Britain’s political structures, with Lively commenting that Mrs Thatcher’s ‘fanaticism would be comparatively harmless were it not for the enormous power that our political system hands to her on a plate’.[[297]](#footnote-298) The principle of parliamentary sovereignty, in which the will of Parliament is the supreme determiner in the political process, and is crucial to the uncodified British constitution, is for Lively a principle of ‘extreme majoritarianism and anti-pluralism’.[[298]](#footnote-299) He cites greater powers for the police, restrictions on the media, the 1981 British Nationality Act and the anti-homosexual Section 28 as evidence of a failing political system, asking with fury ‘How have these infringements of basic civil liberties been allowed to happen? What can be done to rectify them and ensure they don’t happen again?’[[299]](#footnote-300) Arguing that the British ‘lack the language with which to defend ourselves’, Lively calls for the introduction of a written constitution, to limit the power of government and parliament and to encourage ‘a new democratic politics, protected from the dead, unifying hand of central control’.[[300]](#footnote-301) Lively had little time for those who believe the election of a Labour government would be sufficient to remedy the ills he has diagnosed, witheringly asserting that ‘such faith is naïve. The Labour Party is not an assembly of saints, and past Labour governments have not been above introducing authoritarian or discriminatory legislation’.[[301]](#footnote-302) His call, for a more active democracy and a written constitution, is typical of campaigners for political reform in this period, with the message a clear one: it is not enough to defeat Mrs Thatcher at the ballot box, but to ensure another like her can never wield such unchecked authority again. Journalist Andrew Marr took up the cry for reform in his 1995 book *Ruling Britannia: The Failure and Future of British Democracy*, though he did nuance some of the more indignant calls for constitutional reform by observing that ‘British democracy is not extinct, nor have the recent failures produced an intolerable situation. Most people don’t feel oppressed by their politicians, merely a bit contemptuous of them’.[[302]](#footnote-303)

Nonetheless, these calls for reform, emanating largely from the left and centre-left, became prominent in the wake of the third Thatcher election victory in 1987, in the face of seemingly perpetual Conservative electoral hegemony. Writing for the *Daily Mail* in June 1987, a week after the general election, former *Spectator* editor George Gale observed that ‘Thatcher’s triumph has left the opposition parties with a lot of hard thinking to do – and so far, there is precious little evidence they are doing it. Instead, they are messing around with constitutional reform – not for the country, but for themselves.’[[303]](#footnote-304) It is certainly true that the case for reform was at its strongest among a section of the educated and intellectual elite: even a cursory glance at newspaper archives reveals that publications like the *Financial Times, The Guardian* and *The Economist* devoted considerably more column space to the issue than did the *Daily Mail* or *Daily Mirror*. With the establishment of its ‘Bagehot’ column in 1989, *The Economist* was consistently supportive of the case of constitutional reform, and the imperative for radical changes to Britain’s political system. In 1991, in a piece entitled ‘Time to Change’, it quoted from Robert Peel’s 1834 Tamworth Manifesto, whose commitment to remedying rather than ignoring social problems had paved the way for the formation of the modern Conservative Party. The piece concludes that ‘in the 1980s Margaret Thatcher applied a similar philosophy to Britain’s economic decline. It is time for the leaders of the 1990s to apply it to the British constitution’.[[304]](#footnote-305) The *Financial Times* was similarly committed, and while endorsing a third term for Mrs Thatcher in 1987, it earnestly proposed that if the result was another Tory landslide, backbench governments MPs could fruitfully occupy their time by ‘drafting a package of constitutional reform, for the parliament and institutions of the 1990s’.[[305]](#footnote-306) By 1989, an editorial in the same paper lamented that ‘the government’s failure to contemplate reform’ had ‘exacerbated the defects of the British constitution by its remorseless centralisation of power’.[[306]](#footnote-307) In a piece for *The Observer* in February 1987, Neal Ascherson presaged Lively’s contempt for the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, deriding it as ‘the curse of British politics, the Druidic dogma which makes effective reform of our institutions almost impossible’.[[307]](#footnote-308)

Journalist Anthony Sampson published the first edition of his *Anatomy of Britain* in 1962, being a study of Britain’s ruling elite and the way in which different rings of power interlock to mutually reinforce each other, such as economic, political, bureaucratic, and legal power. In so doing, it is typical of state of the nation concerns in the early 1960s, with a growing lack of distrust in the ‘establishment’ in the face of scandal and the decline of Harold Macmillan’s government. Sampson reissued the book several times over the course of his lifetime, updating it to reflect the wider concerns of the late twentieth century, and by the time of the publication of *The Essential Anatomy of Britain* in 1992, the series was on its fifth revised version. Its subtitle, *Democracy in Crisis*, indicates how Sampson’s latest work reflected the wider concerns about the viability of Britain’s democratic structures: in the preface Sampson details ‘the weakening of democratic representation which accelerated during the eighties’.[[308]](#footnote-309) Many of the criticisms of changes in the 1980s are present and correct here, with Sampson lamenting that ‘the gap between government and governed looms wider than ever, and Britain is run by one of the most centralised and least accountable systems in the industrialised world’.[[309]](#footnote-310) Mournfully, he concludes that ‘the arena of power and influence has become narrower and bleaker since I first looked at Britain’s anatomy thirty years ago’.[[310]](#footnote-311) As Hugo Young had put it in *The Guardian* the previous year, ‘a feature of the Thatcher years was that they taught more people to care about how they were governed’.[[311]](#footnote-312) Other works in this ‘state of the nation’ moment included Anthony Wright’s *Citizens and Subjects* (1994) and Will Hutton’s *The State We’re In* (1995).

Of course, frustration with the political system is nothing new, and it is not unheard of for opponents of a particular government to loudly proclaim the need for constitutional reform. This is evident earlier in the period of this thesis, in an editorial in the *Financial Times* from January 1977. Discussing a vote due to take place on whether the proposed devolved assemblies for Scotland and Wales should be elected via proportional representation, the editorial urges Tory MPs to support it, as ‘the greater the vote in favour of proportional representation for these assemblies the further we shall have travelled along the road towards overall constitutional reform and a consequent shoring-up of our democracy.’ The catalyst for this interest in constitutional reform was ‘the emergence in autumn 1974 of a Labour Government that rested on the support of fewer than three out of ten registered voters’ which ‘made itself the creature of both the trade unions and the worst absurdities of its own ideology’ and ‘then proceeded to inflict the consequences upon the rest of us’. The standpoint clearly comes from one of profound anti-socialism. This is perhaps unsurprising from an editorial in the *Financial Times*, but nevertheless instructive in how opponents of a particular government can object to its policies in terms of legitimacy of the government itself to enact them. In many ways, it is uncannily similar in tone to those who made the same case ten years later against the Thatcher Government, with the editorial declaiming that ‘deeply ideological government is in itself unattractive, and its imposition by a minority imbued with the arrogance of temporary power is simply intolerable’. Whilst the editorial concedes that proportional representation, a Bill of Rights and an elected second chamber ‘would not in itself half this continuing erosion of democracy in Britain… it would make the process far more difficult.’[[312]](#footnote-313)

In *The British Constitution Now* (1992), Ferdinand Mount became the first major figure on the right of British politics to lay out a comprehensive and coherent rationale for constitutional reform. Mount argues that checks and balances on the power of the executive had eroded over time, and that ‘the task of reviving or remaking [them] must be undertaken, not in a sweeping, blank-sheet fashion, but rather with a careful appreciation of practicalities.’[[313]](#footnote-314) Mount’s diagnosis and prescriptions for remedying the constitutional problems are rooted in a sense of history, blaming ‘a century of indoctrination in the beauties of parliamentary omnipotence’ for British indifference to the cause of a Bill of Rights, a written constitution or the restraining of Royal Prerogative powers. While it is perhaps a stretch too far to argue that Mount is a ‘medievalist’, as a young Niall Ferguson characterised his ideas in the *Daily Mail*, it is certainly true that Mount is ‘attracted by the pre-Tudor world where the jurisdictions of Church, Crown and estates overlapped. The more sovereignty, the better for individual liberty, he argues. Good riddance to the 19th century nation-state, with its centralising impulse.’[[314]](#footnote-315) Mount’s work was positively reviewed in the reform-minded *Economist*, which commented that ‘he is rightly convinced that the Tories now need to think as hard about the constitution as they once did about the economy. The alternative is to the lose the moral and intellectual initiative to the opposition.’[[315]](#footnote-316) While the Conservative Party was not to take up the mantle of constitutional reform, they were unable to escape the growing discourse rooted in the notions of citizens and citizenship.

The rest of this chapter will further consider the expressions of discontent in the late 1980s and early 1990s with Britain’s political system, and how discussion was couched in the language of the citizen and citizenship. The diffuse and often ill-defined nature of citizenship itself is critical, as it provided a springboard for many different campaigns, initiatives and debates. It will consider the Commission on Citizenship, a parliamentary initiative of the late 1980s, and those who made the case for citizenship to appear as a school subject on the National Curriculum. Then, it will examine the campaigns of Charter 88, which advocated constitutional reform, the language of the citizen they utilised and their success in ‘cutting through’ to voters. Finally, the chapter will conclude by examining the response of the Labour and Conservative parties to this growing section of public discourse, their attitudes to constitutional reform, and the ways in which both parties utilised a rhetoric of citizenship to chart a new course in the post-Thatcher landscape of the 1990s.

**The Commission on Citizenship**

Bernard Weatherill served as Speaker of the House of Commons from 1983 to 1992. The last speaker to date to wear a ceremonial wig whilst presiding over the chamber, his speakership coincided with the introduction of TV cameras into Parliament, in 1989, and he therefore achieved a somewhat wider public profile than had his predecessors. In 1988, as Speaker, Weatherill established the Commission on Citizenship as a Commission of the House of Commons, which reported two years later. The fact he did so is indicative of the rising prominence of such conceptual and constitutional questions within elite political debates. The Commission was chaired by Maurice Stonefrost, a former senior civil servant at the Greater London Council, with a composition typical of an inquiry of this kind, including MPs, members of the House of Lords, academics, figures from industry and business, trade unionists, educationalists, religious figures and figures from think-tanks and pressure groups.[[316]](#footnote-317) In his foreword to the written report in 1990, Weatherill draws upon the traditional narrative of Britain’s ancient democracy by referencing the Magna Carta, which he describes as an ‘important step… in the long process of establishing a free society for men and women here in Britain’.[[317]](#footnote-318) The implication is, while unstated, that the work of the Commission will be in a similar vein, if not quite of the same stature. Weatherill goes on the describe the special interest he takes in young people who visit the House of the Commons, having learnt that ‘many of our intelligent and serious young people have little idea of how they are governed, nor what part they themselves might play in the process’. From this, Weatherill concludes, ‘citizenship, like anything else, has to be learned. Young people do not become good citizens by accident’. He is also keen to stress that the report does not confine itself in scope to young people: ‘The Commission… has considered what is meant by citizenship and how this applies to the public institutions of our society and to the great range of voluntary bodies and independent associations, and above all, to individual citizens of all ages’.[[318]](#footnote-319) How is citizenship to be defined? For Weatherill, it is taken to mean ‘the ability to argue a case fairly and calmly, to represent others or to work in a team, to negotiate and plan together’. However, it is made clear in the Introduction to the written report that seeking a definition of ‘citizenship, including active citizenship’ is one of the core aims of the Commission itself. The use of the term ‘active’ here is highly significant: it symbolises the shift in the late 1980s away from viewing citizenship as being a passive affair, concerned merely with respecting the rule of law and meeting social obligations, towards the claiming and utilisation of political rights.

This theme is reiterated in the ‘Summary of the Argument’ section of the Report, which argues that ‘citizenship is one of the most important concepts of modern political struggle and social development… whatever it means, [it] is a cultural achievement, a gift of history, which can be lost or destroyed’.[[319]](#footnote-320) The Summary situates the work of the Commission within the wider ways that the concept was understood in the previous decades. Most notably, the Summary makes explicit the Report will *not* discuss topics such as wealth creation, consumer rights or ‘the rules of the economic community’, which had been so contested in the 1970s and early 1980s. Whereas the language of citizenship had previously been most commonly utilised with regards to law and order, or industrial disputes, the focus here was expressly about political participation, to ensure those ‘who wish to become actively involved can understand and participate, can influence, persuade, campaign and whistleblow, and in the making of decisions can work together for the mutual good’.[[320]](#footnote-321) The first section of the Report, entitled ‘What Citizenship Means’, takes this theme further, quoting the academic Raymond Plant who argued in an April 1989 seminar that ‘trying to pin down *the* definition [of citizenship] as the only true or real one is in itself a political activity because it brings into play a more normative or ideological commitment within which an idea of citizenship sits as a part’.[[321]](#footnote-322) This is perhaps the single most perceptive comment in the Report. Naturally, given the usual need for the work of such Commissions to be seen as non-partisan, it is not remarked upon or interrogated further. This section also notes how the legal notion of citizenship is impacted by the uncodified nature of United Kingdom’s government, observing that ‘there is no comprehensive constitutional list of entitlements. Individuals’ freedoms exist to the extent that Parliament has not enacted restrictions. By the same token, there is no list of duties. However, citizens have a duty to respect the law. The duty to pay taxes, to serve on juries or to refrain from treasonable activities are examples of what is required of a citizen on this basis’.[[322]](#footnote-323) What does become clear in this section is what is to become the central concern of the Report, chiefly ‘the relationship between the entitlements and duties of individuals on the one hand and the corresponding obligations of public institutions on the other, as well as the framework of rules to which they both conform’.[[323]](#footnote-324)

It is seeking to understand this relationship between entitlements and obligations that forms the basis of the second section of the Commission’s report, ‘Impediments to Citizenship’, impediments of the sort ‘existing in those formal arrangements which hindered the citizen’s ability to participate’.[[324]](#footnote-325) Concern is expressed with the level and type of citizenship education provided in school, but a greater emphasis is placed on the necessity of government to provide ‘a floor of social entitlements’ which enables people to become fully engaged citizens, as some are ‘so severely disadvantaged that their commitment can only be to their immediate day to day lives’.[[325]](#footnote-326) This then follows through to the final section of the Report, entitled ‘Encouraging Citizenship’. The most notable theme that features in this article is a recognition of the increasing scope of voluntary activity in society, seeing this as a conduit for responsible and admirable acts of citizenship. The Report quotes Peter Wilmott who argued that ‘the movement away from centralism and towards a belief in ordinary people is sometimes expressed in other terms, such as ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ or ‘citizenship’.[[326]](#footnote-327) After a lengthy section listing the challenges for the social services of the increasing use and reliance on the voluntary sector to ‘provide citizenship entitlements’, the Report concludes with a number of recommendations. These include better provision of citizenship education in schools and attempting to change public attitudes, while noting that ‘companies do frequently allow their staff off with pay to pursue active citizenship involvement’, with examples including the Territorial Army, school governorship, blood donation and jury service.[[327]](#footnote-328) In addition, the report calls for the codification of ‘rights, duties and entitlements’ of citizens and the creation of a ‘comprehensive citizens advice service’ to advocate for the disadvantaged ‘who cannot claim their own entitlements’.[[328]](#footnote-329) The most emphatic recommendation is for the ‘establishment of either a Standing Royal Commission on Citizenship, or an Organisation with a Royal Charter publishing an annual report’ in order ‘to deal with all aspects of citizenship’.[[329]](#footnote-330)

So, what is the overall significance of this Report? It is perhaps unsurprising that, given the need for such commissions to be seen to be above party politics and partisanship, many of the comments and recommendations are frustratingly vague, with occasional references on needing to push the government to maintain ‘a floor of adequate social entitlements’ perhaps acting as a thinly veiled critique on the perceived harshness of the policies of the Thatcher Government towards the disadvantaged. The emphatic recommendation too, for the creation of a permanent body to oversee citizenship is unsurprising, as such a role in these committees brings both prestige and pay to its members, and is perhaps an example of, as it was once put, the tendency of bureaucracy to expand in order to meet the needs of the expanding bureaucracy. There is, however, a degree of inevitability about such a report being vague if it wishes to be non-partisan, as ideas of citizenship are inherently and indistinguishably intertwined with normative and contested political ideals. Speaker Bernard Weatherill had finished his foreword to the Report by stating his belief (perhaps more accurately described as a hope) that the ‘thought-provoking’ work of the Commission ‘will contribute to a wide public debate on these important matters’.[[330]](#footnote-331) Already at time of publication, Weatherill notes, the National Curriculum Council, with support of the Government and the Opposition, designated citizenship as one of five ‘cross-curricular themes’ that schools must take into account when planning their teaching, with Weatherill seeing this as a success for the work of the group.

However, the publication of the Report does not appear to have attracted any significant media attention, an essential prerequisite for the kind of ‘wide public debate’ on which Weatherill had professed his desire. A short article appeared in *The Times* in September 1990, making note of the Report’s publication, in which chair Maurice Stonefrost declared that ‘we have taken a tough-minded look at the present situation in British society and it’s important that we do so. We live in times of great change and, if we take our citizenship for granted under such circumstances, we could wake up and find that it’s been eroded’.[[331]](#footnote-332) There is no evidence that the launch of the Report was covered in any other national newspaper or broadcaster. Its significance is that is perfectly illustrates that political elites were attempted to grapple with the question of citizenship, and the instituting of the commission itself an illustration of the rising prominence with which debates about citizenship were being accorded in the public sphere.

**Citizenship Education**

As previously noted, the written report of the Commission on Citizenship had considered the degree to which citizenship was taught in schools, quoting a September 1989 survey by Leicester University Social & Community Planning Research (SCPR). The SCPR had surveyed 800 schools on their provisions for citizenship education. While 43 per cent reported they had an agreed policy in place for teaching citizenship, only 5 per cent reported that this was located in a separate policy document as opposed to being diffused across the curriculum.[[332]](#footnote-333) It was on the basis of this data that the Report declared that there appeared to be ‘no systematic teaching of citizenship in the UK’.[[333]](#footnote-334) It was clearly a concern which occupied the thoughts of the Commission’s creator. In 1996, as president of the Institute for Citizenship Studies, former Speaker Lord Weatherill wrote to the editor of *The Times* to highlight research done by the Institute which found that ‘76 per cent of primary schools do not have a member of staff with overall responsibility for citizenship education. Only 6 per cent have a separate section on citizenship education in their school development plan and 91 per cent do not have a single written policy covering citizenship education. Clearly there is a pressing need to support teachers in this area’.[[334]](#footnote-335) For a band of committed academics however, most prominently Bernard Crick, this was a long-standing grievance, and while the idea of a qualification such as a GCSE in citizenship had been ‘overwhelmingly rejected’ in the report of the Commission on Citizenship, separate citizenship classes had been a long aim of the ‘subjecteers’.

Bernard Crick was undoubtedly central to the push for citizenship education in schools: in 1975, a report in *The Economist* had stated the cause of political reform owed ‘much to the tireless advocacy of Professor Bernard Crick’.[[335]](#footnote-336) His attachment to the cause of citizenship education dates back at least as far back as the late 1960s, when he contributed the introductory essay to Derek Heater’s collection *The Teaching of Politics* (1969), and from the beginning his criticisms were rooted in a desire to teach an active form of citizenship. He lambasted the tendency to focus on the dry mechanics of ‘the constitution’, sitting above party and policy disputes, as ‘there is no such thing which is not itself a matter of intense political dispute’.[[336]](#footnote-337) Such a focus on process and procedure, argued Crick, ‘makes an interesting and lively subject dull, safe and factual’.[[337]](#footnote-338) Nearly ten years later, *The Economist* summarised the criticisms that those such as Crick had of the existing framework for the teaching of politics and civic affairs, being that ‘on the whole, it is descriptive rather than analytic and tells schoolchildren how the machinery works, rather than getting them to see themselves as participants.’[[338]](#footnote-339) Crick attributes this to ‘institutional nervousness’, a worry that to encourage debate would encourage vicious partisanship and a narrowed viewpoint among students, to which Crick vigorously objects, stating that ‘we should encourage the holding of opinions – strong and firm opinions – but in ways that are open to argument and exposed to refutations.[[339]](#footnote-340) He argued that introducing a stronger element of debate would allow the forming of better opinions: ‘the artful Communist quotes *The Times* to support him and the shrewd Conservative the *Morning Star*’.[[340]](#footnote-341)

By 1978, Crick collaborated with Alex Porter for a Hansard Society publication entitled *Political Education and Political Literacy* (1978), which further set out his views on the best way to teach citizenship education in schools. Three possible aims in such education were identified: firstly, ‘the purely and properly conserving level of knowing how our present system of government works’, secondly, ‘the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for an active citizenship’, and finally ‘considering possible changes of direction of government or of alternative systems’.[[341]](#footnote-342) The latter of these was considered the most contentious, but Crick argued that it was ‘a perfectly proper area of educational concern… but only when taken together with some consideration of the previous two’.[[342]](#footnote-343) Crick further articulated his distinction between ‘good’ and ‘active’ citizenship in an address to the Political Studies Association in 1992. The former adjective, he argued, was the one usually applied to the term in Britain: ‘Good citizens have a respect for law and order, pay their taxes (even poll taxes), know their place in society, keep their noses clean and are ever so grateful to be governed well’.[[343]](#footnote-344) It is, in effect, an articulation of the term citizen that was common to the manifestos examined above: a restrained, dutiful vision of citizenship. Active citizenship, on the other hand, stresses participation, the claiming of political rights, and a less deferential air to the conduct of civic affairs: ‘government in a citizen culture becomes less easy to conduct, but perhaps more effective and more interesting when it has to and can carry people with it’.[[344]](#footnote-345)

There had been a growing number of features in the press throughout the 1980s that reflected a desire to teach citizenship as a subject in schools. Barbara Day, in an article for *The Times* rounding-up in May 1983 on that day’s broadcasting during the General Election campaign, reported Neil Kinnock’s appearance on BBC Radio 2’s *Jimmy Young Show*, in which he stated that ‘if we educate for every other human competence then we should be educating for democracy’.[[345]](#footnote-346) Kinnock’s articulation of how such an education would proceed – showing pupils how ‘to express themselves, to chair meetings, to take minutes’ – reflects the priorities of someone who has spent a lifetime in the Labour Party, but he also proposes inviting charities and pressure groups into schools. ‘Child Poverty Action, environmental groups, Stop Killing Whales – come into school with clear labels, give their point of view, then the ability of the children develops to discern and make judgements’, and that such an ability is best developed ‘by being confronted with the opinion rather than having to pick it up on street corners’. It is hard to say whether Kinnock’s vision of schoolchildren discussing the welfare of whales on street corners was an accurate one, but nevertheless he articulated a growing belief that, as he put it, ‘education for citizenship’ was necessary. A backbench Conservative MP backed the launch of a booklet in schools entitled *Finding Out What Happens When I Vote* but was at pains to stress that it was ‘totally non-political and only deals with the mechanics of parliament’.[[346]](#footnote-347) Despite the establishment of a National Curriculum in the late 1980s, citizenship education in schools remained ad hoc and disparate, at the discretion of different schools and local authorities.

Though it was after the period of this thesis, the subjecteers eventually achieved their aims, with Citizenship Education being added to the National Curriculum in England in 2001. In 1997 the newly-elected Blair administration had requested a report from Crick, duly delivered the following year, in which he declared his desire for ‘no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens.’[[347]](#footnote-348) David Kerr notes how the report was well received, and ‘there was little public concern expressed about the dangers of political indoctrination of pupils, which has dogged discussion of citizenship and political education in the past’.[[348]](#footnote-349) Crick penned an introduction for his collection *Essays on Citizenship* (2000), entitled ‘A subject at last!’. He reflected upon why it had taken so long to achieve: Crick argued that it was due to ‘excessive national self-confidence: a sad reluctance, on the one hand, to accept that we need all kinds of adjustment to live decently and comfortable in our post-war and post-imperial skin, and, on the other hand, to get right down to education earth, a belief that the *ethos* of the school was sufficient.’[[349]](#footnote-350) Crick’s consistent calls for the teaching of *active* citizenship – as opposed to the more abstract, mechanistic views perhaps embodied by Speaker Bernard Weatherill’s commission – are a clear indication of the trends in citizenship discourse throughout this period. Though largely unacknowledged, they were to provide fertile ground for those who wished to translate these calls into a concrete political programme and agenda.

**Charter 88: The National Campaign**

The campaign group Charter 88 was the most prominent and significant expression of the discontent that many felt with the political system in the wake of Thatcherism and the continued re-election of the Thatcher governments. In many ways, their growth can be viewed alongside the wider growth in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which Matthew Hilton has utilised to argue that political engagement in post-war Britain has not declined, but transformed, and in so doing changed ‘the meaning of the political’.[[350]](#footnote-351) By examining the proposals of Charter 88, and the rhetoric which they used to make their case, it can be shown how the language of citizenship came to permeate a reform-minded section of civic society in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Charter 88 emerged from a specific context, with important antecedents earlier in the decade. Political and constitutional reform had been priorities for the newly-created Social Democratic Party (SDP) and their Liberal partners since the early 1980s, with the *Daily Mail* reporting in October 1981 that David Owen had laid out proposals ‘to put cross-benches across the bar of the House of Commons and make Parliament a forum of the nation instead of a bickering cockpit’. In addition, the House of Lords would be filled with ‘businessmen, union leaders, engineers and scientists’, as ‘Dr Owen argued that constitutional reform… was essential for the revival of Britain’s fortunes.’[[351]](#footnote-352) This last sentence is critical, as it reflects a different motivation for advocating constitutional reform as would be the case later in the decade, namely of its use as a tool for promoting economic prosperity and revitalisation. In July 1981, the *Financial Times* had reported the SDP-Liberal Alliance view that ‘Britain’s resources… cannot be harnessed for the common good without a fundamental change in our adversarial political system. The key to such a change it claims lies in electoral and constitutional reform.’ This was again evident the following year, when SDP leader Roy Jenkins, in setting out his party’s plans for a radical devolution of power to the English regions, declared that ‘for at least a century Britain has had less constitutional reform than virtually any other Western democracy. It is time for a change.’ The motivation, as the article states, ‘is to revitalise the economies of the regions, especially the less prosperous parts of the country’.[[352]](#footnote-353)

In 1984, the Constitutional Reform Centre was founded, with Lord Scarman as president, ‘to stimulate constitutional reform in Britain’, with its first priority being ‘the co-ordination of major campaigns on citizens’ rights, starting in the new year’.[[353]](#footnote-354) This it duly did, with a campaign to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into British law being reported in the *Financial Times* in January 1985.[[354]](#footnote-355) The formation of the Constitutional Reform Centre was significant in that it became a crucial pillar of what Charter 88’s first ad described as ‘an informal association of individuals and bodies’, also acknowledging the Charter’s roots in the pages of the *New Statesman*, a leading publication on the intellectual left. In addition, many of its leading figures had their roots in the Liberal and Social Democratic parties. ‘Charter 88 stems from discussions at the start of this year among journalists on New Statesman and Society. Dissatisfaction… led the group to try to put the inadequacies of Britain’s written constitution at the top of the political agenda’.[[355]](#footnote-356) Anthony Barnett, director of Charter 88 from its inception until 1995, had been writing opinion pieces in *The Guardian* advocating constitutional reform in the years running up to the official launch of Charter 88, writing in April 1987 that ‘as David Owen dilutes Alliance commitment to constitutional reform, a far-reaching opportunity opens up for those with sufficient nerve and wit to advance a thoroughly democratic programme from the Left’.[[356]](#footnote-357) Barnett’s preoccupation with the Left adopting constitutional reform was also evident in a piece written in August the previous year, arguing that ‘what is surprising is that [the question of constitutional reform] is almost never asked within the Labour Party, and that the Left has allowed the Alliance to dance away with constitutional reform. Here lies the true mystery of British politics.’[[357]](#footnote-358)

 ‘A non-party movement’, reported *The Guardian* in November 1988, ‘designed to gain public support for a new constitutional settlement in Britain was launched yesterday by 230 prominent public figures under the title Charter 88’.[[358]](#footnote-359) The title itself was a reference and an homage to the ‘Charter 77’ movement, founded by Czechoslovak dissent Václav Havel in 1977, protesting the human rights conditions in Soviet-occupied Czechoslovakia. The obvious melodrama of the comparison was not lost on the founders of Charter 88, who made a point a point in their first paid advertisement to stress that ‘conditions here are so much better than in Eastern Europe as to bear no comparison’.[[359]](#footnote-360) Hoping ‘a movement would snowball’, the Charter was the epitome and ultimate expression for constitutional change as expressed in the previous few years, calling for ‘a written constitution, electoral reform, reform of the Lords and the judiciary, equitable sharing of power between central and local government, and a bill of rights enshrining basic civil liberties’.[[360]](#footnote-361) Critical to Charter 88’s rallying cry was the need for the British people to see themselves as citizens, not subjects:

*‘We have had less freedom than we believed. That which we have enjoyed has been too dependent on the benevolence of our rulers. Our freedoms have remained their possession, rationed out to us as subjects rather than being our own inalienable possession as citizens. To make real the freedoms we once took for granted means for the first time to take them for ourselves’.[[361]](#footnote-362)*

Given Charter 88’s origins on the liberal left, it is not surprising its most trenchant critics were to be found among the columnists for right-of-centre publications. Bruce Anderson, writing in *The Sunday Telegraph*, while conceding that ‘at some stage, the constitutional issue will come on to the political agenda’, declared that ‘more nonsense is talked about freedom in Britain than on any other topic’.[[362]](#footnote-363) Decrying what he terms the ‘freedom’ industry, Anderson articulates the common view of those on the right towards Charter 88, a motivation driven by ‘a double abhorrence for Mrs Thatcher’s policies, and her success at winning elections’. Turning the arguments of Charter 88 on their head, namely that Britain’s electoral system fails to reflect British public opinion, Anderson laconically enquires ‘one wonders why they failed to cite the most clear-cut, prolonged instance of the Commons thumbing its nose at the electorate – over the death penalty!’ In addition, the choice of name was criticised, with Czech dissident Julius Tomin describing its echo of Charter 77 as ‘cheap’, saying that ‘people here are not oppressed. They are not speaking from within some really threatened right. It is more or less an academic exercise’.[[363]](#footnote-364) While conservative philosopher Roger Scruton believed ‘the idea of citizenship as embraced by the Charter 88 movement’ as the ‘most interesting development’ on the left of British politics in the late 1980s, the overwhelming view of the right to ‘Chatter 88’ was dismissive.[[364]](#footnote-365) ‘It was always a problem for Charter 88’, reflects Michael Rustin, ‘that it was asserting the need for major constitutional reform at a moment when, from a Conservative point of view, the existing constitution had only recently proved how adaptable an instrument it actually was’.[[365]](#footnote-366) As Mrs Thatcher herself put it in reply to a letter from Charter 88 calling for a written constitution, she believed the present constitutional arrangements ‘continue to serve us well’.[[366]](#footnote-367)

It is worth briefly considering each of Charter 88’s proposals for reform in turn, as each clearly illustrates how the anti-Thatcher context was a crucial motivating factor. The demand for a ‘written’ constitution was central to all other demands, to be ‘anchored in the idea of universal citizenship’.[[367]](#footnote-368) For the likes of Charter 88, this was an absolutely necessary precondition for reform: as the British constitutional settlement had evolved over centuries, it existed via a patchwork of individual Acts of Parliament, common law precedents, Royal Prerogative powers, works of authority, custom and convention, rather than as a single ‘codified’ document. As such, the British constitution is easily amended via a simple majority in Parliament, without the provisions evident in most written constitutions (such as the United States) which place additional obstacles in the way of constitutional change, such as the need for supermajorities or widespread geographical support. For Charter 88, all other political reform was meaningless without ensuring it was rooted in a new, written constitution, as any changes could be easily repealed via a majority in Parliament. This desire for ‘entrenched’ rights was to prove a sticking point between Charter 88 and other advocates of constitutional reform, and also illustrates their difference with earlier calls for reform emanating from the Liberal and Social Democratic parties: whilst earlier in the decade constitutional reform was articulated as a precondition necessary for economic revival, by the end of the 1980s it is rooted in calls for new political rights as citizens, as a necessity for the viability of British democracy. As the advocates said themselves, ‘no country can be considered free in which the government is above the law. No democracy can be considered safe whose freedoms are not encoded in a basic constitution’.[[368]](#footnote-369) Bernard Crick, who was an enthusiastic supporter of Charter 88, wrote an open letter to Mrs Thatcher in *The Guardian* in which he argued a written constitution was essential in allowing ‘courts [to] rule on cases brought by citizens that a particular legislative provision or governmental action is unconstitutional, which then means illegal and unenforceable’.[[369]](#footnote-370) Other demands include the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with an elected chamber, to combat the power of hereditary privilege and government patronage, a Bill of Rights to ‘enshrine’ civil liberties, freedom of information, electoral reform to remove the possibility of single party majority government on a minority of the vote, and greater powers for Parliament to scrutinise the executive. Crick makes the Thatcher context clear in his open letter to the Prime Minister, stating her attempts to ‘change for ever the powers and financial basis of local government, the whole structure of public welfare and finances, to revise the Official Secrets Act, to limit the rights and capabilities of the Media to criticise and investigate the government’ were underpinning ‘this growing clamour for constitutional reform’.[[370]](#footnote-371)

Interestingly, much of the initial literature and coverage surrounding Charter 88 was explicitly linked with the three-hundredth anniversary of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688, when Parliament deposed the Catholic King James II and ensured his replacement by his Protestant daughter and nephew Mary II and William III, and from which came the Bill of Rights. These are relevant in that these events were long viewed as cornerstones of Britain’s path towards a modern democracy when Parliament finally emerged supreme over the monarchy: a critical strand of thinking within Charter 88 was critical of these developments. Charter 88’s first paid advertisement, in *The Guardian* in January 1989, goes to great lengths to critique traditional views of 1688. Whilst conceding ‘in its time the Glorious Revolution was a historic victory over Royal tyranny’, nevertheless the ad pessimistically concludes that ‘the events of 1688 only shifted the absolute power of the monarch into the hands of the parliamentary oligarchy’.[[371]](#footnote-372) This demonstrates not only the contempt of many of the reformers for the crucial principle of parliamentary sovereignty, but how willing Charter 88’s advocates were to make their case in explicitly historical and intellectual terms. Lord Scarman, in describing his reasons why he signed the Charter, made the historical link, arguing that ‘the settlement of 1688 has broken down’. Whilst the former powers of the Monarch and the House Lords ensured, Scarman argued, that ‘the constitution did have effective checks and balances built into it’, ‘with the democratisation of our society those checks and balances have diminished almost to vanishing point.’[[372]](#footnote-373) Charter 88 was, Scarman concludes, ‘a bold attempt carried out in considerable detail to tackle the problem of securing the survival of our human rights and constitutional freedoms amid the complexities of modern British society’.[[373]](#footnote-374)

Such language cuts to the heart of the tensions by which Charter 88’s success or failure could be measured, and the criticisms it received from other reform-minded actors. There was certainly a flurry of press interest among certain publications, such as the *Guardian*, the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*. In December 1988, Hugo Young was able to report in *The Guardian* that ‘Charter 88 has had a successful start. More than 2,500 people, a far larger number than the organisers expected, answered a Guardian advertisement and sent money for another one’.102 By January 1989, ‘some 10,000 people have signed Charter 88, the manifesto calling for constitutional reform, in the first month of its existence. About £35,000 has been donated, the organisers announced yesterday, and by Easter they expect to have 25,000 paid-up members’.106 Such was the support that, by April 1989, Patrick Wintour was noted that Charter 88 had ‘decided to organise into a permanent movement following the response to its first statement’, with the group commenting that ‘we want to transform this response from a mainly symbolic, if remarkable, protest into something more practical and lasting’.[[374]](#footnote-375) Most of the commentary from Charter 88’s supporters in the press was of its significance (‘the most significant sign of political interest in constitutional reform’, according to *The Economist*) and that it was, according to Robert Harris, ‘that most powerful of forces: an idea whose time has come’.[[375]](#footnote-376)

Perhaps Charter 88’s biggest initiative in this period was ‘Democracy Day’, on 2 April 1992, one week before the general election. ‘On this day’, declared an advertisement in *The Guardian*, ‘prospective Parliamentary candidates have been invited to take part in simultaneous meetings throughout the country to listen to their constituents on the vital issue of constitutional change’.[[376]](#footnote-377) These meetings were, the advertisement dramatically declared, ‘the biggest mobilisation of the public on such an important subject since the Suffragettes’.[[377]](#footnote-378) The initiative was backed by a range of organisations such as *Time Out*, the Body Shop and *The Economist*, and there were reports in *The Guardian* that more than 150 people were left out in the cold, unable to enter a packed-out Charter 88 meeting – though the location of the meeting – Hampstead – would do little to counter the prejudices of those convinced the cause of constitutional reform was a middle class one.[[378]](#footnote-379) It was certainly an image the organisers wished to banish, proclaiming ‘it’s the C2s rather than the chattering classes who are in the vanguard of the movement for constitutional reform’, with *The Guardian* reporting Democracy Day as ‘a reform crusade involving more than a hundred meetings of election candidates in pubs and halls across Britain last night’: ‘Mr Peter Pulzer, professor of government at Oxford, was convinced constitutional reform issues would dominate the next parliament’.[[379]](#footnote-380) However, Charter 88 never quite managed to shake off the image that ‘the Chattering Classes, it seems, are on the march.’[[380]](#footnote-381)

Nevertheless, Charter 88 also attracted criticism from fellow constitutional reformers. In December 1988, not long after the Charter’s initial launch, Hugo Young decried the wish of many in the organisation to present themselves as an apolitical, legalistic movement, elevating ‘law above politics by seeking to establish a regime which is proof against the quotidian forces of mere passing politicians who may accidentally be armed with an impregnable parliamentary majority’. Whilst commending Charter 88 for ‘speaking admirably for higher things’, Young concludes ‘it is a political document and can only bear fruit in a political world’. [[381]](#footnote-382) In May 1990, an editorial in *The Guardian* was critical of Charter 88’s desire for a codified constitution ‘written on a clean sheet’, dismissing these hopes as a ‘fantasy’, and correctly noting that, historically, written constitutions emerge from a period of upheaval and the destruction of an existing regime, which Britain ‘does not face’ nor ‘is it foreseeably likely to do so’. [[382]](#footnote-383) Even *The Economist* criticised the call for a written constitution, on the grounds the proposals to enshrine ‘fairness’ were so abstract as to be either meaningless or highly contentious, such as ‘promises that a written constitution would ensure “fair voting”. But who decides what is fair voting?’[[383]](#footnote-384) Such was the criticism from those that Charter 88 viewed as its own side, co-ordinator Anthony Barnett wrote angrily to the *Financial Times* in June 1991 to challenge claims that the group were “faddists”, stating that until the emergence of the group ‘few considered the need for a written constitution in Britain’.[[384]](#footnote-385)

**Sheffield Charter 88: A Case Study**

How can the success of Charter 88 be measured beyond its coverage in the national press? The minutes, accounts, correspondence and papers of the Sheffield branch of Charter 88, located in the archives of Sheffield City Council, are the only archival material of their kind for a local branch of the organisation. As such, they provide a unique insight in how activists attempted to translate their message to the general public and the level of their success in doing so.

The origins of the Sheffield’s local Charter 88 group can be traced to a course delivered by the Sheffield branch of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA), a voluntary adult education movement and one of the UK’s largest charities. The course in question, which commenced in October 1989, concerned the history of the British Constitution, including questions of its future reform. Such was the enthusiasm that the students held for the subject in question that they produced a paper, entitled ‘The Last Closed Shop: The British Constitution’, which was published in September 1990 in collaboration with the national Charter 88 organisation based in London.[[385]](#footnote-386) The introduction argues that it is ‘of real importance that the views expressed in the Paper come from below, from ordinary British subjects who wish to be citizens’.[[386]](#footnote-387) The foreword proudly notes the attention the group had received in the national press, quoting Peter Hennessey, writing in *The Independent*, who observed that ‘whatever else the Sheffield Constitutionalists may be, they are not the comfortable classes interested in a little institutional tinkering. For them the issue is as central as it is serious.’[[387]](#footnote-388)

Arguing that ‘there has been no occasion when everything has been looked at together to make sure the parts make a sensible whole unit’, the reforms proposed in the paper indicate a clear alignment with the broad agenda of Charter 88: calls for a codified constitution, a stronger legislature vis-à-vis the executive, an independent judiciary strengthened by a Bill of Rights and electoral reform. While these are all standard reforms beloved by constitutional reformers, it is the more general call for ‘a shift from seeing people as subjects of the Crown to acknowledging their rights as citizens in a free society’ which is the most significant of the paper, for it is this desire which ran a common thread uniting the constitutional reforms of the era.[[388]](#footnote-389) Also highly significant is the clear indication given of the political sympathies of the students who produced the paper. While the introduction to the paper stresses that its contributors ‘do not all have exactly the same opinions nor share the same political views’, it goes on to note that their work ‘has been consistently infused with a strong sense of outrage at the social and economic injustice which exists in our society. Constitutional reform by itself is not enough, but it is a necessary part of a better ordered society.’[[389]](#footnote-390) As with the national Charter 88 organisation, despite gestures made to non-partisanship, the adherents of constitutional reform were firmly on the anti-Conservative wing of politics.

It was this paper in question that was to bring two of the most prominent members of Sheffield Charter 88, Allan Wisbey and Vicky Seddon, into correspondence: it is their involvement that registers most prominently in the archives of the group. Wisbey had been a member of the WEA class, and they were mutual acquaintances of Anthony Barnett of the national Charter 88 organisation, and it was in this capacity that Wisbey first contacted Seddon. In a letter dated 23 January 1991, Wisbey wrote to Seddon sending her a copy of ‘The Last Closed Shop’, explaining he was doing so at the suggestion of Barnett, and that the paper had been sent off to ‘a range of people… [which] produced quite a response: the reaction from most of the MPs we wrote to might be described as cautious’.[[390]](#footnote-391) Wisbey stresses to Seddon that she is under no obligation to read or respond to his letter, but that he had assumed due her acquaintance with Barnett that she was a ‘keen member of Charter 88’. ‘There isn’t an active Charter 88 group in Sheffield’, Wisbey comments, and that ‘I don’t want to start one – I’m too busy – but if you know of a few people who do, I would expect to become a member, if not a very active one’.[[391]](#footnote-392)

This not-so-subtle hint seems to have sparked an interest in Seddon, and while little would come of this letter in the rest of 1991, it was to be the following year that would witness the launch of Sheffield Charter 88. In February 1992, Seddon wrote to seven signatories of the Charter based in Sheffield, ‘to discuss the possibility of organising a public meeting on Democracy Day’, Charter 88’s initiative for public meetings to be held a week before the general election. Seddon concedes that, ‘whilst 7 is not a huge number of people, I think it is certainly sufficient to share the work out.’[[392]](#footnote-393) By 27 March, plans for the Sheffield Democracy Day were well underway, with local newspaper editor Alan Powell agreeing to chair a meeting of parliamentary candidates for the Hallam constituency. In a letter to signatories, Seddon asks for assistance in terms of leafleting, stewarding on the evening and financial support, with the letter expressing a desire to organise a permanent local group, noting that ‘it is very clear that citizenship and constitutional rights and reform are on the political agenda as never before in our life time. We need to nurture and encourage the current interest.’[[393]](#footnote-394) The letter concludes by addressing the 160 Sheffield signatories of Charter 88, who currently receive updates via mail, to complete and return a tear-off to express continued support, as ‘we simply cannot afford to continue to mail everyone’.[[394]](#footnote-395)

There is no mention that the sitting MP for Sheffield Hallam, Conservative Irvine Patnick, attended the Democracy Day meeting, with only the Green, Liberal Democrat and Labour candidates listed on promotional posters for the event.[[395]](#footnote-396) The organisers deemed the event successful, with an ‘audience of some 150 people’ in attendance. After an inaugural meeting held on 20 May, attended by a representative from the London organisation, a permanent Sheffield group of Charter 88 was established, with Vicky Seddon as chair and Allan Wisbey as Treasurer, among others.[[396]](#footnote-397) In a newsletter to supporters in July 1992, the purpose of the Group was set out as being ‘to advance the objectives of the Charter… essentially that means educating the public and the media, gaining publicity… forming links with other like-minded groups’.[[397]](#footnote-398) Later than month, several members attended a meeting in London of the national organisation. In a report, they observed that ‘C88 can’t afford to become a sort of political party in its own right’, and that as for the local group, ‘we do our own thing’.[[398]](#footnote-399) The suggested means of proceeding was to invite ‘everyone, especially with power or influence’, to meetings, including those who disagree with them, to target ‘movers’, including schools, students, clubs, political representatives at every level, to ‘invite them to consider how their tasks/problems might be eased by various of the C88 demands’, and to ‘link it all, as we can, with relevant external events in Sheffield’.[[399]](#footnote-400) The report also stressed ‘the importance of not getting trapped into a culture of protest, i.e. becoming simply another group pursuing a set of concepts but not really getting (or perhaps expecting to get) anywhere much with them’.[[400]](#footnote-401)

A meeting was held on 27 October 1992 concerning the issue of freedom of information, with the group agreeing that they would try to support MP Mark Fisher’s private members ‘Right to Know’ bill.[[401]](#footnote-402) They did this via the form of ‘Right to Know’ days, collecting signatures on 14 November, 12 December outside City Hall and 16 January 1993, and as of the meeting of five members held on 15 December 1992, approximately 300 signatures had been collected. There was concern about an event scheduled by Mark Fisher MP at Sheffield Library Theatre, ‘that this could be a Labour party political event, & that if Sheffield Charter 88 attended we could be seen as siding with Labour’.[[402]](#footnote-403) As we have seen, the National Charter 88 organisation had largely accepted its influence would be best directed towards Labour, whereas much of the correspondence of the Sheffield group stresses their commitment to party political neutrality, worried too close an association with Labour ‘would damage our chances of establishing ourselves as a non-party political group, and dissuade people from joining us’.[[403]](#footnote-404) In July 1993, ‘Sheffield Democratic Left Democracy Group’ contacted the Charter 88 group, proposing ideas for joint events or co-ordinated campaigns. This was only raised in a meeting in September, with members agreeing any coordination ‘needed more flesh’.[[404]](#footnote-405) Guidance from the central Charter 88 organisation in February 1993 had stated ‘we want [Charter 88 events] to be “inclusive” events which debate the issue – not opportunities for party political lectures or adversarial point-scoring’.[[405]](#footnote-406)

Throughout the period, Sheffield Charter 88 was always in a precarious position with regards to its finances. A financial statement, circulated by Treasurer Allan Wisbey on 22 November 1992, noted a net balance in the local groups account of £108.65, having spent £152.09 since May on venue hire, refreshments, mailing costs and posters and promotion.[[406]](#footnote-407) This had dropped to just £1.04 by March 1993 after spending on various campaigning activities, with a collection in a January 1993 meeting raising just £21 for the group, £20 of which covered the costs of the meeting itself. On 27 October 1993, Wisbey wrote to Seddon concerned about the finances of the group: whilst conceding that ‘we are in the business of trying to seize hearts and minds and we don’t want money to get too much in the way of that’, he notes that ‘we did calculate earlier this year that a reasonable level of total income for the year would be say £350. We are over £100 short of that’.[[407]](#footnote-408) The situation had not improved by the time of a financial statement circulated in February 1994, with Wisbey reporting net funds stood at £67.48, rising to £82.13 by May 1994, with subscriptions and individual donations raising £251 over a twelve-month period.[[408]](#footnote-409)

Sheffield Charter 88’s biggest focus seems to have been public meetings, such as the one organised at Sheffield Hallam University for 2 October 1992, for ‘an evening discussion on the state of British democracy’, with a talk by Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield, David Marquand, as well as the November 1992 ‘Right to Know’ campaign mentioned above.[[409]](#footnote-410) The 1993 Annual General Meeting was held on 25 May, with nine members in attendance. The minutes reflected on ‘a successful first year for our group. We now have 84 members, up from the original 15 who turned out following the Democracy Day meeting’.[[410]](#footnote-411) It was agreed that the group would establish stalls at the freshers’ fairs of Sheffield’s two universities, ‘have more frequent bigger “event” meetings’ to supplement the monthly meetings, and to write to the Sheffield Star and Sheffield Telegraph.[[411]](#footnote-412) There were nominal elections to the group’s Committee, but all posts were elected unanimously with one candidate standing, and annual subscription rates to the local group were agreed, ranging from £10 to £2 depending on income.[[412]](#footnote-413) A public meeting held on 10 August 1993 was assessed as merely ‘OK’ in the minutes of a committee meeting held on 15 September, with only 11 new signatories to the Charter and one person joining the local group.[[413]](#footnote-414) Consistently, the minutes show that, despite reaching at least 84 paid-up members, no more than a dozen ever seem to have attended: as is common with many activists in constituency parties, only a fraction of those who pay their membership subscriptions ever actively participate, and Sheffield Charter 88 seems no exception to this.

A comparison can be drawn with campaigns against the Community Charge (the official title for what universally became known, even by Conservatives, as the poll tax), occurring simultaneously with many of Charter 88’s activities and campaigns. Designed as a replacement to the disliked ‘rates’ system of funding local government, the tax quickly became wildly unpopular after its introduction in England and Wales in 1990: while Mrs Thatcher reflected in her memoirs that ‘it was very important that the first year’s community charge was not so high as to discredit the whole system’, this is precisely what happened, with research conducted in ten marginal Tory seats being sent to the Prime Minister from Conservative Central Office in September 1989, which illustrated that ‘73 per cent of households and 82 per cent of individuals would lose from the introduction of the charge in 1990 compared with the rates in the previous year’.[[414]](#footnote-415) The nationwide average annual bill in 1990 was £363, twice the amount estimated during the tax’s formulation.[[415]](#footnote-416) The anti-poll tax movement has correctly been described as ‘the largest mass campaign of civil disobedience in modern British history’, and the archives of Sheffield City Council demonstrate that ‘Sheffield Against the Poll Tax’ ran an extremely active campaign, encouraging people to withhold payment.[[416]](#footnote-417) ‘Sheffield against the poll tax believes that the fight must be taken into workplaces and the unions’, as one piece of its literature stated.[[417]](#footnote-418) For the constitutional reformers, the poll tax was a gift, and was portrayed by many as crystallising the problems with Britain’s political system: ‘a parliamentary system that worked well would not have produced the poll tax: a huge majority of MPs privately opposed it from the outset’, *The Economist* noted, adding the tax was indicative of ‘more general worries: about the power and patronage of the prime minister about the secretary that still cocoons Whitehall, about the degraded level of adversarial debate in the House of Commons, about the relative failure of the Commons to keep a check on the executive’.[[418]](#footnote-419) The Sheffield anti-poll tax organisation was based in the exact same area as that of the local Charter 88 group, Hunters Bar, but there was no chance for cross-collaboration, as the poll tax had been abolished by the time the Charter 88 group was founded. However, records in Sheffield City Council archives show that Sheffield Against the Poll Tax had 120 members and 1,250 people had signed a petition to local MP Irvine Patnick by the summer of 1990, far exceeding the engagement and support the local Charter 88 would receive.[[419]](#footnote-420)

Far from Peter Hennessy’s denial that Sheffield Charter 88 was composed of the ‘comfortable classes’, it is surely no coincidence that the vast majority of its membership and its campaigns were centred on the Sheffield Hallam constituency. The constituency, covering the west of the city, is by far the most affluent of Sheffield’s parliamentary seats, with an extremely high number of graduates in its population. In contrast to the rest of South Yorkshire, during the period in question it was solidly Conservative in terms of voting patterns, with the Liberal Democrats as the main challengers, with the Hallam constituency only electing its first Labour representative in 2017. This speaks perfectly to the problems which the national Charter 88 group, and others interested in constitutional reform, continually wrestled with, namely, how to broaden its appeal beyond the intellectually minded middle classes. There is little evidence from the archival material that it was successfully able to do so, as illustrated by the lack of widespread engagement, even from its own financial supporters. It stands in stark contrast to cover in the national press, which emphasised Charter 88 as cutting through into the national political debate and demonstrates how a feeling of dissatisfaction did not correspond with an increasing level of engagement other than from a committed few.

**Labour and Constitutional Reform**

The Labour Party’s response to the constitutional reformers of the late 1980s was a shifting one, from initial indifference and hostility towards an embrace of many of their ideas, even if the embrace was slightly half-hearted. Labour’s third consecutive election defeat in 1987 was a shock to many in the party, or, more specifically, the scale of the defeat, given how figures like Peter Mandelson had attempted to overhaul Labour’s public image and run a campaign infinitely ‘slicker’ than the somewhat ramshackle affair of the election four years previously. Despite these efforts, the Thatcher government was re-elected for a third term with a majority of over 100. A third successive defeat would, for any political party, prompt a degree of soul-searching, of deciding which policies to cast aside and which to adopt, and how to adapt and change political rhetoric. This section will describe how, by the time of the 1992 general election, Labour had come to adopt a great deal of the constitutional reform agenda, believing it to be one of the ways that it could demonstrate it had changed, that did not involve moving closer to the Conservative position. Though that election was yet another defeat for the party, the constitutional reform proposals were not dropped, and would remain ready to be enacted after the party’s eventual triumph in 1997.

The assessment of many within the Labour Party when Charter 88 emerged in the autumn of 1988 could be best described as scathing. In a *Guardian* article entitled ‘The Charter of Despair’, Shadow Home Secretary and Labour Deputy Leader Roy Hattersley attacked the idea of a written constitution, the central demand of Charter 88, describing it as ‘the wrong remedy for anyone who wants to see a radical change in the nature of our society, built on a more equal distribution of wealth and the greater freedom which equality provides. The only way to end the excesses of a bad government is to replace it with a better one’.[[420]](#footnote-421) Hattersley seems to be writing from an understanding that a written constitution would be an Act of Parliament stating that ‘what Parliament has given away, Parliament can take back… a government with a majority in both Houses could repeal the whole Constitutional Act with a single clause bill’. This does somewhat miss what had been explicit in Charter 88’s literature and argument, that its proposed written constitution would be *more* than just an Act of Parliament, but a codified document, sovereign in itself and above the doctrines of parliamentary sovereignty. Nevertheless, Hattersley’s criticisms clearly come from the left, arguing that written constitutions ‘diminish the importance of positive freedom’, and that by making political change more difficult it would prevent the enacting of socialist policies. Given the prominence of conservative figures making the case for a written constitution, such as Lord Hailsham and Lord Scarman, this is understandable: a written constitution, Hattersley concludes, ‘has become a badly thought-out counsel of despair’. The election of a Labour Government was all that was needed ‘to stop the excesses of Thatcherism infecting this country for ever.’

A year later, in October 1989, Shadow Education Secretary Jack Straw wrote an article for *The Times*, defiantly mocking those who had believed Hattersley’s criticisms of Charter 88 were reactionary, proclaiming ‘somehow, Labour has managed to survive and prosper without accepting [their] advice. It is for the centre parties, not us, that the obituaries are being prepared.’[[421]](#footnote-422) Straw picks up where Hattersley left off, seeing this as important ‘because the ideas of Charter 88 linger on [and] it is important to nail them’. Straw criticises the use of Charter 77 as inspiration, pointing out countries with codified constitutions that do not have a good track record in terms of rights or liberties, and takes issue with the notion that rights ‘could be wrapped up in a single document, which by some ill-defined process would become entrenched and unamendable by Parliament’. ‘We have avoided’, Straw states, ‘the arrogant assumption that future generations can be forced to subordinate to present edicts their judgements about what needs to be changed’. The idea of Charter 88 as arrogant reoccurs throughout the piece, particularly with reference to its advocacy for proportional representation, ‘that our present first-past-the-post system is somehow morally unworthy’, with Straw forcefully making the case that the current electoral system allows for the swift removal of governments. His disdain for the organisation is barely concealed. Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, was reported to have labelled Charter 88 as ‘a bunch of whingers, whiners and wankers.’[[422]](#footnote-423)

At the time of Charter 88, those advocating constitutional reform recognised that Labour’s continued ‘resolute’ opposition to a Bill of Rights and written constitution were ‘by far the most important obstacle to the campaigners’ success’.[[423]](#footnote-424) For one of the two major political parties in a majoritarian political system such as Britain, a degree of resistance was perhaps inevitable. As Martin Linton and Patrick Wintour commented, ‘Labour leaders come from a political tradition which is rooted to the supremacy of single-party majority governments in sovereign parliaments.’[[424]](#footnote-425) ‘The pursuits of untrammelled power at Westminster has always lain behind Labour’s conservatism on constitutional issues’, commented the *Financial Times.[[425]](#footnote-426)* After the ferocity of the some of the pushback from within Labour, what is remarkable is the speed with which Labour came to adopt as party policy many of the reforms synonymous with Charter 88, under the guidance of Roy Hattersley himself as Shadow Home Secretary. In November 1988, as Charter 88 was launching, Bernard Crick commented in *The Guardian* that ‘hardly anyone in the Labour Party who uses their intelligence freely does not now believe that constitutional reform is a major issue’.[[426]](#footnote-427) In January 1989, just two months after the official launch of Charter, internal policy committees in the party proposed ‘four or five bills which would entrench positive rights for civil liberties’.[[427]](#footnote-428) Whilst the focus of a May 1989 report in the *Financial Times* was Labour’s abandonment of unilateral nuclear disarmament, it also included details of proposals for constitutional reform, namely the ‘replacement of the House of Lords by an elected chamber and establishment of regional assemblies’.[[428]](#footnote-429)In *The Guardian* in August 1989, Michael White referenced ‘Mr Hattersley’s mistrust of the Bill of Rights or Charter 88 approach to the protection of civil liberties’, and yet, by January 1990 Labour had embraced the idea of a single ‘Charter of Rights’, despite criticism from Anthony Barnett of Charter 88 that it meant little without a written constitution to entrench it.[[429]](#footnote-430) By April 1990, Hattersley had conceded the principle of a new supreme court, to legally enforce the proposed Charter of Rights and remove the judicial functions from the House of Lords, with an elected second chamber’s function ‘to protect fundamental liberties and rights’.[[430]](#footnote-431)

The qualified nature of Labour’s proposed constitutional reforms did draw criticism from the dedicated constitutionalists, perhaps unavoidably so given Hattersley’s previous stances. In January 1990, the *Financial Times* complained that Hattersley’s proposals ‘manage to dodge some of the central issues’, namely the lack of any attempt to check the ever-expanding power of the executive vis-à-vis the legislature. Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, commented that ‘like the emperor with no clothes, Mr Hattersley’s programme is all bluster and little substance’, while Labour MP Austin Mitchell wrote in *The Guardian* that ‘putting Roy Hattersley in charge of constitutional reform was as sensible as bringing back Stalin to handle perestroika’.[[431]](#footnote-432) ‘Mr Hattersley’, argued Joe Rogaly of the *Financial Times* in November 1991, ‘is probably the best single reason for not trusting Labour’s claim to have become the party of constitutional reform’.[[432]](#footnote-433) There was, however, a clear pattern to Labour’s approach, with each new proposal for reform becoming steadily more radical, followed by scorn from Charter 88 and its ilk for not being radical enough. As we have seen with the complete reversal of the question of a Bill of Rights, this disguises the significant shift that did take place. Despite its own complaints (including no intention of the creation of a British Republic, a move to proportional representation or drafting a written constitution), *The Economist* felt able to claim, justifiably, in April 1990 that ‘the scale of constitutional change envisaged by Labour is still breathtaking’.[[433]](#footnote-434) Whatever personal misgivings he may have had, Hattersley was not wrong to claim in September 1991 that ‘we propose the most radical programme of constitutional reform that has been offered to the electorate this century’.[[434]](#footnote-435)

From its inception, Charter 88 and others who advocated constitutional reform had always realised its best hope was through influencing, cajoling, and working with the Labour Party. This was explicit in the coverage of the Charter’s creation, with Hugo Young stating the groups’ ‘real target… must be to convert the Labour Party to this kind of thinking’, to persuade Labour ‘that its best hope of becoming a party of government lies in attracting the votes of people outside its normal frame of reference’.[[435]](#footnote-436) ‘The Labour Party has a duty’, declared a piece in *The Guardian* in January 1989, ‘to make Democracy its programme and platform for the next general election’.[[436]](#footnote-437) Charter 88 organised a series of lectures during the 1992 election, with Shadow Trade and Industry Secretary Gordon Brown arguing in one that ‘the post-war settlement did not take account of government itself as a vested interest from which the citizen might need protection’.[[437]](#footnote-438) That it was able to attract high-profile figures from the Shadow Cabinet speaks volumes of the growth in its reputation and perceived importance.

The 1992 Labour manifesto was the first to lay out a coherent, comprehensive rationale for constitutional reform. In a section entitled ‘A Modern Democracy’, the manifesto declares that ‘it is time to modernise Britain’s democracy. Central to Labour’s purpose in government is our commitment to radical constitutional reform’.[[438]](#footnote-439) Detailing Labour’s commitment to establish a ‘Charter of Rights’, devolution for Scotland, Wales and London, an elected Second Chamber and a change to the electoral system, the manifesto declares that ‘Westminster must become more effective in protecting citizens and holding government to account’.[[439]](#footnote-440) Previewing the manifesto, the *Financial Times* stated that Labour’s manifesto ‘stresses a commitment to constitutional reform… its central theme is partnership between government, business and the citizen’.[[440]](#footnote-441) In the liberal press, there was some disquiet over Labour and particularly Neil Kinnock’s reticence in embracing the cause of proportional representation, with *The Economist* lamenting that Kinnock was ‘picking at it distastefully as though it were an over-spiced Indian curry’.[[441]](#footnote-442) The issue was raised almost entirely in the context of a widespread belief the result of the election would be a hung parliament, and some offer of electoral reform would be essential to secure the support of the Liberal Democrats: however, this talk merely highlighted previous divisions amongst the party leadership, with Hattersley telling the *Daily Mail* that ‘we are serious about constitutional reform, but the electoral system is too important to be decided in smoke-filled rooms or hurried back stair conversations’.[[442]](#footnote-443)

In the event, given Labour’s surprise loss to the Conservatives, this talk came to little, but nevertheless many in the party blamed its focus on constitutional issues as a factor in the defeat. Patrick Wintour, reporting in *The Guardian* on Neil Kinnock’s decision to step down after the loss, reported that ‘the last week emphasis on constitutional reform’ had been ‘playing to Mr Ashdown’s agenda, raising the fear of an unpopular hung parliament’.[[443]](#footnote-444) In September 1992, Labour MP Giles Radice wrote *Southern Discomfort* on behalf of the Fabian Society, a short pamphlet with the aim of analysing Labour’s continued poor performance in the South (and particularly South East) of England. Based around the polling of attitudes in 5 marginal South East constituencies, it provided valuable insight into the values and attitudes of Tory-voting ‘C1’ and ‘C2’ electors whose support would be crucial for a future Labour election victory. With regards to enthusiasm for constitutional reform, Radice concludes that these voters ‘show little interest or positive enthusiasm about action to protect their ‘rights’, and that ‘it is obvious that the Charter 88 Agenda has far more resonance in Hampstead or Cambridge than in Stevenage or Slough’.[[444]](#footnote-445) This was despite the attitudes of many of those canvassed, whose outlook towards politics and politicians was ‘usually sceptical’, with one voter complaining ‘they scream at each other in Parliament – and that’s our future they’re talking about’.[[445]](#footnote-446) Look, however, to the language which Radice turns in making his case for a modernised, ‘aspirational’ Labour Party: that ‘it must be the party of the individual citizen, which… speaks up for the individual against all vested interests’.[[446]](#footnote-447) Nevertheless, John Smith reaffirmed Labour’s commitment to constitutional reform in his pitch for the leadership just a week after the 1992 defeat, despite characterisation in the *Financial Times* that his plans were ‘cautious’.[[447]](#footnote-448) The following year, Smith was calling for “a fundamental shift in the balance of power between the citizen and state”, embodied in his party’s proposals for reform, arguing that ‘poor and unaccountable government [was] feeding a sense of a impotence among the public’.[[448]](#footnote-449)

Smith’s sudden death in 1994, and his replacement by Tony Blair, saw the party rebrand as New Labour, moving further to the political centre in a bid to attract former Conservative voters worried about the party’s radical former positions. Despite this, widespread constitutional reform remained part of Labour’s policy offer. The government Blair formed after the 1997 general election would go on to implement many of the reform policies advocated for by pressure groups and reform movements. It is remarkable that, despite knowledge that the issue was never likely to be a vote winner, and the reticence with which so many in the party approached the topic, that Labour adopted so much of the constitutional reform agenda. It is a clear demonstration of the influence that citizenship discourse and agitation had in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that the Labour Party believed it must respond to and reflect a cause that even *The Economist* conceded were a ‘minority interest’.[[449]](#footnote-450)

**The Conservatives: Tory Democracy and the Citizen’s Charter**

It was not just on the left, however, that the greater salience of citizenship in political rhetoric and debate was evident. It is true that calls from those on the right, such as Ferdinand Mount and the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), for constitutional reform had fallen on deaf ears in the upper echelons of the Conservative Party: the IEA had joined the calls for reform in 1991, arguing constitutional limits on government to intervene in business were essential for the future operation of the free market. ‘It is the first time one of the right-wing intellectual hothouses closely associated with Mrs Margaret Thatcher’s government has deviated from the Tory party’s argument that Britain’s slowly evolved political institutions still serve it well’, concluded a piece in the *Financial Times*.[[450]](#footnote-451) Nevertheless, the Conservative Party was not to adopt any measure of constitutional reform throughout the period discussed. However, the Conservatives were not immune to the growing discourse of citizenship. This section will explore how the language of citizenship, with a different emphasis from that of the left, became a route by which the Conservative Party attempted to carve out a new path for itself in the post-Thatcher world of the 1990s.

The first signs of this engagement can be seen in April 1988, a year after the Conservative election victory, with Home Secretary Douglas Hurd penning an article for the left-leaning *New Statesman* entitled ‘Citizenship in the Tory Democracy’, in which he lays out a conservative conception of citizenship and seeks to explain how government policy enables it. Hurd was responding to an editorial in the magazine two weeks previous which had accused him of ‘neo-feudalism’. ‘Underpinning our social policy’, Hurd writes, ‘are three traditions – the diffusion of power, civic obligation, and voluntary service – which are central to Conservative philosophy and rooted in British history’. Hurd details how, as he sees it, the Thatcher government has attempted to ‘shift power outwards’, giving examples of greater parental choice in education, neighbourhood watch schemes to combat local crime and the right of council tenants to purchase their properties as examples, as ‘the key to active and responsible citizenship’. Hurd directly addresses criticisms that ignited the reform movement in the first place, acknowledging that policies that had involved ‘taking power from local councils to the centre’ had only been ‘in order to prevent its abuse or atrophy’, and that ‘our approach is pragmatic, seeking to nurture effective forms of community organisation more local and more responsive to particular circumstance than local councils’. Hurd’s argument is rooted in the notion that citizenship is something that must be taken up by individuals and communities, stating that ‘governments can no more easily create good citizens than could Dr Frankenstein create a human being’. ‘This is not “neo-feudalism”’, Hurd declares, ‘but Tory democracy’, with the wider spread of property and share ownership inculcating an independence and responsibility essential for this notion of the good citizenship.[[451]](#footnote-452)

What this piece also gives indication of is how the left of the Conservative Party, who had led the internal charge against Mrs Thatcher’s economic policies at the beginning of the decade and had been branded as ‘wets’ as a consequence, were starting to reformulate their message. Hurd, who represented this strand of the party despite serving in high office in Mrs Thatcher’s cabinet, is accommodating his brand of conservatism to, as he puts it, ‘the motor of wealth creation’, accepting the Thatcherite economic reforms but formulating them in a way that makes them acceptable to the One Nation tradition of his party. ‘A social policy founded upon ideals of responsible and active citizenship’, he writes, ‘is compatible with free market economic policies.’ In 1990, Hurd was one of the candidates to replace Mrs Thatcher, and subsequently served his winning opponent John Major as a close confidante, with Major being much more in tune with Hurd’s type of conservatism than Mrs Thatcher had anticipated.[[452]](#footnote-453)

The fullest expression of many of these notions, and the clearest Tory contribution to citizenship discourse, be seen in the Citizen’s Charter initiative, launched in July 1991 by John Major as a centrepiece of his new government, ‘to steal the clothes of Charter 88 to offer something very different’.[[453]](#footnote-454) Its focus was to improve public services, emphasising accountability, choice and standards. As Major himself put it, it was ‘to make sure that people, when they’re dealing with public services, are treated as individuals and offered the quality of service, and individual service to which I believe they’re entitled’.[[454]](#footnote-455) Envisaged as a ten-year programme of rolling reform, there was never a single Charter, but a series of charters published regularly and concerning specific areas. By the end of 1993, forty had been published, concerning a wide range of areas including charters for taxpayers, employers, hospital patients, railway passengers, council tenants and users of the Benefits and Child Support agencies, to name a few.[[455]](#footnote-456) Public services deemed to have provided an outstanding level of service would be awarded ‘Charter Marks’ at annual award ceremonies, described by Major as ‘a significant achievement’, who argued at the 1993 Charter Mark Awards that the recipients demonstrated ‘waiting times down, response times quicker, customer satisfaction up, standards raised.’[[456]](#footnote-457) An advertisement placed in *The Times* in October 1994 highlighted the Ordnance Survey as a Charter Mark winner, and encouraging readers to look out for ‘a service in your area that’s gone out of its way for you’ as possible 1994 winners.[[457]](#footnote-458)

Previewing the launch of the Charter in June 1991, Martin Jacques of *The Times* reflected that ‘the very title is indicative of the enormous change in the terms of political debate since the heyday of Mrs Thatcher in the late Eighties.’ ‘The word “citizen”’, observed Jacques, ‘suggests rights, equality, and society, a far cry from the previously favoured double-act: consumer and market. And the word “charter” suggests the enshrinement of popular rights and the obligations of government’.[[458]](#footnote-459) Jacques goes on to the list the ways in which, in his view, the charter represented a break with Thatcherism, such as the notion that consumers have responsibilities as well as rights, an acceptance ‘that the public services should remain public’, correcting market-driven inequalities, and, most significantly, ‘a new desire to guarantee in written form individual rights with regard to the state’, with Jacques namechecking Charter 88 alongside the Citizen’s Charter as expressions of this desire. Edmund Neill has written of how many on the Right by the 1990s were unsatisfied with the Thatcherite conception of citizenship, with the market-led reforms of the previous decade not having ‘automatically led to revivified civil society, and a more robustly self-reliant set of citizens, but instead led to rampant individualism and damaged civil society institutions.’[[459]](#footnote-460) This belief, previously semi-articulated by Hurd as far back as 1988, was definitely shared by John Major. In March 1991, Ronald Butt of *The Times* had argued that ‘[Major’s] emphasis on social concern, and his idea of a “citizen’s charter” to enforce delivery of quality in public services, are not merely a response to public opinion’.[[460]](#footnote-461) In February 1992, Major declared his desire to build ‘a nation at ease with itself’, and when questioned about this, the Prime Minister talked of people’s rights to self-respect, dignity, good service, with ‘much of it is reflected in what we’re trying to do in the Citizen’s Charter’.[[461]](#footnote-462)

At the time of the launch of the initiative in July 1991, *The Times* reported that ‘ministers admitted last night that the charter would raise expectations that would be hard to fulfil’.[[462]](#footnote-463) In essence, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this is precisely what happened: given a lack of allocated funding, and a sometimes confused idea among ministers as to what precisely it aimed to deliver, the Charter came to be widely viewed as a project of tinkering, and focused on trivia and minutiae. In an editorial entitled ‘Flirting with Platitudes’, *The Times* observed Major was ‘having trouble putting flesh on the bones of his pet project, the Citizen’s Charter’, before it was even officially launched.[[463]](#footnote-464) On 27 June 1991, it was reported that the government were ‘examining a plan for up to a million public servants to wear name badges, to make them more responsive to customers and give them greater pride in their work’.[[464]](#footnote-465) This was precisely the sort of policy which came to define public perception of the charter, with grand rhetoric being used to front policies which were almost comically small in comparison. A retrospective in 1999 damned it as being ‘too low-level and mechanistic an approach… easily caricatured as a preoccupation with trivia’.[[465]](#footnote-466) The infamous ‘cones hotline’ was perhaps the nadir of this, being a phoneline introduced by the Department for Transport in 1992 to allow road users to report incidents of ‘wayward motorway cones’ and was wound down in 1995 after much public mockery. It was not the only phoneline to receive negative press. When a trial helpline dedicated to the Citizen’s Charter launched in the East Midlands in May 1993, by the following March ‘the 25 calls made every day to the Citizen’s Charter telephone helpline cost the taxpayer £68 each’, with plans for its extension nationwide being scrapped in May of 1994.[[466]](#footnote-467)

In introducing the notion of targets and standards into public services, the Citizen’s Charter did anticipate an approach that would be substantially increased and enhanced by the New Labour administration of Tony Blair. A 1995 report argued that the Charter had ‘led to a record level of complaints to ombudsmen and advice agencies’ by the public with regards to the state of public services.[[467]](#footnote-468) In addition, as Davina Cooper argued at the time, there was a paradoxical element to the Charter, ‘which aims to entrench the principles of private provision and the market’ yet ‘at the same time affirms the centrality of the welfare state to a notion of citizenship’.[[468]](#footnote-469) With regards to the public perception, a *Times* editorial of June 1992 asked the question that would most determine the fate of the initiative: ‘can the Citizen’s Charter delivery substantially better services or is it a veneer to disguise the cracks in public service that are due to underinvestment?’[[469]](#footnote-470) The election in 1997 of a Labour government that would, in time, vastly increase funding for public services seems to suggest that in this regard it was wholly unsuccessful. ‘The Citizen’s Charter is a bit of a joke’, confided one anonymous Tory MP to a journalist in 1996, ‘it doesn’t give people any legal powers – just higher expectations and the power to whinge.’[[470]](#footnote-471)

Despite the rhetoric of the Citizen’s Charter, the Conservatives, as Labour had, felt they had to respond to the constitutional reform movement, Interestingly, a report in December 1990 noted that the Liberal Democrats were planning to ‘[hold] back attacks on the Tory leader until he has spelt out his views on constitutional reform’.[[471]](#footnote-472) They were to be disappointed, however, as Mr Major’s Conservative Party proved itself to be just as opposed to constitutional reform as Mrs Thatcher’s had been, however, they were to proclaim their opposition much more loudly than had previously been the case. The interventions of John Patten were the most significant in this. Patten, as Minister of State for Home Affairs and then Education Secretary, made a number of interventions in the debate clearly stating the Tory opposition to constitutional reform. In 1989, Patten had described Labour proposals for regional assemblies, an elected second chamber and state funding for political parties as a ‘gerrymanderer’s charter’, with a *Guardian* report stating that ‘ministers are apparently offended that Mr Neil Kinnock’s reforms, designed to create an electable Labour Party, have won wider public and media favour than they feel they deserve’. [[472]](#footnote-473) A report in *The Economist* in 1991 previewed a speech on the subject of constitutional reform by Patten, ‘the first speech about constitutional reform from a member of the government since Mrs Thatcher came to power’.[[473]](#footnote-474) In the speech, Patten set out the Conservative approach to reform, ‘designed to remedy proven abuses, in preference to wholesale reform’, with such ‘rolling constitutional change’, argued Patten, ‘is a more certain recipe for a relaxed democracy than the tumult of speculative and revolutionary constitutional upheaval’.[[474]](#footnote-475) Despite attacking every proposal for reform advocated by Charter 88 and the opposition parties, it was true that, as *The Economist* put it, ‘the mere fact a Tory minister will publicly pose constitutional questions is significant’.[[475]](#footnote-476) In a September 1990 article entitled ‘Potty plans of the puny parties’, George Gale articulated the attitude of many on the right to the left’s embrace of constitutional reform, arguing that a proportional voting system ‘could [be] foisted upon us. Paddy Ashdown and his party propose to wheel and deal to bring in a system designed only for wheelers and dealers, while bleating about democracy and constitutional reform. What a bunch!’[[476]](#footnote-477)

As with Labour, the rhetoric of citizenship crept into the Conservative manifesto: the 1992 manifesto contained twenty-four references to the citizen, as opposed to seven in the previous manifesto of 1987. ‘Government should look outwards’, the manifesto declared, ‘it should listen. It should put you in the know not keep you in the dark. We have made quite a start, under the seal of the Citizen’s Charter’.[[477]](#footnote-478) Describing the Citizen’s Charter as ‘the most far-reaching programme ever devised to improve quality in public services’, it runs through the usual ways the initiative was framed: promoting choice, putting the ‘customer’ first, setting standards, introducing clear complaint procedures.[[478]](#footnote-479) References to citizens are scattered throughout the manifesto, however, beyond the remit of the Charter, including in a pledge to raise the threshold of Inheritance Tax, the need for wider deregulation, the usual language around law and order, and discussion around social care and the voluntary sector.[[479]](#footnote-480)

Conservative attacks on Labour’s plans for constitutional reform continued until the election that followed, in 1997. John Major in 1994 decried new Labour leader Tony Blair’s reaffirming of support for constitutional reform as a ‘type of teenage madness’, adding that ‘you can’t shake our constitution around as if it were a cocktail at an Islington dinner party’, a clear dig at the area of London where Blair and many of the other New Labour modernisers were situated.[[480]](#footnote-481) Nevertheless, it is clear that from Hurd’s 1988 intervention, senior Conservatives were willing to embrace and marshal the concept of citizenship for their own political ends, to provide a distinctive Tory approach for the post-Thatcher 1990s. In August 1994, despite the many travails with which the government found itself entangled, Home Secretary Michael Howard found time to write on the topic of Conservative citizenship for publication, much as Hurd had six years earlier, again responding to accusations that Conservative policy since 1979 had favoured individual entitlement over social cohesion and citizenship. Howard first attacks Labour for seeing ‘duty primarily in terms of what the State owes to its dependants, not that which the citizen owes to himself, his fellows and the civic order’, whereas ‘Conservatives have always emphasised the crucial role of the individual citizen and the fundamental importance of individual responsibility… the obligations of citizenship flow naturally from Conservative principles’. Significantly, Howard accepts that market forces ‘clearly do have their limits’, but that since Conservative policy had been to reduce the scope and activities of the State, ‘the role of voluntary collective action as an alternative to compulsion and taxation by the State will grow in significance’. He concludes by citing the growth of Neighbourhood Watch schemes (‘now 130,000 across the country, covering 5 million households’) as examples of this Tory active citizenship, proclaiming that ‘our civic bonds are strong and strengthening. The Government will continue to succour them.’[[481]](#footnote-482) It is a perfect illustration of how, by the end of the period of this thesis, the Right as well as the Left had come to embrace the rhetoric of citizenship.

**Conclusion**

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a flourishing in public debate and discourse centred around the notion of citizenship, largely in response to the specific and unique context which Britain found itself after a decade of Thatcher government. Now that the big questions which propelled the Tories to office in 1979 – about economic management, union power, tax and spend – seemed to have been answered, it created room in the public discourse for questions of an entirely different political conception to be asked. Given how much of the historiography stresses the continuities between Mrs Thatcher’s administrations and those that followed, both Labour and Conservative, the flowering of citizenship discourse marks an important and under-appreciated break: as Martin Jacques put it in *The Times* in 1991, ‘the priorities and platitudes of Thatcherism have evaporated like winter snow in hot spring weather… the Zeitgeist has changed’.[[482]](#footnote-483) The Speaker’s Commission on Citizenship and the push for citizenship education illustrate a widely-held belief within a certain section of society that something *had* to be done. While the Commission was easily (and probably fairly) dismissed as ‘bringing together the great and the good in a harmonious statement of unexceptionable platitudes, England at its woolliest and intellectually unrigorous’, supposed unexceptionable platitudes are often indicative of a crystallised, settled view.

As this chapter has argued, citizenship debates on the Left found their fullest expression in the movement for constitutional reform, such as Charter 88, with a feeling that the Thatcher governments had exposed and, in some cases, created defects in the British political system that required urgent and often wholesale repair. ‘It is not hard to see that today’s vigorous talk of constitutional and electoral reform has been provoked by the Conservative Government’s three successive election victories’, noted *The Guardian* in 1988, ‘and by dismay on the Left at the prospect at its impotence at preventing a fourth and even a fifth Thatcher win’.[[483]](#footnote-484) A piece in *The Economist* in 1991 argued that another reason for the growing interest of many on the left with constitutional reform was due to Neil Kinnock’s purge of the Militant tendency and other hard left groups from Labour in the mid-1980s. His ‘iron rule’, argued the piece, made ‘political theory unfashionable among ambitious Labour MPs’, with local constituency parties enthused ‘about green issues, or anti-racism, or constitutional reform’, rather than ‘an irreversible shift of power and wealth’.[[484]](#footnote-485) Many of the groups and advocates for constitutional reform were high minded, intellectual, and often had a completely incoherent view on the level of success with which their agenda was attaining. Indeed, a paradox throughout the press coverage in publications friendly to the cause of constitutional reform is they often simultaneously proclaim how the issue has risen to the top of political discourse, yet at the same time lament its lack of traction with the public. In May 1992, an editorial in *The Economist* praised Charter 88 as having ‘brought debate about Britain’s ruling institutions to a new level, and a new audience’.[[485]](#footnote-486) Just a month earlier, however, the *Financial Times* lamented of their cherished desire for reform that ‘sadly – and despite the best endeavours of Charter 88 – these issues have not had the airing they deserve’.[[486]](#footnote-487) In a sense, they are both right: it is undoubtedly the case, as this chapter has aimed to prove, that issues of constitutional reform did rise considerably within political discourse in this period, driven by the greater salience and prominence of citizenship and citizens’ rights. This is not contradicted by the fact that Charter 88, and the wider reform movement was, as Hugo Young put it back in 1988, ‘a collective of the concerned from middle-minded Britain’.[[487]](#footnote-488)

As described above, the Labour Party came to a position where it felt it had to respond to the movement for constitutional reform and came to adopt much of its agenda by the time of the 1992 general election, even if it was not enough for the most die-hard adherents to the cause. The Labour government elected in 1997 would prove to be the most constitutionally radical ever elected in Britain. Labour was well aware that there were few votes to be gained after 1992 in stressing the topic. During John Smith’s tenure as leader, *The Guardian* reported that ‘even on constitutional reform, where Labour has ostensibly moved four-square behind the positions long held by the Lib Dems, conversation is forbidden’.[[488]](#footnote-489) Nevertheless, the reform agenda remained, described in 1995 by Andrew Marr as ‘the accumulated political frustration and depression of the left, the bar-room and dinner-table conversations of years, piled up into pre-legislative form and ready for blast off’.[[489]](#footnote-490) The post-1997 Labour government would go on to strip the House of Lords of most of its hereditary peers, abolish the judicial functions of the Lords and replace them with a Supreme Court, introduce devolution for Scotland, Wales and Greater London, introduce Freedom of Information legislation and incorporate the European Convention of Human Rights into British law. While Charter 88 never achieved its cherished written constitution or proportional representation, and its successors came to vehemently oppose the Blair government’s attitude to civil liberties, it did have significant influence in helping to achieving the reforms that were eventually enacted. In the words Alwyn W. Turner, Charter 88 ‘lit a slow-burning fuse. Ignored by the government at the time, it nonetheless did much to set an agenda on the left, its warnings about slipping into an elected dictatorship only heighted by the talk of a one-party state that followed the 1992 election.’[[490]](#footnote-491) The Conservatives did remain steadfast in their opposition to radical constitutional change, they nevertheless also grappled with the language of the citizen, much of it ‘a coded re-statement of old Tory consensus values as a defence to the charge that Mrs Thatcher’s philosophy was causing a breakdown in social cohesion’, as Melanie Phillips argued.[[491]](#footnote-492) It was not only used to explain their long period in office, but also to articulate a different emphasis in the 1990s, with the removal of Mrs Thatcher necessitating a different style: the Citizen’s Charter initiative probably represents the clearest area of difference between Mrs Thatcher and her successor, John Major, who struggled to strike out a new direction while being seen to remain faithful to the Iron Lady’s revered legacy.

The results of the *British Social Attitudes Survey* (BSA), published annually since 1983, can shed some light on how the mass of the British people themselves responded to this focus on citizenship. When asked how they would respond to a law they considered ‘really unjust and harmful’, over the latter half of the 1980s, there was a clear increase among respondents towards greater participation: between 1983 and 1989, the number stating they would contact their MP rose from 45.9 per cent to 54.2 per cent, that they would sign a petition, from 54.3 per cent to 70.5 per cent, and those that would do nothing declining from 12.4 per cent to 7.8 per cent.[[492]](#footnote-493) What is fascinating about this particular data set is that for the other, more direct forms of involvement, extremely large majorities state they would *not* do them, such as attending a protest or demonstration, forming a group of like-minded people or contacting a relevant government department, but that the small minority that say they *would* increases on all counts across the time period: from 7.6 per cent to 14 per cent for attending a protest, from 6.1 per cent to 9.6 per cent in forming a group of like-minded people, and from 7 per cent to 12.3 per cent in contacting a government department. By 1989, it may have been the case that the vast majority of the British people would simply not be prepared to do the work that ‘active’ and ‘engaged’ citizenship would require, but that small minority who would were slowly on the increase. In 1989, those who responded that the government had ‘far too much power’ had risen to 23.8 per cent, from 16.6 per cent in 1983, yet a plurality of respondents (37.1 per cent) though it had ‘about the right amount’.[[493]](#footnote-494)

Above all else, this chapter has aimed to stress that the degree of nebulousness with which citizenship could be interpreted is crucial to understanding how it came to be embodied in so many different permutations throughout the period, be that the push for citizenship education, constitutional reform or more ‘active’ and responsible citizens. Writing in *The Guardian* in 1990, Melanie Phillips came the closest of any contemporary author to recognising this, asking in her usual disgruntled manner,‘what is this citizenship that everyone keeps talking about? As a vogue, it is irritatingly vague. Does it actually mean anything or is it no more than an abstract debating topic for the chattering classes?’[[494]](#footnote-495) Perhaps it was largely the latter, but that does not mean it did not have considerable influence in reshaping political culture in this period, as this chapter has aimed to illustrate.

**3. Scandal Culture**

*‘If you don’t want to appear in the papers, then don’t drop your trousers… it’s as simple as that.’*[[495]](#footnote-496)

What makes a scandal in politics? A leading scholar of the political scandal, John B. Thompson, writing at the dawn of the twenty-first century, reflected that the scandal had become ‘an occupational hazard of life in the public domain’.[[496]](#footnote-497) Absolutely central is the idea of a transgression: that a politician has acted in a way that invites scandal, shock, outrage, that there has been a ‘violation of due process’.[[497]](#footnote-498) Two particular aspects of this definition merit further examination and make the political scandal distinctive. Firstly, the nature of the transgression that makes an event a scandal can be multifaceted: it could be something illegal, by which a politician has broken the law and, in theory, is liable for prosecution. This could include any number of criminal offences, though in the political world they tend towards the actions of fraud, money laundering and other forms of criminalised corruption. On the other hand, the scandal might fall within a less well-defined field, not being criminal but generally considered unacceptable ethically or morally. Examples could include sexual misconduct, such as a married politician conducting an affair, or covert homosexual activities when the politician is still ‘in the closet’, perceived bad behaviour towards or mistreatment of others, or using their position to benefit themselves in a way that, while not illegal, is not especially beneficial to their reputation. This is a crucial distinction, as how the scandal is reported and concluded can depend on the distinction of legality. Secondly, is that very notion that it is a *scandal*: the very terminology is suggestive of the fact it is supposed to invite shock and outrage among the wider populace. As Sanders and Canel have put it, political scandal reporting is the ‘journalism of outrage’.[[498]](#footnote-499) Rules and norms have been transgressed, whether legal or moral, perhaps hypocrisies exposed, and a consensus exists that deems them unacceptable. In addition, a degree of concealment or secrecy may be involved, further adding to the assumption that it is imperative for the transgression to be uncovered.[[499]](#footnote-500) As such, they receive wide publicity, with details discussed and disseminated widely among the general public. Political scientists Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein have conceptualised the political scandal as when there is an overlap and clash between the ‘logic of power’, which is ‘privatizing [sic], secretive, exclusive’, and the ‘logic of due process’ which is ‘public-orientated, open, inclusive’.[[500]](#footnote-501)

How are historians to interpret the increased salience of political scandals in the latter decades of the twentieth century? Thompson has advocated three theories which seek to answer this question. The first of these is that the political scandal represents an overall decline in the moral health of political elites, or in fact an entire nation, with a story of a fall from a more noble time in the conduct of political affairs. The second focuses on the media side of the equation: that for the producers of news and current affairs commentary, the scandal is a lucrative resource for the production of their content. The third explanatory route, which Thompson himself finds the most persuasive, stresses the importance and centrality of reputation to the modern politician, reflective of ‘a world where visibility has been transformed by the media and where power and reputation go hand in hand. Scandal matters because, in our modern meditated world, it touches on real sources of power’.[[501]](#footnote-502) The first-outlined reason given for the power of the scandal, that it is reflective of a declining moral framework, is a favourite of those who cover and commentate on political scandals. It is however a futile avenue of inquiry for the historian to attempt to prove in any meaningful way, as moral standards are always so temporally specific and contingent on any number of other factors. The power of a changing media landscape, however, particularly in the popular press, should not be ignored, and this chapter will demonstrate some of the critical changes in the tabloid press in Britain in the long 1980s which are critical to the changing nature of the political scandal. Nevertheless, Thompson’s emphasis on reputation is perceptive and significant, and bears further explanation.

For Thompson, reputation can be divided into two subsets, ‘skill-specific reputation’, being known and appreciated for possessing certain qualities of talent in specific demonstrative skills, and ‘character reputation’, which ‘one acquires for being a reliable and trustworthy individual, a person of probity and integrity.’[[502]](#footnote-503) Whereas the former type of reputation is much more easily observed and noted, the latter is more nebulous: as Thompson notes, ‘you do not have to display any specific skills in order to acquire a reputation for good character, but you do have to display a pattern of behaviour over time which others can judge to be worthy of their esteem’.[[503]](#footnote-504) The centrality of reputation to the politician is obvious when one considers the very nature of political affairs. To succeed in politics is dependent on a politician’s ability to build relationships and coalitions of interest or ideology, to deploy rhetoric in order to mobilise supporters and the electorate, to be given the consent to assume the vast scope of power possessed by a modern executive branch of government. Reputation thus acts as a resource from which politicians can draw upon in the furtherance of these goals, and, as Thompson describes, ‘unlike money or other types of economic capital, reputation is a resource which is not depleted through use’.[[504]](#footnote-505) A successful politician can continually draw upon a ‘good’ reputation, be that a reputation for integrity and moral probity, a reputation for being principled or a reputation as a successful administrator. Political scandals thus undermine, sometimes fatally, a resource from which it is absolutely essential for a politician to be able to draw. The degree of the damage done, and the ability to successfully rehabilitate one’s politician reputation, are determined critically by the perceived level of the transgression committed.

Studying the political scandal can prove a fascinating insight into the political culture of the society in question, and as such can be a valuable resource for the historian, as the scandal is ‘an important social phenomenon which can have serious consequences’ for both individuals and for institutions.[[505]](#footnote-506) As mentioned above, many examples of the political scandal are ones in which a moral or ethical standard appears to have been broken, and as such, they can be profoundly revealing about the norms, expectations and ethical standards that are widely held by the mass of the populace at any particular time. These can be focused particularly on the political class, demonstrating the standards to which it is believed politicians must be held, and to see if this contrasts with other prominent figures in society. As Anthony King argued in 1986, ‘so useful… do political scandals turn out to be as a means of exploring different countries’ political values and institutions that the study of them really deserves to be become a recognised academic subfield’.[[506]](#footnote-507) Political scandals can also be paradoxical in what they say about a political system. On the one hand, the widespread existence of corruption, for example, could demonstrate a political system that has broken down, and is not functioning as might be expected. And yet, the fact an event in politics could be viewed as scandalous implies widespread dissatisfaction and opposition, and actually provide evidence of the robust nature of liberal democracies. As David R. Dewberry has put it, ‘the presence of a scandal reveals that people in the government are up to no good. However, the system has worked. The wrongdoing has been revealed and addressed’.[[507]](#footnote-508)

Michael Johnston has written about the centrality of ideas of right and wrong to the conduct of British politics, most notably in an article published in 1991. Quoting Macaulay’s ‘well-known lament’ about the hypocrisies of “fits of morality”, Johnston nevertheless recognises that ‘politics revolves around not only material interests, but also questions of propriety’.[[508]](#footnote-509) Johnston conceptualises such questions as especially pertinent for Britain: ‘not only have its unwritten constitution and tradition of moderation made it a prime focus for analysts of political culture, but unlike the United States it has relied historically more upon social sanctions, notions of “character” and “etiquette” than upon written codes to regulate behaviour’.[[509]](#footnote-510) Johnston’s findings show ‘a substantial “grey area” in which judgements of right and wrong draw upon pragmatic everyday norms and a strong but conditional political trust’.[[510]](#footnote-511) In other words, Johnston argues that there is a normative concept of wrongdoing centred around cultural definitions rather than legal ones, with the public expecting certain codes of behaviour and morality in political life but with a capacity for nuance and understanding. His research, Johnston argues, ‘cast doubt upon the image of an uncritically deferential British public… respondents show little reluctance to pass judgement upon prominent figures in public and private life’.[[511]](#footnote-512)

This can and should be placed in the wider literature on public trust in politicians and what voters expect of their political masters. In his 2007 work *Why We Hate Politics*, Colin Hay shows, for many voters, ‘how low our expectations of (formal) politics’ is, and ‘how frequently, nonetheless, politics still fails to live up to those expectations’.[[512]](#footnote-513) When Hay describes how many have come to view politics, it is hard not to see the corrosive effect of successive political scandals over decades:

*‘Politics is synonymous with sleaze, corruption and duplicity, greed, self-interest and self-importance, interference, inefficiency and intransigence. It is, at best, a necessary evil, at worst an entirely malevolent force that needs to be kept in check’*.[[513]](#footnote-514)

Hay does not explicitly discuss political scandals, but his insights on political dissatisfaction at his time of writing are insightful, as well as his explicit statement that ‘politics is a social activity, and like most social activities, it works best in situations of co-operation and trust’.[[514]](#footnote-515) This cuts to the core of why the political scandal has the potential to be so corrosive for public trust in, and engagement with, politics: it seems to break an unspoken expectation of trust between voter and politician. These themes are explored further in Nick Clarke, Will Jennings, Jonathan Moss and Gerry Stoker’s *The Good Politician* (2018), with their concept of ‘anti-politics’ being ‘citizens’ negative sentiment towards the activities and institutions of formal politics’, beyond ‘healthy scepticism’.[[515]](#footnote-516) The authors’ greatest insight is in discussing how the normative public view of what constituted the ‘good politician’ changed over the twentieth century: while the expectation of politicians to be ‘trustworthy’, ‘able’ and ‘level-headed’ has remained constant, more recent generations have added new demands of being ‘normal’ (‘in their look, voice and behaviour, and in a variety of situations’) and ‘in touch’ with the reality of daily life for the average voter.[[516]](#footnote-517) There is a tension, however, in the authors’ argument which a focus on the political scandal such as this chapter provides helps to expose. Logically, if voters placed such a high premium on politicians being ‘normal’, having the same weaknesses, temptations and foibles that many voters have, then we might have seen that the salience of political scandals involving sex and morality questions will have decreased. As the examples below illustrate, the opposite turns out to be the case, suggesting there is a gulf between what the public say they want in politics, and what they respond to.

Political scandals have, of course, been an occurrence throughout the entire existence of human government, and Britain is no different. As Anna Clark has illustrated in *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (2004), sexual scandals plagued the politics of the Georgian period, reflective of a society in which ‘sexual morality was confused and changing’.[[517]](#footnote-518) Examples of the twentieth century, before the period in question, include the Marconi scandal of 1912, which revealed many ministers of the Liberal government were involved in insider trading, the honours scandal of 1922, when it emerged Prime Minister David Lloyd George (previously involved in Marconi) had been selling peerages for large donations to his personal election fund, and the Lynskey tribunal of 1948, established to report on allegations of corruption at the Board of Trade.[[518]](#footnote-519) The Suez Crisis of 1956, which witnessed the government of Anthony Eden collude with the French and Israelis to re-establish control of the Suez Canal from the Arab nationalist government of Egypt led by Colonel Nasser, was scandalous in that Eden was proved to have lied to the House of Commons about his knowledge of these matters. What these all twentieth-century examples have in common as transgressions is they are concerned with the corrupt use of power as a government, be that to benefit members financially or to collude in a morally dubious foreign policy. Perhaps the most infamous political scandal of the postwar period was the Profumo Affair of 1963, in which it was revealed that the Secretary of State for War John Profumo had been engaged in a sexual liaison with Christine Keeler, who was also involved with a naval attaché to the Soviet Embassy in London. The security implications, in addition to his lying to the House of Commons about the nature of his relationship with Miss Keeler, sealed his fate.

Implicit in all the discussion around the political scandal is the need for a free press with a wide circulation to be able to expose and amplify the scandal: countries with authoritarian or totalitarian regimes have mechanics to suppress unflattering details which makes the political scandal a much more common feature of liberal democracies. British newspapers are a field with an extensive historiography. The mass-market paper, or ‘tabloid’, had been pioneered in Britain, and by the early 1950s, 85 per cent of the population came into contact with a paper every day, and ‘the British public consumed more newspapers per head than any other nation’.[[519]](#footnote-520) While mass market papers had emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the *Daily Mirror* (which by the middle of the century had become the best-selling newspaper in Britain), it was with Rupert Murdoch’s acquisition and reinvention of *The Sun* in 1969 ‘that a wave of tabloidisation occurred’, with a focus on ‘punchy, digested journalism’, for readers who did not have the time nor the inclination to wade through reams of prose, nor grapple with the unwieldy size of broadsheets like *The Times*.[[520]](#footnote-521) The rise of *The Sun* was rapid, breaking a million daily copies within a year. By autumn 1974 daily sales had reached 3.5 million, officially becoming Britain’s top-selling newspaper in 1978, the same year *The Daily Star* launched. According to Bingham and Conboy, ‘The *Star* aped the *Sun* as blatantly as the *Sun* had copied the *Mirror* nine years earlier’.[[521]](#footnote-522) It is impossible to consider the political scandal without considering the tabloid newspaper in this period, for it more than any other media pioneered and shaped the coverage of the political scandal in this period. The slew of changes that occurred throughout the business from the 1970s through to the 1990s are crucial to understanding the political scandal and necessitate closer examination here.

As previously mentioned, the relaunch of *The Sun* in 1969 and the launch of the *Daily Star* just under a decade later were indicative of the intension competition for rivals between the different newspapers. As Jeremy Tunstall has illustrated, ten new newspapers were launched between 1986 and 1990 alone, ranging from upmarket broadsheets like *The Independent* (1986) and the *Sunday Correspondent* (1989), midmarket tabloids such as *Today* (1986), *London Daily News* (1987), and the left-wing *News on Sunday* (1987), to more downmarket publications such as the *Sunday Sport* (1986) which Tunstall describes as combining sport and softcore pornography.[[522]](#footnote-523) The structure of the newspapers themselves were changing throughout the period, too, and Rupert Murdoch – owner of *The Sun*, as well as *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* – played a considerable part in accelerating this change. With the growth of new computer technology, a newspaper industry became conceivable that was not as dependent on the print unions, who still wielded considerable power in the first half of the 1980s, led by the National Graphical Association (NGA), who ‘preferred to enjoy the high pay and low hours for as long as possible’, derived from the particular set of skills which typesetters possessed. In 1985, both *Today* and *The Independent* decided to launch away from Fleet Street, the London street that had such a long history as the centre of British national newspapers that its name had long since become synonymous with the industry, and one where the print unions still held considerable power. This was to change quickly in 1986, however, with what Tunstall calls ‘The British Newspaper Revolution’, as in January 1986, after 80 per cent of union workers voted to strike, Murdoch dramatically shifted production to a long-in-development plant at Wapping, using new laws on secondary picketing to sack all of the workers on strike.[[523]](#footnote-524) Murdoch’s close relationship was Mrs Thatcher was to prove useful in this, too. While not directly involving herself, the Prime Minister did promise a sufficient number of police would be available to support the move.[[524]](#footnote-525) The move cut the costs of production considerably and increased profits, but moving into the 1990s newspapers were still in fierce competition with each other: the 1993-95 period was one of severe price cutting, retrospectively known as the ‘price wars’, with *The Sun* reducing its retail price from 25p to 20p, at a time when, according to Tunstall, ‘television and radio were both expanding aggressively in a down market direction’.[[525]](#footnote-526)

In addition, newspapers had to contend with and respond to the rapid rise of television, as examined in Chapter 1, with televised news bulletins having the potential to rob newspapers of one of their primary functions, to inform, with television able to spread its message much quicker and further than had the press. Papers like *The Sun* came to rely on television as a bountiful resource from which to gain stories, focusing on soap opera storylines, human interest stories involving famous television stars, in addition to printing regular television schedules. Jeremy Tunstall has summed up the attitude as ‘you’ve seen the programme/soap episode/comedy show, so now listen to the gossip, and scandal behind the scenes’.[[526]](#footnote-527) Examining the relationship of the popular press to television reveals in actuality what had always been its function with regards to politics: while television might provide factual information about current affairs, newspaper coverage sought to frame that information, being ‘a more subtle process of framing issues in particular ways, helping to set the agenda for public and private discussion, and enabling certain types of people and institutions to dominate discussion, while marginalising others’.[[527]](#footnote-528) In setting the agenda, such as investigating, exposing and giving prominence to a political scandal within its coverage, television often then amplified scandal stories by reporting on them as well.

*The Sun* spearheaded a new populist tone in its political coverage in the 1980s, becoming one of the biggest cheerleaders for Mrs Thatcher’s government and pioneering a brand of ‘brash conservative populism, capitalist cheerleading, glitzy consumerism and self-confident moralising’.[[528]](#footnote-529) The figure of Kelvin MacKenzie, editor from 1981 to 1994, was absolutely central to this. James Thomas, drawing a contrast with his predecessor Larry Lamb, has argued that ‘whereas Lamb’s *Sun* was cheeky and had an element of restraint and balance, MacKenzie’s paper, like its editor, was downright offensive at times in politics as in much else’, blurring ‘the already murky distinctions between news, views and entertainment to an extent greater than ever before’.[[529]](#footnote-530) Just a year into his editorship, the advent of the Falklands War allowed MacKenzie to demonstrate the patriotic populism which would define his tenure, with the sinking of the Argentine vessel the Belgrano reported under the infamous single-word, front-page headline: ‘GOTCHA: Our lads sink gunboat and hole cruiser’, with the paper’s attitude towards peace proposals being to ‘STICK IT UP YOUR JUNTA’.[[530]](#footnote-531) These headlines have gained such notoriety that it is impossible to read any account of the conflict without them being featured, as they do clearly illustrate the culture of unashamed, unabashed patriotic populism that *The Sun* helped inculcate in the 1980s, along with the irreverent humour that was deemed applicable to any situation. Indeed, using war reporting to make flippant puns (rhyming ‘junta’ with ‘punter’) broke a taboo of acceptability that made *The Sun* anathema to so many, and parodied by Private Eye as ‘Kill an Argie, Win a Metro’, a reference to the paper’s propensity for competitions and giveaways.[[531]](#footnote-532) MacKenzie became notorious ‘for his habit of frequent ‘bollockings’ of his journalists’, which Jeremy Tunstall has described as ‘loud and obscenity-laden public denunciations of individuals which even in most manual occupations were a thing of the past by the 1980s’.[[532]](#footnote-533)

Two further elements of MacKenzie’s editorship of *The Sun* bear further examination here. The first is the degree to which the paper willingly sought controversy and scandal. Stories would often be produced on the flimsiest of evidence, heading to headlines like the notorious ‘Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster’. Its coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, entitled ‘The Truth’, was widely condemned, reporting inaccurate and untruthful claims from a local Conservative MP about the behaviour of Liverpool fans during and immediately after the tragedy, including pickpocketing of the dead and urinating on corpses. This was just a year after the paper had been successfully sued for libel by Elton John over reports of animal cruelty, having to pay out £1 million in compensation. It says much about the approach of the paper that under MacKenzie it had a dedicated damages fund to pay off those who brought libel claims against its reporting. The second significant element of MacKenzie’s editorship of *The Sun* is the way it took on a strong, moralising tone towards certain groups with whom it took umbrage. This was particularly evident in its vicious attitude to homosexuals, a group already suffering in the period due to the AIDS epidemic, an epidemic the paper exploited for all it could: the deaths of Liberace and Rock Hudson from the disease were mercilessly exploited with photographers capturing ‘last pictures’ of them wasting away. In February 1985, the paper favourably quoted an anonymous ‘professor’ at an AIDS conference who declared ‘all homosexuals should be exterminated to stop the spread of AIDS. It’s time we stopped pussyfooting around’.[[533]](#footnote-534) In 1988, a reference to a Church of England General Synod debate on homosexuality was reported as ‘Pulpit poofs can stay’, a headline upheld by the Press Council as ‘not likely to encourage hatred of gays’, whereas the coverage of two gay characters in BBC soap opera *EastEnders* was covered in *The Sun* as ‘EASTBENDERS’.[[534]](#footnote-535) These views not only reflected MacKenzie’s own homophobia (defended by managing editor Kenneth Donlan as ‘the traditional view’), but was shared by the proprietor, too: Rupert Murdoch’s attitude towards those he referred to as ‘poofters’ was that ‘they were a dangerous mafia which would take over an organisation once let in’.[[535]](#footnote-536) The language used, unpleasant at it is, says a great deal: it is deliberately provocative, insulting, coarse, with an implied superiority absolutely characteristic of a paper styling itself as a champion of ‘ordinary’ people. A heavy-handed moralising tone would become a crucial component of how *The Sun* covered political scandals, particularly where sex was involved.

For Helena See, this moral tone of newspaper scandal coverage is perhaps the most significant, and has crucial links to the uses of moral political rhetoric in the period. In her 2013 article ‘Guardians of the Public Sphere?’, See has argued that ‘under Thatcher, the government and the press propagated a shared moral discourse which sought to reject the paradigm of ‘permissiveness’ established in the 1960s’, and instead sought ‘to replace it within one founded upon the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family’.[[536]](#footnote-537)In essence, her argument is that Margaret Thatcher brought a new moral tone to British politics, which part coincided with and part drove a similar shift in the tone and attitude of the popular press, which bound government and press ‘ever more tightly together’.[[537]](#footnote-538) In placing such an emphasis on Mrs Thatcher’s moralising tone, See follows much of the academic literature which sees her as an expression of anti-permissive sentiment bred of the cultural convulsions of the 1960s. This is overstated, as Mrs Thatcher’s driving mission in office was to undo the economic and industrial malaise of the 1970s. If anti-permissive, moralising rhetoric was utilised by her, it was done in the service of creating a political rhetoric of ‘ordinariness’, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, to gain the attention and support of a section of the electorate, and not as a blueprint for government. In addition, the content of newspapers like *The Sun* moralised, but often from a position of tawdry vulgarity: there was always a degree to which the paper in its coverage of political sex scandals seemed to be *enjoying* itself, with headlines filled with puns and copious talk of ‘bonking’, a favourite verb of *Sun* journalists.

Given its historical influence on *The Sun*, it worth briefly considering the fortunes of the *Mirror*. As discussed above, the *Daily Mirror* suffered from the emergence and growing popularity of *The Sun*. It had been Britain’s best-selling paper, with a strong working-class readership, and in the 1960s had led a number of innovations, such as colour printing, ‘tabloid pages bristling with irresistible hooks for the eye – graphics, montaged photos and variable column widths, white on black and white on tone headlines, underscores and overscores’ which *The Sun* was to copy wholesale and make its trademark.[[538]](#footnote-539) The paper had also often taken a strong campaigning tone in the 1960s on issues such as poverty, housing and miscarriages of justice. Such a stance, under the influence of editor Hugh Cudlipp, was blamed for the *Mirror* opening a gap in the market, particularly with younger readers, that the *Sun* was to ruthlessly exploit. It was said of Cudlipp that ‘he would have made a good teacher for the Workers’ Education Association’, but that his judgement as a tabloid editor was somewhat lacking.[[539]](#footnote-540) The paper remained steadfast in its support of Labour throughout the 1980s, a lone voice among the tabloid press, and continued its rivalry, sometimes boarding on a loathing, with the *Sun*. The *Daily Mirror* in the 1980s would regularly criticise *The Sun* for its attitude towards truth and integrity in politics. During the Falklands War, after the *Mirror* had argued for the need for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict, the *Sun* had run a piece asking, ‘What is it but treason for this timorous, whining publication [the *Mirror*] to plead day after day for appeasing the Argentinian dictators?’, and describing *Mirror* readers as ‘buying a newspaper which again and again demonstrates it has no faith in its country and no respect for her people’.[[540]](#footnote-541) Deciding against pursuing libel action, the *Mirror* instead responded with an entire page entitled ‘The Harlot of Fleet Street’:

*‘There have been lying newspapers before. But in the past month it has broken all records. It has long been a tawdry newspaper. But since the Falklands crisis began it has fallen from the gutter to the sewer… From behind the safety of its typewriters it has called for battle to commence to satisfy its blood-lust.* The Sun *today is to journalism what Dr Joseph Goebbels was to truth. Even* Pravda [official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party] *would blush to be bracketed with it. A Labour MP yesterday called for* The Sun *to be prosecuted for criminal libel. There is no point in that. It has the perfect defence: Guilty but insane.’*[[541]](#footnote-542)

There was a sense to which *The Sun* was to have the last laugh, however. In 1984, the *Mirror* was bought by Robert Maxwell, and from 1995, under the editorship of Piers Morgan, the paperwas to essentially emulate the tone of coverage of the *Sun* under Kelvin MacKenzie, and even in the 1980s the paper had embraced the focus on celebrity and big money giveaways so closely associated with its closest competitor. There was consistently more overlap than either paper would have liked to have admit as they fought over the same section of readership.

The story of the *Daily Mail* in the period is different, as being a middle-market paper, it had always targeted an older, more middle class and socially conservative audience than had the mass-market tabloids. The key figure with regards to the *Mail* was David English, editor from 1971 to 1992 whose editorship has been described as ‘the most influential London editorship in the final third of the twentieth century’.[[542]](#footnote-543) With its focus on issues such as immigration, law and order and an increasingly Eurosceptic angle, in many ways the *Mail* was a template for the political direction tabloids like the *Sun* were to take in the twenty-first century. It overtook its chief competitor, the *Daily Express*, in 1986, and in many respects set the mould that all the other middle-market papers would follow. Despite a similarly pro-Thatcher and conservative political outlook, the *Daily Mail* and *Sun* were very different. David Marquand has described *The Sun* as ‘xenophobic, homophobic, mildly pornographic and ostentatiously vulgar and hedonistic’, with the concept of the *Sun* as a ‘vulgar’ paper being a clear separator from middle-market papers like the *Mail*. While the editors of the *Mail* may have venerated traditional hierarchy and settled authority, the *Sun*, as Marquand perceptively comments, ‘was certainly a more potent enemy of hierarchy and tradition than any number of nuclear disarmers or Bennite fundamentalists’.[[543]](#footnote-544)

The period in question was one in which social attitudes and mores were in a state of flux. Though the impact and extent of the 1960s ‘social revolution’ has been rightly debated by historians, it is undoubtedly the case that the decade inaugurated a decline in deference towards traditional figures and centres of authority, with the re-emergence of a vicious, biting satire towards the political elite (see Chapter 1) being one symptom of this. However, it is also a period when modern notions of decency, often dismissed at the time and since as ‘political correctness’, had started to develop. This makes the period in question absolutely unique: newspapers and media outlets felt emboldened to report details of scandal and show a level of disrespect and contempt in their coverage that previously would have been unthinkable, but their ability to do so had not yet been checked by a growing societal backlash that became evident into the twenty-first century. As *The Sun* had stated in 1969 after a week of circulation, ‘the permissive society is not an opinion. It is a fact. People who pretend that yesterday’s standards are today’s, let alone tomorrow’s, are living a lie’.[[544]](#footnote-545) Clare Short for example, the Labour MP whose feminist objections to the ‘Page Three’ topless models led to her campaigns for their removal, faced an onslaught from *The Sun*, which ran a ‘Stop Crazy Clare’ campaign that included polling its readers on their preference for looking at either Short’s face or the back of a bus. The roots of a backlash were evident in the late 1980s, a period Adrian Bingham has described as one when ‘the British tabloid press reached a crisis in its relationship with politicians and the public’, with ‘prejudiced and inaccurate reporting, speculative stories about the private lives of prominent figures and aggressive long-lens photography’ provoking ‘a storm of criticism’.[[545]](#footnote-546) With MPs from both major parties introducing private members bills to introduce some form of statutory regulation of the British press, the Thatcher government commissioned a report by David Calcutt which was published in 1990. David Mellor, a junior minister for Home Affairs and later the Arts, infamously commented that the press was ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’, in that if they failed to regulate themselves properly then the government would be willing to introduce legislation to do so. However, as Bingham has illustrated, a combination of disagreement over legislative proposals and the Conservative government’s weakened authority after the 1992 election put paid to this: ‘it indicated a way out of the ‘last chance saloon’, and the industry gratefully seized it’.[[546]](#footnote-547)

Much of the literature and historiography on the political scandal is centred around the United States, to an understandable degree, given the significance of scandals such as Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair and the various travails of Bill Clinton, leading to his impeachment in the Lewinsky affair. This does not mean writing on the subject are not useful when studying the political scandal in Britain: as liberal democracies, albeit with very different political cultures, there is bound to be overlap, but there is considerable difference. Throughout the period in question, and indeed reaching much further back, there was an anxiety among many in the British political and cultural elite of a creeping ‘Americanisation’ of British politics, which was often used as a shorthand for a politics excessively focused on personality and superficiality as opposed to policies and principles. Ann Leslie’s coverage in the *Daily Mail* of the 1996 Republican National Convention was typical of this, mocking how Elizabeth Dole, wife of Republican candidate Bob Dole, had ‘turned her speech into an Oprah-like show’, bemoaning the ‘slickly-made ‘infomercial’ video about the life and times of the candidate’. She despaired that ‘some bright spark in [Conservative] Central Office might actually take it up – and the dangerous Americanisation of British politics will be one step nearer to completion’.[[547]](#footnote-548) This disdain was evident on the left of politics, too, with Christopher Hitchens asking ‘why do we never emulate any of the solid and worthwhile aspects of America?’, before complaining that ‘in politics, the British have borrowed the tyranny of the opinion poll and the smarminess of the ‘well-packaged’ campaign’.[[548]](#footnote-549) Implicit within these criticisms is an anxiety that the more politics is focused on the individual, on personality, on ‘showbusiness’, that it becomes trivialised, less serious, and more likely to be focused on the political scandal.

One area worth considering here is the way in which the Royal Family also became fair game for the press throughout the period, Given the supposed political neutrality of the Royals they will not feature heavily in this chapter, but such was their intense scrutiny from the 1980s onwards that it would be amiss not to elaborate briefly. For the British royal family, the period in question was one of transition: Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her Silver Jubilee in 1977 and it was in these years that she underwent her transition from middle-aged mother to silver-haired ‘grandmother of the nation’. The supposed ‘fairytale’ romance and wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 is often contrasted with not only the deep recession and urban unrest with which it coincided, but also the marriage’s disintegration over a decade later. As with the attitude of the press towards politicians, ‘many of the restraints holding back tabloid editors finally snapped’ from the late 1970s and the royals were subjected to a level of scrutiny and a tone of coverage that would truly have been unthinkable even at the time of the Queen’s accession in 1952, most notable in the initial instance in the coverage of the collapse of Princess Margaret’s marriage and her romance with gardener Roddy Llewellyn, some seventeen years her junior.[[549]](#footnote-550)

This chapter will later discuss the concept of the politician as celebrity, but with the rise to prominence of Diana as Princess of Wales the celebrity royal was truly ascendant, with the stipulation of political neutrality, and the glamour the young princess seemed to embody, the tabloids were unhesitant to devote vast amounts of coverage to her, with ‘royal status no longer providing any special protection from the pressures of celebrity’.[[550]](#footnote-551) Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York, universally referred to in the tabloid press as ‘Fergie’, while not receiving quite the same level of attention as did her sister-in-law, nevertheless provided the papers with many stories over the period. The most infamous example of this, just months after her separation from Prince Andrew, was the *Daily Mirror* publishing long-lens photographs taken of a topless sunbathing Duchess, having her toes sucked by her American director of finances. Scandals surrounding the marital problems of Prince Charles and Prince Andrew helped contribute to making 1992 an ‘annus horribilis’ for the Queen, as she described it herself. Lord McGregor of the Press Complaints Commission famously remarked that the press were ‘dabbling their fingers in the stuff of other people’s souls’ in their coverage of the disintegration of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales.[[551]](#footnote-552)It is worth noting, therefore, that many of the conditions and changing procedures with which the political scandal was constructed can be equally applied to its changing coverage of the royal family**.**

Furthermore, a note of nuance must be considered that is essential when discussing politics in the popular press. Newspapers are, as Stephen Vella has observed, multi-faceted historical sources, ‘at once a text, a record of historical events, a representation of society and a chronicle of contemporary opinions, aspirations and debates’.[[552]](#footnote-553) More than anything else, however, they are consumer products: they exist to sell copies and earn profits for the companies than produce them. As such, historians must be cautious in ascribing influence on readers that newspapers may not have. While a typical *Sun* reader in the period may very well have bought the paper for its patriotic populist cheerleading of Mrs Thatcher, they may instead have purchased a copy solely for sporting news, competitions, or the bare-breasted ‘Page 3’ pin up girls. As Adrian Bingham warns, ‘there is a danger of forgetting that newspapers were material objects that were bought, read and passed around’, an expression of material culture beyond the realms of the political, which historians must not forget in an age where word-searchable, digitised newspaper archives have made reams of content easily accessible but separated from its wider context.[[553]](#footnote-554) In addition, it is worth recognising that many daily readers of newspapers either did not let the political preferences of their preferred paper of choice affect their voting pattern, or were simply unaware of the way their paper wished them to vote. In their authoritative survey of the 1992 election for the Nuffield series of studies, David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh contrasted the voting records of those who read each of the major national daily newspapers. Whilst upwards of 60 per cent of readers of the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Financial Times* and *The Times* voted Conservative in 1992, only a plurality, 45 per cent, of *Sun* readers ticked the Tory box on their ballot papers, with 36 per cent opting for Labour and 14 per cent for the Liberal Democrats.[[554]](#footnote-555) Only the *Daily Star, Independent*, *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* had higher proportion of its readers opting for the Labour Party. This is highly significant as the *Sun* had been vociferous in their attacking of Neil Kinnock, with an infamous headline on the polling day featuring the Leader of the Opposition’s head in a lightbulb, accompanied by the headline ‘If Kinnock wins today, will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights’, followed by ‘IT’S THE SUN WOT WON IT’ the following day when the surprise Tory victory was evident.[[555]](#footnote-556) With 55 per cent of *Sun* readers not following the party preference of their favoured newspaper, it is clear that many either did not know about their papers’ party allegiance, or did not care. John O’Farrell, in his hugely entertaining memoir of his time working as a Labour activist in this period, reflected the dismay and bafflement which those on the activist Left approached such a fact, wryly commenting that ‘the left simply could not deal intellectually with the fact that lots of working-class people might prefer tits and bingo to savage indictments of government policies’.[[556]](#footnote-557)

It is the argument of this chapter that there was something qualitatively different in the way the political scandal was conceived, constructed, disseminated and received over the period covered by this thesis. This chapter will examine a range of different political scandals from the period 1974 to 1994, arguing that the development of a very specific scandal culture in the period can tell us much about the wider changes in Britain’s political culture. It will examine the growing notion, developed in the chapter on television, of politics becoming increasingly reported as form of entertainment, and how a new generation of aggressive tabloid editors sought to protect their papers by both covering political scandals with both a greater prominence vis-a-vis other political news than would previously be the case, and by giving a level of detail that would previously have been judged to be inappropriate. The biggest contrast is evident when considered how scandals of the 1970s were reported and received, such as those involving John Stonehouse and Jeremy Thorpe, with the markedly different tone to the coverage of the Conservative ‘sleaze’ scandals that fatally undermined John Major’s administration in the 1990s. As Bingham and Conboy have noted, ‘it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the tabloid-driven sex scandal became a regular feature of British political culture’.[[557]](#footnote-558) Its capacity to taint the government of John Major stood in stark contrast to how Mrs Thatcher had managed to stand above the political scandal in the 1980s, with incidents such as Cecil Parkinson’s resignation for fathering a child with his secretary, or the drama of the Westland Affair afflicted little long-term damage to her political reputation. Whatever else her critics said about her, she personally was never tainted with the whiff of political scandal. The chapter will also consider how the newspapers justified the tone and content of their coverage, how politicians involved with a scandal reacted to their coverage in the press, and the pushback it received from other corners of the press, who often reported all the salacious details of a scandal before swiftly condemning the tone of coverage in the mass market papers. It will conclude by considering an effect such a scandal culture had on the operation of British politics and the attitudes of the public towards their political masters.

**Politics as Entertainment**

As noted above, the notion of politics as a form of entertainment is one of the most enduring aspects of the tabloid press upon British political culture. By stressing the personality and human interest angle of politics, papers such as *The Sun* found a lucrative way to build political content into their paper in a way that kept the punchy, condensed format which was an essential ingredient of its success. This section will examine a number of critical areas within this broad topic, including tabloid attitudes to politicians, the growing interest of politicians with the world of celebrity, the centrality of the human interest story to newspapers and the blurring of previously distinct categories of public and private life as a consequence of the new scandal culture.

Given the laments of many high-minded critics of the effect of the tabloids in debasing politics, it is crucial to note that much of the initial criticism of politics becoming a form on entertainment was centred around television, initially, rather than the press: Leonard Buckley, writing in *The Times* in 1969, excoriating the fact that by-election results ‘would be announced during a programme of ballroom dancing’. ‘The trouble is’, Buckley continued, ‘that television is foremost a form of entertainment. You may disguise the fact but the fact is inevitably there. So, if you put politics or anything else on the box it will be drawn inexorably, in spite of all your efforts, towards that particular end.’ Election night coverage, with its ‘giant arrows and flashing indicators’ meant ‘you scarcely know whether you are being shown some futuristic weather bureau or the Blackpool illuminations… what should be a serious and indeed a solemn occasion dissolves into one big laugh.’[[558]](#footnote-559)

Moving into the 1970s and 1980s, the popular press were to accelerate the notion of ‘politics as entertainment’ rapidly. James Thomas has argued that ‘one of the most important political effects of *The Sun*, particularly under MacKenzie’s editorship, was how it further redefined the nature of political coverage towards entertainment’.[[559]](#footnote-560) The key differential to keep in mind when comparing newspapers and television as a medium is that the former existing purely as a commercial product that in this period existed to sell physical editions, unbound by broadcasting rules of impartiality and balance. While television channels of course compete with each other for viewers and the commercial channels compete for advertising sponsorship, the cut-throat world of competition does not exist in nearly the same way as in the world of the print media. Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy have identified four essential components of the tabloid attitude to politics, that are worth elaborating upon here. The first of these is that of accessibility: political coverage had to be clear, concise and free of jargon, often employing liberal amounts of metaphor in an attempt not to alienate readers. The second component is a desire to highlight, if not outright create, the drama of political life, and correspondingly downplay nuance. The third is to ‘reduce the distance between politics and everyday life’, with a rigid focus on political issues that affect the lives of the paper’s readers. In so doing, argue Bingham and Conboy, the popular press ‘sought to wrest control of the political agenda from government and parties when they diverged from issues deemed to be important to the public’.[[560]](#footnote-561) The final component is a relentless and continued insistence that the paper exists to serve ‘the people’ and amplify their voice in politics, leading newspapers to become some of the largest commissioners of surveys and polling, with a strong anti-elitist and anti-establishment tone to its political coverage.[[561]](#footnote-562)

At the heart of all of these strategies was the emphasis on the human interest story, which had long been central to the world of newspaper reporting. As Bingham and Conboy have recognised, ‘tabloids are built on ‘human interest’, the basic curiosity we have about other people’, and as Lord Northcliffe, founder of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, had quipped, ‘people are so much more interesting than things’.[[562]](#footnote-563) As discussed above, in order to make political stories and events accessible and interesting to its readers, it is not uncommon for papers to play up the human drama at the expense of nuance, to create personalities in a story that are easier for an ordinary reader to relate to. The creation of popular personality is integral to the concept of celebrity, and the human interest attitude of reporting did much to bring the celebrity culture into being, creating a ‘regular cast of characters’ for tabloids to employ in their stories.[[563]](#footnote-564)

Politicians were certainly not averse to embracing aspects of the celebrity culture where it suited them. It was in the 1980s and 1990s that the phenomenon of the celebrity endorsement started to become ubiquitous in British politics, with the idea that the support of famous non-political figures would somehow sway the support of ordinary voters, particularly the young. A 1983 article in *The Times* entitled ‘Prime Minister Draws the Stars to Wembley’, Philip Webster detailed the list of celebrities the Conservatives had managed to draw to a youth rally at Wembley Conference Centre, including comedians Bob Monkhouse and Jimmy Tarbuck, sports personalities such as Steve Davis, Sharron Davies and Fred Trueman, and Arsenal manager Terry Neill.[[564]](#footnote-565) In 1986, in the run-up to the election of the following year, Labour had launched ‘Red Wedge’, an initiative to ‘attract young voters through the use of pop performers like Billy Bragg and Paul Weller’, desperate to shed its “drabby” image of the previous campaign, ‘drabby’ having become ‘a byword in the Labour Party for all that was lacking in its 1983 election campaign’.[[565]](#footnote-566) Labour MP and campaign coordinator Robin Cook took to the pages of *The Guardian* to make this clear, arguing that it was ‘a majority among young people that secured the election of a Labour government in 1964 and 1974’.[[566]](#footnote-567) That is not to say celebrity endorsement was always effective. At the same 1983 Tory rally mentioned above, the comedian Kenny Everett had caused significant embarrassment to party officials by arriving on stage wearing two huge, outsized hands, infamously working up the crowd of Young Tories into a frenzy with cries of “Let’s bomb Russia!” and “Let’s kick Michael Foot’s stick away!”[[567]](#footnote-568)

There was also a greater expectation that politicians would be engaged with popular and celebrity culture. In March 1987, in the run-up to the general election of June, Mrs Thatcher gave an excruciating interview to *Smash Hits* magazine, in which she was questioned about her musical tastes and attitudes towards popular culture. Not only did Mrs Thatcher demonstrate how, by the late 1980s, she had come to be seen as something of a relic of a lost generation, but also her tendency to spread her gospel at every opportunity afforded to her. Asked if she kept up to date with pop music, Mrs Thatcher responded ‘I am not up to date with it at all but I was very interested to do that “Superstore” thing’, referencing her recent appearance on Saturday morning television show *Saturday Superstore*, where she had passed comment on contemporary chart hits.[[568]](#footnote-569) Seemingly unable to recall details of records of the 1960s which she professed to like – she erroneously refers to ‘Telstar’ as a Beatles track, even after she is corrected that it was by the Tornadoes – Mrs Thatcher proclaims that older records were ‘not just noise and rhythm’, unlike some of the more modern offerings she sampled on *Saturday Superstore*. In many ways, her opinions were typical of a woman of her age, born in 1925 and obviously unlikely to be intimately acquainted with the details of modern pop music. What is interesting is the complete legitimacy of asking a Prime Minister in 1987 such questions about celebrity and popular culture: it hard to imagine Harold Macmillan thirty years earlier being asked similar questions. As discussed in Chapter 1, Mrs Thatcher had to some extent opened up this type of questioning – beyond the realm of the pure political – in the way she had presented herself as an ‘ordinary’ housewife in the late 1970s, when she was Leader of the Opposition.

In many respects, however, Mrs Thatcher’s capacity to generate embarrassment by engaging with popular culture was as nothing compared to the efforts of her Labour counterpart. ‘The secret showbiz talents of the leader of the Labour Party will be revealed to an unsuspecting public tonight’, wrote Ian Black in *The Guardian* in February 1984, ‘when Mr Neil Kinnock makes his dancing debut in a video with the singer Tracey Ullman’.[[569]](#footnote-570) The video, to accompany Ullman’s song ‘My Guy’s Mad at Me’, saw Kinnock playing the role of a canvasser knocking on the doors of a high-rise estate and dancing arm-in-arm with Ullman, with Black’s article noting Kinnock had commented that taking park was ‘great fun, better than work!’[[570]](#footnote-571) Despite a piece in *The Observer* five months later stating that the pop video appearance had ‘helped to reinforce the new leader’s image as an unstuffy, approachable family man’, by August *The Sunday Times* was reporting that Kinnock’s advisers were convinced that the appearance had shown him to be a ‘lightweight Opposition leader’.[[571]](#footnote-572) ‘You see, it’s always the same questions’, Kinnock groaned to a reporter in 1985 after a grilling from the voters on the BBC’s *Open to Question*, ‘Why did you appear in Tracey Ullman’s pop video? Why is your party in bloody chaos?’[[572]](#footnote-573) To some degree, the interaction of politics with celebrity culture became a feedback loop where it becomes extremely difficult to know who is originating contact and who is responding. A future generation of politicians, most notably Tony Blair, were able to engage with the world of celebrity with a considerably greater degree of success, but it was in this period that it first became an arena with which politicians believed they should concern themselves. ‘The leaders of Britain’s political parties have a new message for voters who believe there has always been a fine line between politics and showbusiness’, declared *The Sunday Times* in October 1991, pointing the way for the rest of the decade: ‘you ain’t seen nothing yet’.[[573]](#footnote-574)

The celebrity culture and entertaining tendencies of the popular press did much to call the supposed existence between the public and private spheres into question. Tom O’Malley has argued that ‘during the 1970s the question of media policy and accountability moved to the centre of the political debate in the UK’. To describe it as central might be overstating the case somewhat, but it is certainly true that discussion about the extent to which the press could intrude upon private life was a feature of 1970s political discourse.[[574]](#footnote-575) The Heath government had instituted a Committee on Privacy in 1972, which began to distinguish between ‘freedom from intrusion and privacy of information’. This was followed by a Royal Commission, appointed in 1974 and publishing three years later. ‘The continued emphasis on self-regulation’, writes Sarah Crook, ‘implied a conservatism that disappointed those who wished for more robust recommendations’.[[575]](#footnote-576) In his study of the Calcutt reports of the 1990, discussed previously, Martin Cloonan argued that the whole notion of a ‘right to privacy’ could be a double-edged sword for the conduct of British democracy: ‘While exercise of the right to privacy can be beneficial to democracy if it enhances individual freedom, it can be detrimental if it leads to secrecy in the conduct of public duties and impinges upon the public’s right to know how its officials are behaving’.[[576]](#footnote-577) There were a number of changes to defamation and libel law, in addition, with Section 13 of the 1996 Defamation Act ‘enabling individual MPs to waive parliamentary privilege so that House proceedings could be used as evidence in any libel litigation in which they were involved’.[[577]](#footnote-578) The act was partly passed because so many Conservative MPs were engaged in libel action with the press that the use of waiving parliamentary privilege was seen as an effective way of speeding up these cases. However, as Helen See has correctly noted, there is a distinction between the issue of defamation and privacy law, and that elision of these two categories in the 1990s ‘effectively tarred all investigative journalism, broadsheet and tabloid, with the same brush’.[[578]](#footnote-579) The questions of the limits on the rights to privacy are not easy to answer in a pluralistic, democratic society, and the political scandals of this period threw up some profound questions of this nature, and ‘marked an important point in the dissolution of a clearly defined boundary between public and private in political life’.[[579]](#footnote-580)

**The Scandals: Overview**

This section will analyse in detail a number of crucial political scandals throughout the period, from John Stonehouse and Jeremy Thorpe in the 1970s through to the cascade of Tory ‘sleaze’ scandals in the first half of the 1990s. In so doing, it becomes apparent what is the biggest shift in the construction and the dissemination of the political scandal in this period. In the 1970s, as had been the case previously with the Profumo Affair in the early 1960s, the scandal was reported on by the press when it had become apparent to the wider political class: for example, the *Daily Mirror* had plenty of information about Profumo’s deeds before the scandal broke, and only after Profumo admitted misleading the House of Commons did the story gain extensive press coverage. Similarly, the Jeremy Thorpe scandal came to public prominence after legal cases had been brought. By the 1990s, however, it was the newspapers themselves that were actively searching for such stories, the more salacious the better: it would be inconceivable in 1994 that a major paper would sit on the details of a scandal as the *Mirror* had done thirty years previously.[[580]](#footnote-581)

In addition, another significant shift is that there was a proliferation in the reporting of scandals where no crimes had been committed: the Stonehouse and Thorpe scandals were significant cases with accusations of fraud and attempted murder being crucial ingredients. There were, it should be noted, undeniable breaches of the law in the 1990s Tory ‘sleaze’ scandals, most notably the so-called ‘cash for questions affair’ which broke in October 1994, with *The Guardian* publishing allegations that Conservative MPs Neil Hamilton and Tim Smith had been paid to ask parliamentary questions on behalf of a lobbyist, at £2,000 per question.[[581]](#footnote-582) However, the focus in the 1990s case studies is squarely on that of the sex scandal, whereby a scandal was constructed despite the fact no law had been broken. These are fascinating examples, as given the lack of criminality involved the scandal exists by a perceived breaking of an unwritten code of public morality and decency, and can be a valuable window into wider public attitudes towards morality and how they expect their political elites to behave. Of course, the Jeremy Thorpe scandal had a sexual element, notably the fact that the lover Thorpe had allegedly ordered to be killed was male, at a time when male homosexuality, though decriminalised, was still highly taboo. In addition, the John Stonehouse affair had featured the politician in question conducting an affair with his secretary. However, by the 1990s the wholly illegal but highly embarrassing sex scandal was a common feature of newspaper reporting on politics.

**The 1970s**

John Stonehouse, Labour MP since a by-election in 1957, disappeared on the 20 November 1974. He had served in Harold Wilson’s administrations of the 1960s, first as Postmaster General and later as Minister of Posts and Communications, and had hoped for a Cabinet-level promotion after the anticipated Labour victory in the 1970 general election. However, with the party’s unexpected loss at the polls to the Conservatives, Stonehouse’s dreams of high office went unfulfilled, and he was surprised to find that he was not to be appointed to Wilson’s shadow cabinet, nor to government when Labour re-entered government in February 1974 as a minority administration. In November 1974 he headed to Florida, on the pretence of a business trip, and vanished, ‘the last person to see him alive had been a secretary at the beach club, to whom Stonehouse had handed his clothes before going for a swim’.[[582]](#footnote-583) Despite talk in the *Daily Express* just three days after his disappearance of the implications of a by-election in his Walsall North constituency, and Stonehouse’s mother declaring ‘I have no doubt that John is dead’ to the *Daily Mirror* on 27 November, political insiders were less certain.[[583]](#footnote-584) In his diary, Tony Benn reflected the commonly held views within Westminster circles of Stonehouse’s disappearance, that ‘people don’t believe he’s dead. They think that with the financial trouble that he’s in, he’s just disappeared’.[[584]](#footnote-585) On 29 November the *Daily Express* placed Barbara Stonehouse, John’s wife, front and centre of its coverage, describing her as ‘grief stricken’, furiously rebutting claims that there were any financial issues or that their marriage was in trouble. In actuality, Stonehouse’s secretary Sheila Buckley was pregnant with Stonehouse’s child at the time of his disappearance.[[585]](#footnote-586)

On this occasion it was Tony Benn rather than John Stonehouse’s mother or wife who turned out to be correct: the *Daily Mirror* broke the news on Christmas Eve 1974 that Stonehouse had been arrested in Australia, being mistaken for the aristocrat Lord Lucan, then on the run from accusations of murder, and that Stonehouse had attempted to fake his own death to begin a new life in Australia with his pregnant mistress. He had utilised the identities of dead constituents to aid his attempt. His wife Barbara later stated that, when she spoke to him over the phone for the first time since his whereabouts were discovered, that Stonehouse ‘sounded like a naughty little boy who had just been found out’.[[586]](#footnote-587) Despite ‘pleading’ in court to be allowed to stay in Australia, Stonehouse was deported back to Britain, and upon his return lurid allegations began to swirl that Stonehouse had been working as an intelligence agent for the Czechoslovakian communist authorities since the 1960s, and had been under ‘constant security watch’ ever since.[[587]](#footnote-588) As Labour’s parliamentary majority was so thin, he was not expelled from the party, but his defection in 1976 to the eccentric fringe English National Party necessitated the formation of a confidence and supply arrangement with the Liberals (‘Lib-Lab Pact’) that was to last for the remainder of the decade. Reflecting on how Stonehouse justified his actions in the House of Commons in October 1975, Dominic Sandbrook has observed that ‘it is a safe bet that the Palace of Westminster had rarely heard a more outlandish speech. Referring to himself in the third and person and borrowing liberally from the psychobabble of the day, Stonehouse explained he had suffered ‘psychiatric suicide’’.[[588]](#footnote-589) Eventually persuaded to resign, he served two years in prison from 1977 to 1979 and wrote a series of bizarre semi-autobiographical erotic novels before dying of a heart attack in 1988 on the set of the television programme *Central Weekend*.

With its many fanciful twists and details, the Stonehouse scandal appears at first glance to come from the world of fiction, with the *Daily Mirror* reflecting that ‘reality has proved at least as far-fetched as any of the questions that were asked’.[[589]](#footnote-590) However, its relevance in terms of the construction of the political scandal has a number of aspects. The newspapers took a real interest, providing updates on his disappearance, and as previously mentioned, the *Daily Express* framed his wife as an unfortunate victim, with the tone of coverage sympathising heavily with her plight. She was interviewed again with a front page splash on 18 December, with the headline ‘AM I WIFE OR WIDOW?’[[590]](#footnote-591) Reflecting on the newspaper coverage, what is significant is that the papers almost immediately began to indulge and almost revel in the more salacious aspects of the story, particularly Stonehouse’s financial misdeeds. The *Daily Express* had run a piece on 2 December entitled ‘MP with Foes Everywhere’, airing far-fetched allegations from a fellow Labour MP that Stonehouse had been ‘destroyed by the Mafia’, as well as referencing alleged financial irregularities over an aid fund for Bangladesh that Stonehouse had been connected to.[[591]](#footnote-592) A week later, the *Daily Mirror* reported on claims from a business associate that Stonehouse owed him £5,000, and that Stonehouse had put his £80,000 country house on the market shortly before his disappearing act.[[592]](#footnote-593) Such was the ubiquity of such discussion in the press that a piece in the *Daily Express* entitled ‘The MP who Loved Money’ was merely a repeat of what had already been widely circulated.[[593]](#footnote-594) After his return to Britain, the press (particularly the *Daily Mirror*) revelled in keeping readers up to date with Stonehouse’s latest claims, cropping on a regular basis in the popular press for the next few years.

However, there was a single note of caution: an editorial ran in the *Daily Express* on the 21 December which complained that John Stonehouse’s ‘reputation has been torn to shreds – so far without convincing evidence’, and that ‘other politicians have been as mercilessly degraded in the public eye simply on suspicion. Even men above suspicion will be made to look fools if they cannot get on with the media. There is no redress’.[[594]](#footnote-595) This encapsulates in so many ways a crucial principle of opposition to the reporting of political scandal, in that lurid allegations and details are allowed to dominate coverage and may unduly influence attitude and opinion, even if such claims are wholly fabricated or unsubstantiated. Of course, events of the next few days were to prove that the claims about Stonehouse’s financial misconduct and questionable diplomatic past were completely true, undermining the argument that careers were being unfairly brought to an end by false allegations. Nevertheless, the articulation of the views expressed in the editorial are significant, and would re-emerge later in a slightly different formulation: not that politicians were being tarnished with *false* allegations, but with allegations of sexual misconduct that had no bearing on their ability to do their jobs.

Jeremy Thorpe was elected leader of the Liberal Party aged just 38 in 1967, and in his tenure as leader managed to successfully revive the electoral fortunes of the party in a process that had begun under his predecessor, Jo Grimond, with Matthew Parris describing Thorpe as ‘the Liberals’ greatest hope since Lloyd George’.[[595]](#footnote-596) In the general election of February 1974, Thorpe trebled the Liberal vote from 2 million to 6 million, and almost trebled the share of the vote from 7.5 per cent to 19.3 per cent, compared to the election of 1970.[[596]](#footnote-597) In the fever pitched atmosphere surrounding the return of a hung parliament in the election, there was considerable speculation in the press that Thorpe could play a decisive role as ‘kingmaker’ and return the Liberals to government for the firm time since the end of the Second World War. This was not to be, but Thorpe continued in the future months to position himself as a serious statesman and man of integrity, taking a very stern stance on the John Stonehouse affair as an example, being quoted in the *Daily Mirror* on 27 December 1974 as saying that ‘there are still matters of grave doubt which have to be resolved’.[[597]](#footnote-598) However Thorpe, like Stonehouse, had secrets of his own: he was a homosexual, openly so to his very closest confidantes such as fellow Liberal MP Peter Bessell, though he denied this in public until the day he died. Recognising the toll such a revelation would take on his politician ambitions, he presented himself as a heterosexual, telling a friend of heterosexual consummation that ‘it’s a bloody bore, but if it’s the price I’ve got to pay to lead this party, I’ll pay it’.[[598]](#footnote-599) However, when Thorpe’s former lover Norman Scott began to circle with threats of revealing their affair, a bizarre series of twists and turns were to lead to Jeremy Thorpe being tried in 1979 for Scott’s attempted murder.

The many specific features of the scandal, as entertaining as they are, do not need to be repeated here, but in the broadest terms Norman Scott, who claimed to have had an affair with Thorpe in the early 1960s, began to harass Thorpe by letter from the mid-to-late 1960s and into the early 1970s, which Thorpe interpreted as attempts at blackmail. Despite attempts to appease Scott, with Bessell acting as an intermediary and providing financial assistance, Thorpe perceived his indiscretions to be so potentially damaging that, having failed to frighten or buy Scott into silence, he allegedly planned to have Scott murdered so as to prevent him from exposing the affair to the public. ‘Peter, we have got to get rid of him’, Bessell later claimed Thorpe had said to him, ‘it’s no worse than shooting a sick dog’.[[599]](#footnote-600) Scott’s escalating attempts to get his story out, including moving to Thorpe’s North Devon constituency in 1973, appeared to be the final straw, with an assassin recruited to dispatch Scott, who in October 1975 succeeded only in shooting Rinka, his beloved Great Dane, leaving Scott free to spread the word of the supposedly failed assassination attempt upon him. After four months of details of the affair circulating in the newspapers in May 1976, Thorpe resigned the leadership of the Liberal Party, and he was arrested in 1978 on charges of conspiracy to murder. Bessell later sold his story to *The Sunday Telegraph* for a reported £50,000.[[600]](#footnote-601) The trial was scheduled to begin just weeks after the election of May 1979. Thorpe was acquitted of all charges, but the public furore helped contribute to his losing his parliamentary seat of twenty years, with the Conservatives successfully retaking the seat, and Thorpe’s political career lay in ruins.

The critical component in the reporting of the Thorpe affair by the newspapers was that it was heavily tied to court reporting. As early as 1972 Scott had managed to tell freelance journalists of his relationship with Thorpe, but after phoning it into their newsrooms, ‘the same familiar judgement had been made: that the source was too spurious for the claim to be worth even looking into’.[[601]](#footnote-602) In January 1976, just months after the attempted murder, Scott had been up in court on charges of benefit fraud, where he revealed to the presiding magistrate that his issues stemmed, as he saw it, from the consequences of his affair with Jeremy Thorpe. As Matthew Parris put it, ‘with the allegations made in court, they could be reported under protection of absolute privilege. The lid was off’.[[602]](#footnote-603) Rumours had swirled around various newsrooms before this of Thorpe’s homosexuality. Scott was purposely indiscreet, but found he had trouble getting a hearing, but now, with his story in a court record, the papers felt they were able to successfully print the details. They employed the newspaper trick of grounding headlines within the language of denial, which simultaneously spreads the allegations while distancing the paper from any endorsement of them: ‘THORPE DENIES SEX AFFAIR’ ran the *London Evening News* (29 January 1976), whereas the left-leaning *Observer* went with ‘SEX WITH MAN: CLAIM DENIED’ the following day.[[603]](#footnote-604) In this respect, the reporting of the Thorpe affair was following in precedent that of the Profumo affair, with newspapers reluctant to report until details had been made in a public forum, be that a court or the House of Commons. For some of Thorpe’s fellow Liberal MPs, the press coverage was nonetheless unacceptable, given the technically unproven nature of Scott’s allegations. When Cyril Smith published his autobiography in 1977, he declared that ‘it is a book that defended Thorpe from the Thorpe affair… it is meant to be a bitter attack on the British press and what I consider was a disgraceful episode in their history’.[[604]](#footnote-605) In October 1976, after Thorpe had resigned as Liberal leader but before he was charged for attempted murder, John Whale reflected in *The Political Quarterly* that ‘the most striking thing about the way the national newspapers dealt with the Scott charge is that they never, as organisations, asked themselves: “Does it matter?”’[[605]](#footnote-606) ‘They took is as read,’ Whale continued, ‘that a homosexual past, if proved, would bar a man from high political office.’[[606]](#footnote-607) However, as Donna Smith concludes, ‘the press could claim to be reacting to outside events, reporting rather than manufacturing [Thorpe’s] press coverage’, a critical dividing line between the coverage of scandals at this time, and how they were beginning to be reported a decade later.[[607]](#footnote-608)

Jeremy Thorpe was not the only politician in the 1970s to be involved in a scandal that prominently featured homosexuality. Maureen Colquhoun was first elected as Labour MP for the marginal constituency of Northampton North from the February 1974 election, having previously worked as an economist and Labour’s national women’s officer from 1966, and was outspoken for feminist and women’s issues for the rest of her life. She had garnered press coverage throughout her parliamentary career for these positions, including attempts to get more women onto a parliamentary committee adjudicating on the future of abortion law and a campaign to provide better protection in law for sex workers, to protect them ‘from exploitation and victimisation’.[[608]](#footnote-609) Unbeknownst to the public or her constituency party, Colquhoun had left her husband of twenty-six years in 1973 to live with a woman. While an initial report in the *Daily Mail* in April 1976 referred to Colquhoun’s ‘close friend Babs Todd’, the same reporter disclosed in June that Todd was ‘a contributor to the lesbian magazine *Sappho*’.[[609]](#footnote-610) Colquhoun had been outed in all but name, and any inference was not needed by *The Sun* running an article entitled ‘THE GAY MP’. The paper’s growing interest in Colquhoun’s private life led her to file a complaint with the Press Council, with was rejected in December 1976 and reported gleefully by the *Mail* under the headline ‘Mail Was Right to Investigate Woman MP’s Marriage’, even though the paper had been censured for intruding unfairly into the privacy of Colquhoun’s partner. The *Daily Express* felt the need to state that Colquhoun was ‘convent-educated’ when explaining that Colquhoun was ‘living with a girl-friend’, allowing readers to draw their own inferences about Colquhoun’s fallen behaviour.[[610]](#footnote-611) Colquhoun continued to receive criticism and abuse for years after the breaking of the story. Jean Rook, also of the *Express*, was particularly vituperative, declaring in a 5 April 1978 column that ‘THE GAY LADY IS A BORE’.[[611]](#footnote-612) This prompted Colquhoun to write an open reply a week later, telling Rook that ‘you don’t get understand that at a last a public person had told Fleet Street’s Peeping Toms that homosexuality is irrelevant to the proper performance of a responsible job. It had made you insecure because your prying days are numbered’.[[612]](#footnote-613) The *Daily Express* sought to adjudicate on the matter in a piece on 21 April entitled ‘Was Rook Right?’, publishing readers’ takes on ‘the clash between columnist and MP’: the written submissions were overwhelmingly negative. ‘Most of us look with sympathy on people born with a “kink” and are prepared to them let them mix in our free society’, wrote one responder, ‘but we are not prepared to let them impose their will upon us’.[[613]](#footnote-614)

Colquhoun’s hope that she could prove homosexuality was no bar to public service was not to be, however: Colquhoun’s sexuality and advocacy of feminist causes led to her deselected by her constituency Labour Party as their candidate for the next general election. Despite a successful appeal to the party’s National Executive Committee, Colquhoun lost her seat to the Conservatives at the 1979 general election. ‘Being a lesbian ruined my political career’, Colquhoun reflected in her memoirs.[[614]](#footnote-615) The overall hostility to Colquhoun after her outing as a lesbian cannot be untwined from her support for feminist causes. Perfectly expressing the prejudices of the age, a report in *The Spectator* thundered that ‘a speech in favour of women’s liberation has quite different validity if one knows it is delivered by a practising lesbian’.[[615]](#footnote-616) The accusation of lesbianism had long been used as a slur, particularly by hard-line anti-feminists, as a means of discrediting their opponents, the implication being that the root of women’s liberation was the breakup of the ‘traditional’ heterosexual family. However, for our purposes the true significance of the Maureen Colquhoun scandal lies in the way it was reported by the press: it was one of the first instances of the newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail* in this instance, taking an active lead in uncovering a ‘scandal’, none of which contained any criminal wrongdoing. In this respect, it foreshadows changes to come in the next decade, with the crucial dividing line being the issue of Colquhoun’s homosexuality, and the fact she was a woman. This made the case newsworthy in the way that, at the time, it simply would not have been for a heterosexual male politician (discounting other considerations, such as were evident in the Profumo Affair): but as we shall see, this was not to remain the case into the 1980s and 1990s.

**The 1980s**

The 1980s can be best described as a period of transition for the reporting of the political scandal in Britain. Tabloid newspapers, due to the many changes previously outlined, began to flex their muscles. For one, they were willing to report details from a single unsubstantiated source, smashing through the conventions clearly still in practice in the previous decade, as demonstrated above. In addition, newspapers were much more to willing to create the story, to find the participants and give them a platform, the ‘kiss-and-tell’ so beloved of editors like Kelvin MacKenzie. Many political scandals occurred throughout the decade, involving politicians such as Tory party deputy chairman Jeffrey Archer and claims made that he had paid money to a prostitute. However, this section will focus on the Cecil Parkinson/Sara Keays affair, as its coverage and reception is highly revealing of the changing attitudes to the political scandal, and the travails of Jeffrey Archer, to demonstrate the increasing use of libel by those accused of misdemeanours by the tabloid press.

Cecil Parkinson had a good claim to be, as Matthew Parris described him, ‘the golden boy of early 1980s Tory politics’.[[616]](#footnote-617) Considered dashing and handsome by many, he appeared to be the epitome of Mrs Thatcher’s new Toryism, being a self-made man with impeccable family credentials, and an enthusiastic preacher of the Thatcherite gospel. He had fast become Mrs Thatcher’s favourite minister, and there was talk in some quarters that she was grooming him as a potential heir. Regardless of the veracity of this claim, Parkinson was judged to have performed admirably as party chairman, with responsibility for planning the 1983 election which had resulted in the biggest parliamentary landslide since 1945, and as a result Mrs Thatcher was determined to offer Parkinson the Foreign Office as a reward for his loyalty and service.[[617]](#footnote-618) However, it was on election day, after Mrs Thatcher and Parkinson, leaning out of the window, had shared the applause of the crowd gathered below Conservative Central Office, Parkinson confided to Mrs Thatcher had he would be unable to take on such a high-profile role as Foreign Secretary. He had been having an on-off affair for twelve years with his secretary Sarah Keays, 16 years his junior, and she was now pregnant with his child. Despite Parkinson claiming he told Mrs Thatcher that ‘I’m not sure whether I should be in your Cabinet at all’, she nevertheless proceeded to appoint him in the lesser role of Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.[[618]](#footnote-619)

Keays, angry that Parkinson had broken off the affair despite claims on her behalf that he had twice promised to marry her, took her story to the press, with *The Times* running a piece on 14 October 1983 entitled ‘I implored him to tell Thatcher’, which for the first time substantiated stories that had been running for previous few months. Six days earlier, on 8 October, a cartoon in the *Daily Express*, entitled ‘The Tory Minister and the Ex-Secretary’, had featured a row of seven babies in prams outside 10 Downing Street, with the accompanying caption from a policeman staying “it’s a full Cabinet Meeting sir!”, after *Private Eye* had first revealed her pregnancy on 5 October.[[619]](#footnote-620) In the *Times* piece Keays claimed, in a way that was to become wearily familiar, that she was only speaking out because she believed that it was ‘her duty to do so’.[[620]](#footnote-621) As rumours had swirled within political circles that Parkinson believed ‘a quiet abortion is greatly to be preferred to a scandal’, Keays angrily responded that ‘I was not aware that political expediency was sufficient grounds for an abortion under the 1967 Act, quite apart from the fact that I could not have contemplated it’.[[621]](#footnote-622) Keays wrote that in August she had been chased by reporters from the *Daily Mail*, one of whom collided their car with hers. Though Parkinson had managed to tough it out until this point, the revelations meant he felt he had no choice but to resign on the same day that Keays’ side of the story appeared in *The Times*.[[622]](#footnote-623) This did not do much good for Keays, however, with an editorial in the same paper had published her story praising Parkinson, stating that ‘Men who tell the truth and face their responsibilities are, in my view, far more worthy of public office than men who take the easy way out. I trust Cecil Parkinson for having done the brave thing’.[[623]](#footnote-624) ‘There is something disgusting’, opined Matthew Parris, ‘about the way the media can make a normalisation of human relations impossible, then scream its outrage that the relations are not normal.’[[624]](#footnote-625)

In giving Sara Keays a platform to comment on the stories regarding her relationship with Cecil Parkinson, *The Times* set a template extremely familiar to anyone with a modicum of knowledge of the coverage of the modern political scandal: a jilted lover seeking to set the record straight, to get their side of the story across whatever the consequences for the political figure involved. Keays later wrote a book about the affair, published in 1985 as *A Question of Judgement*. Matthew Parris recounts a recollection from Cecil Parkinson about the attitude of press editors that is highly revealing, and says much about the commercial imperatives driving these shifting attitudes towards scandal coverage. Parkinson recalls how his house in Hertfordshire, the day after Keays’ story had broken, was besieged by journalists who had camped outside overnight. Parkinson received a call from an editor of a daily newspaper, some of whose journalists were part of the station outside Parkinson’s house, advising Parkinson not to say anything ‘to his jackals or to anyone else’s’.[[625]](#footnote-626) When Parkinson suggested not unreasonably that the editor could simply call off his reporters, the editor ‘replied that as long as other people’s men were there, he could not move his!’[[626]](#footnote-627)

Jeffrey Archer had served as a Conservative MP from 1969 to 1974, stepping down at the October general election of that year due to a looming case of bankruptcy. Best-known as today as a novelist, he began writing books in order to lessen his financial difficulties. Appointed deputy chairman of the Conservative Party in 1985 by Mrs Thatcher, Archer was to, in the words of Alwyn Turner, ‘add to the gaiety of the nation with a hugely entertaining libel case’.[[627]](#footnote-628) In October 1986, a five page splash in the *News of the World* had alleged that Archer had paid a prostitute, Monica Coughlan, £2,000 to leave the country. The accusations led him to resign his deputy chairmanship (‘like the title of his latest novel, as a matter of honour’, quipped the *Daily Mail*)**.**[[628]](#footnote-629)Whereas the *News of the World* had been careful not to accuse or infer that Archer had actually *done* anything with Coughlan, the *Daily Star* was not so prudent, claiming a sexual relationship between the two.[[629]](#footnote-630) Nevertheless, Archer began libel proceedings against both publications, and while the *News of the World* settled out of court, admitting they had libelled Archer in their coverage, the attitude of the *Star*’s proprietor was more combative, asking ‘why should we give in to that little shit?’[[630]](#footnote-631) It was a decision that editor Lloyd Turner would come to regret, costing the paper half a million pounds in 1987 and leading to his sacking six weeks after the end of the trial. Libel proceedings would go on to become a standard recourse for politicians who believed that they had been wronged in the pages of the press, but this did not lead the press to back off reporting such stories as the 1990s beckoned, quite the reverse, as the next section will demonstrate. A *Daily Mail* ‘Comment’ piece from October 1986, when the allegations first emerged, was particularly revealing of the prevailing attitudes of the role of the scandal in modern politics. ‘The more categorically he protests his sinless lack of involvement with this call-girl’, the piece said, ‘the more deeply he underlines his own folly in bounding so blithely into the tacky trap set up for him by her and by the sleazy journalism of the *News of the World*.’[[631]](#footnote-632) While the *News of the World* is attacked as sleazy, the piece nonetheless gives the strong indication that such set-ups and potential scandals are a fact of existence for a politician, who should do well to avoid implicating themselves in them. As for Archer, he was infamously charged for perjury in 2000 over evidence he had given at the 1987 trial, and served two years in prison.

In a May 1987 piece, feminist author Germaine Greer took the pages of the *Daily Mail*, reflecting that after the travails of American presidential hopeful Gary Hart, ‘the Americans are now congratulating themselves that they have achieved a real British sex scandal’.[[632]](#footnote-633) For Greer, ‘a genuine British scandal involves real sleaze and murk, humiliating kinkiness and desperate shifts to overcome impotence’.[[633]](#footnote-634) All of these were to feature in some form or another in the political sex scandals of the twentieth century’s final decade.

**The 1990s**

‘There is a good chance,’ John Major reflected in his memoirs, published in 1999, ‘that, when many of the achievements of the last Conservative government this century have been forgotten, people will still remember one word: ‘sleaze’.[[634]](#footnote-635) This section will examine a number of the ‘sleaze’ scandals that seemed to plague John Major’s administration, becoming ‘one of the silliest sagas in modern British politics’ in Major’s words.[[635]](#footnote-636) The behaviour of the press was absolutely crucial, playing the leading role in searching for scandalous stories, even if this meant the threat of libel from those involved and the possibility of paying substantial damages. There was a widespread perception that sleaze was the principal factor in the downfall of the government at the 1997 election, feeding a ‘public belief that the Conservative Party as an institution had been in government for too long, and had got into bad habits. As the mood music to the final act, sleaze chimed with the times’, in Major’s own words.[[636]](#footnote-637) This section will examine a number of the ‘sleaze’ scandals of the 1990s, to investigate how they were reported and to demonstrate the change in coverage that had occurred since the 1970s. In so doing, it will also consider, as Major had predicted his memoirs that historians would eventually, why ‘sleaze’ was so damaging, ‘when the behaviour of Conservative MPs in the 1990s was no more culpable – and often less so – than that of earlier generations of politicians’.[[637]](#footnote-638)

To understand the resonance sleaze had it is necessary to briefly chart the state of Major’s government in the period. After replacing Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister in November 1990, Major had substantially revitalised the Tory image as to be able to lead the party to a surprise victory over Labour in the April 1992 general election, who had appeared to have a commanding lead over the Tories until Mrs Thatcher’s defenestration. After that election, there was an aura of invincibility around the party after a fourth election victory. When in her 1993 memoirs Mrs Thatcher described the Callaghan government as ‘perhaps the last ever’ Labour government in Britain, it did not seem an entirely ridiculous statement to make.[[638]](#footnote-639) This honeymoon, however, was not to last long, for the Conservative majority in the House of Commons has been slashed from over 100 to 21: a loss of just ten colleagues from the chamber would wipe out the government majority. In this context, it is easy to see why scandals and misdemeanours, and their potential for resignations and by-elections, took on a perceived greater importance compared to the 1980s, when the Conservatives had maintained a commanding parliamentary dominance. In addition, the Black Wednesday debacle of September 1992 had fatally undermined the Conservative reputation for economic competence, when Britain had crashed out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) after a shambolic process whereby interest rates were raised to 15 per cent in an attempt to bolster the pound. A reputation for economic competence is essential to the electoral appeal of the modern Conservative Party, allowing it to retain the loyalty of voters who might otherwise look unfavourably on some of its other policies. In addition, debates over the Maastricht Treaty, which transformed the European Economic Community into the European Union, had split the Conservative Party down the middle and resulted in a period of protracted public infighting, with Major caught on microphone lambasting the ‘bastards’ on his backbenches. All of this was to lead to a culture of decline in the reporting of Major’s administration from which governments find it difficult to recover: an unwritten but widely assumed feeling that a particular administration has run out of steam and has entered its terminal stages.

The first scandal of the Tory sleaze saga actually broke before Black Wednesday, in July 1992, and involved the Secretary of State for National Heritage (derided by the tabloids as ‘Minister for Fun’), David Mellor. It had been Mellor in the late 1980s, as minister responsible for press regulation, who had informed the newspaper industry that they were ‘drinking in the last chance saloon’ if they wished to retain self-regulation and avoid any regulation being introduced via statue. Chippindale and Horrie have outlined the attitude of *Sun* editor Kelvin MacKenzie towards Mellor, who believed that Mellor was ‘generally a talentless, smug, pro-European toff who definitely deserved to have the most enormous razor-toothed ferret sent up his bum at the first opportunity’.[[639]](#footnote-640) In the summer of 1992, when John Major asked David Calcutt, who had last reported on the subject of press regulation in 1990, to look again at the topic (presumably to recommend some sort of statutory press regulation this time), the tabloid press now had a motive to discredit Mellor, and discredit they did when they discovered that Mellor had been conducting an affair with the actress Antonia de Sancha. It was the *Sunday People*, however, rather than *The Sun*, which were first to publish the story, providing lurid detail about his sexual preferences and alleging his ‘bonking’ meant he was too tired to carry out ministerial duties.[[640]](#footnote-641)

The press had obtained all the information about the affair by bugging de Sancha’s West London flat, with the cooperation of her landlord: much had changed since the tabloids had to wait for details to appear in court proceedings or Parliament, driven by the attitudes of editors like MacKenzie and Bill Hagerty of the *Sunday People*. There was also no aspect of prurience with regards to chronicling Mellor’s adulteries, with discussion of how Mellor enjoyed ‘shrimping’ (having his toes sucked) and, most infamously, making love in the strip of his beloved Chelsea football club. That his proclivities were highlighted by the press is an understatement, summed up in by *Sun* headline when Mellor eventually resigned in September entitled ‘MELLOR QUITS AT LAST: TOE JOB TO NO JOB’.[[641]](#footnote-642) Photographs were published on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*, on 20 July, under the headline ‘DAVID MELLOR’S LOVE NEST’, of a distinctly shabby mattress on the floor where Mellor and de Sancha had conducted their affair: it is difficult to overstate just how reflective this is of a profound change towards political figures, that publishing such images on the front page could be justified as being in the public interest.[[642]](#footnote-643) The *Daily Express*, holding back somewhat compared to other publications, gave a platform to Mellor’s wife, with a front page on 22 July of ‘The Brave Face of Mrs Mellor’, echoing the sympathies expressed to John Stonehouse’s wife nearly twenty years previous.[[643]](#footnote-644)

In its ‘*Sun* Says’ leading article, the paper explicitly linked attempts at press regulation and accusations of hypocrisy as to why they had gone for Mellor in such a brutal way, proclaiming ‘They only want publicity when it suits them. Not when it suits the people who elected them. What a two-faced bunch so many of them are. It certainly was rich of Mellor to warn the press it was drinking in ‘Last Chance Saloon’ – while all the time he was playing the piano in the bordello next door.’[[644]](#footnote-645) This simple editorial sums up so much about the tabloid approach to politics and why the political sex scandal was becoming such an increasing element in this period. By referring to politicians as ‘they’, the paper is clearly positioning itself with the reader with a deliberately anti-establishment tone, reminding its readers – ‘who elected them’ – that the work of the paper is to represent and champion ‘the people’. It is explicit in linking its coverage of Mellor and his affair with the privacy bill, but covers accusations of self-interest by linking it to a wider campaign against the corruption of political elites, with ‘so many of them’ described as a ‘two faced bunch’. Bill Hagerty, editor of the *Sunday People* which broke the story, defending the publication by stating that ‘the only reason for publishing the story was that it was in the public interest…. [Mellor] was a pompous hypocrite. He’d used his family in his election address. He was the minister in charge of the press. He was the one who talked about the last chance saloon!’[[645]](#footnote-646)

It was not just the tabloid press, however, who revelled in the details of the affair: *The Times*, in its round-up of 1992, delighting in reporting on De Sancha’s verdict of Mellor as a lover: “OK, so he’s no Clint Eastwood”, she claimed.[[646]](#footnote-647) In a technique typical of the more upmarket papers, details are revealed under the guise of reporting what the tabloids have revealed on a topic: in this instance, that *The Sun* had uncovered that De Sancha ‘once starred in a soft-porn movie in which she was raped by a pizza-delivery man. *The Sun* wanted answers to key questions, notably: “Did she hold the sausage?”’ In formulating its coverage in this way, papers like *The Times* are able to bring all the gossipy and entertaining incident as uncovered by the tabloids whilst providing sufficient distance from themselves, to avoid any hint that they condone the methods used to acquire the information or its relevance to the story at hand.[[647]](#footnote-648) Even *The* Guardian, that most earnest of papers, was recalling the affair with fondness over two years later, with an excruciating limerick featuring such lines as ‘the headlines went on unabated and with this scandal we were sated’ and ‘of David Mellor and his lady friend and hurried nights they did spend’[[648]](#footnote-649). As for De Sancha, she came to the same conclusion that Sara Keays had nearly ten years previously. Though not writing a book like Keays did, she engaged publicist Max Clifford to sell ‘her’ side of the story to the press, making around £30,000 in the process.[[649]](#footnote-650) Mellor never returned to frontline politics, and lost his seat at the 1997 election.

There was a sense that sleaze came to define pretty much every other aspect of Major’s Conservative government. In September 1992, Major phoned *Sun* editor Kelvin MacKenzie, to enquire about how the paper would respond to the Black Wednesday fiasco. ‘Well John, let me put it this way’, replied MacKenzie, ‘I’ve got a large bucket of shit lying on my desk – and tomorrow morning I’m going to pour it over your head’.[[650]](#footnote-651) Surely enough, the following day’s edition was blazoned with the headline, ‘Now we’ve ALL been screwed by the Cabinet’, tying in this particular policy failure to a wider narrative of sleaze and corruption, despite being just five months after *The Sun*’s enthusiastic endorsement of Major at the general election.[[651]](#footnote-652) Dunleavy and Weir, writing at the height of sleaze stories in 1995, argued that the term allowed the linkage of separate issues in ‘an innovative but easily understandable way, in the process of automatically making sleaze take on ‘pseudo-crisis’ features’. The *Sun* headline linking sleaze with economic incompetence is as clear a demonstration of this linkage as one could hope to find.[[652]](#footnote-653)

After Mellor, the insistences of sexual scandal among government ministers appeared to be endless. Transport minister Steven Norris was caught in a scandal involving his five mistresses, despite having a wife and two children back in his constituency, and the tabloids delighted in making sure that all of Norris’ mistresses knew of each other’s existence in short time. Transport minister Tim Yeo was found to have fathered a child with his former lover, now six months old, with the *News of the World* trawling through his interviews in his local press to find that he once stated that ‘it is in everyone’s interests to reduce broken families and the number of single parents, and I have seen from my constituency the consequences of marital breakdown.’[[653]](#footnote-654) Justifying their decision to report the details, the ‘*Sun* Says’ editorial declared that ‘a man’s private life is the most reliable guide to his character… People have the right to know the TRUTH so they can decide whether a man can be trusted with their vote.’[[654]](#footnote-655) Conservative MP Stephen Milligan, was found dead at his home, ‘slumped over the kitchen table, naked apart from a pair of stockings, a cord around his neck, a black stocking over his head, and a plastic carrier bag over that’ and a piece of satsuma in his mouth. The coroner ruled death by misadventure, mostly likely due to autoerotic asphyxiation.[[655]](#footnote-656) John Major in his memoirs reflected on how commonplace such stories became: ‘It soon became a routine. The phone would ring at Finings [Major’s constituency home] on Saturday, and I would be warned by my office that ‘there could be a difficult story’ the next day. I was never sure if the story would be printed, or what the details would be, or whether it was true. Usually I knew it ought to have been beneath attention. Always, I knew it would cause a storm’.[[656]](#footnote-657)

In his use of political rhetoric, John Major did not always help himself, however, infamously so in the case of the ‘Back to Basics’ campaign, launched in October 1993 at the Conservative Party conference to try to reignite momentum and a sense of purpose behind Major’s ailing administration. Major’s speech, in which he venerated what he described as the ‘old values’ of ‘neighbourliness, decency, courtesy’, had declared that it was ‘time to return to those old core values, time to get back to basics, to self-discipline for yourself and your family and not shuffling off on other people and the state’.[[657]](#footnote-658) The speech was widely interpreted as the beginning of a moral crusade, with the *Daily Express* opining that the speech ‘was war on trendy values and the permissive society of the past 20 years’.[[658]](#footnote-659) Former Conservative leader Edward Heath, writing in *The Guardian*, also interpreted the call in such terms, seeing the speech as ‘motivated by a certain moral attitude, or at least the belief that the public would react favourably to what appeared to have a moral content’, and urged Major to abandon the rhetoric ‘because it only leads to the past’.[[659]](#footnote-660)

Major, for his part, always maintained the speech was not meant as an opening salvo in anti-permissive campaign, and in his memoirs he wrote that ‘I had no plan for a puritanical moral crusade’, but nonetheless it was extraordinarily naïve of Major not to realise that his speech would be interpreted in this way. At the same conference, two days previously, Secretary of State for Social Security Peter Lilley had issued a savage attack on single mothers as benefit cheats.[[660]](#footnote-661) Given the ongoing raft of sexual scandals that seemed to be engulfing the government, Major had handed the tabloid press the perfect ammunition with which to justify their investigations in the private lives of Cabinet ministers and other high-ranking officials. Despite Major often remaining loyal to government ministers embroiled in sex scandals, the effects of his Back to Basics rhetoric (detailed below) were long-lasting. Matthew Parris has recounted how chairmen of local Conservative associations would bombard Major with letters demanding the dismissal of ministers involved in sex scandals, citing their behaviour as incompatible with the drive for moral standards that they had believed ‘Back to Basics’ was all about.[[661]](#footnote-662) Major summed up the consequence of this best himself in his autobiography, recalling that from the day he made the speech, any commentary on a scandal would feature ‘an opening paragraph along the lines of ‘Prime Minister John Major was last night severely embarrassed in his call for a return to moral basics by the shock disclosure that…’’[[662]](#footnote-663) In many ways, the real intentions behind the Back to Basics campaign – a focus on the corrosive effects of crime and a determination to get to its root causes, for example – were to prefigure Tony Blair’s later determination to be ‘tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime’. Alas, as with the Citizen’s Charter, it was a call that was yet to cut through.

1994 was the year that ‘sleaze’ as a concept, however, decisively *did* cut through into the mainstream of political discourse, with 64 newspaper articles mentioning the term compared to six the previous year. This would drop slightly to 57 and 51 in 1995 and 1996, before rocketing to 229 in 1997, the year of the general election.[[663]](#footnote-664) This clearly demonstrates the way in which the concept of sleaze came to dominate media discussion of that year’s election defeat, which saw the Conservatives suffer their worst electoral defeat since 1832. The same authors also observed that in actuality, the term was much more often used in the left-leaning *Guardian* and *Observer* than in papers like the *Times* and *The Sunday Times*.[[664]](#footnote-665) For setting the overall tone of discussion, however, the responsibility lies with tabloids like *The Sun*. When Kelvin MacKenzie left the editorship of the paper in 1994, it had increased its margin over the *Daily Mirror* of 1.3 million copies a day, and even the paper’s usual detractors recognised its appeal. ‘While MacKenzie’s *Sun* became a byword for excess and bad taste’, reflected a piece in *The* Guardian, ‘it also sold by the million as it perfected the difficult trick of touching both the pulse and the funny-bones of its readers at the same time. “Freddie Starr ate my hamster” and “Paddy Pantsdown” were simply good jokes’.[[665]](#footnote-666) As Alan Doing et al. have demonstrated, sleaze continued to be used as a term beyond the fall of John Major’s administration, well into the twenty-first century, even if it never quite reached the ubiquity of use that it attained in the mid-to-late 1990s.[[666]](#footnote-667)

**Conclusion**

It has been the argument of this chapter that the study of the political scandal, particularly the sex scandal, can provide a valuable insight into a nation’s political culture, being a demonstration of how a society views its political elites and the degree of deference which it believes they should be shown. By examining scandals from the 1970s to the 1990s, the range of the long 1980s, it becomes clear that something profound changed in the reporting by the press of the political sex scandal. In this period, any vestiges of deference towards the private lives of politicians truly disappeared. It is hard to conclude that the politicians of the 1980s and 1990s were any more morally lax or ill-behaved than their predecessors in centuries gone by: as John Major himself put it, ‘it is my belief that the level of sin in our political system holds fairly steady. It is the media appetite for reporting it which goes in waves’.[[667]](#footnote-668) What was different, however, was that the papers constructed a narrative that reporting the intimate details of sexual liaisons were relevant to the way that politicians conducted themselves in offices, being ‘the best judge of a man’, as the *Sun* put it. This was accompanied with an escalating tone in coverage, with hysterical front pages almost screaming about ‘BONKING’, ‘LOVE RATS’, ‘CHEATS’ and the like. In addition, the way such scandals were uncovered changes considerably. As witnessed with the Thorpe affair, Norman Scott had told almost anyone who would listen about his affair with Jeremy Thorpe, the problem being that nobody would listen: only when the allegations appeared in the court record were papers willing to act on it and make them public. It is hard to imagine the *Sun* of Kelvin MacKenzie’s time as editor demonstrating any such restraint.

There had, of course, always been a strain of criticism, usually from upmarket papers, about the focus on the political sex scandal, and the influence of tabloid journalism on political discourse throughout the period. Anna Clark has summarised this view which posits that ‘scandals often seem to exemplify the worst of trivial, sordid, opportunistic politics’.[[668]](#footnote-669) On Boxing Day 1993, Simon Hoggart took to the pages of *The Observer* amid swirling rumours about US President Bill Clinton’s numerous alleged infidelities. ‘There is a double hypocrisy in all reports of political rumpy-pumpy’, the first being ‘the newspapers’ need to find a public interest justification’, and the second that ‘our interest in politicians’ private lives is itself shameful and furtive’. Citing Cecil Parkinson’s affair with his secretary, Hoggart conceded that the notion of never being intrigued by sex scandals ‘is simply daft’, but he nevertheless laments a focus on sex scandals as a ‘self-contemplation and navel-gazing that makes an anchorite look like a lager lout’. He argued that the coverage of scandals by *The Sun*, by coining phrases such as ‘Paddy Pantsdown’, have ‘set a precedent for portraying the straying politician as a silly clown, an *opéra bouffe* figure’. ‘We should admit’, declares Hoggart, ‘we cannot expect all public figures to adhere to a bourgeois ideal of the perfect family – unless they themselves try to impose it upon us… maybe we can find a way of knowing all and forgiving most of it’.[[669]](#footnote-670)

The article is a perfect articulation and summation of those who took issue at the time with the construction and presentation of a political sex scandal. In seeking to be clear that it is only natural for such stories to arouse the interest of readers, Hoggart is clearly placing the blame on papers like *The Sun* for presenting coverage around sex scandals in a sensationalised, hyperbolic and occasionally moralising tone. Even though it is not mentioned directly in the article, the title given to it – ‘Sex, Lies and Hypocrisy in Search of Circulation’ – gives a clear demonstration to the disapproval that so many high-minded publications had towards the tabloid press: that such details were used unashamedly to attract readers and boost sales figures. The *Sun* in this period, and particularly the figure of Kelvin MacKenzie, was able to raise of the heckles of high-minded journalists for decades after his departure from the role of editor. In an excoriating opinion piece, published in *The Guardian* in September 2012, Tanya Gold fumed that MacKenzie ‘presided over a culture of fury, malice and lies. It was not journalism, designed to enlighten. It was anti-journalism, designed to obscure, and he corrupted a generation of his own journalists and political discourse generally, as he created a newspaper in his own image.’[[670]](#footnote-671) An example of this corruption of political discourse that Gold presents centres on a famous stunt the paper ran during the 1987 election, when mediums and psychics were employed to contact the spirits of famous leaders from history: ‘The only ghost to endorse Labour was Joseph Stalin, as Genghis Khan was a “don’t know”.’[[671]](#footnote-672) Reiterating her point, for Gold this demonstrates that MacKenzie ‘did more to corrupt political debate than anyone.’[[672]](#footnote-673)

How much of an influence did this tone of coverage have on the minds of everyday voters, particularly the sex scandals and Tory ‘sleaze’? An academic study conducted in 1998 tried to consider the extent to which the reputation of ‘sleaze’ had contributed to the Conservative wipe-out at the election the previous year. In only one constituency, that of Neil Hamilton in Tatton, was it shown to be the most important factor in electors minds when casting their votes. In addition, TV journalist Martin Bell stood in Tatton as an independent anti-corruption candidate, with the other opposition parties standing aside to give him a clear run. Such conditions allowed Bell to win over 60 per cent of the vote, but perhaps focused the minds of the electors of Tatton onto the topic of sleaze and corruption in a way that might not have been the case had the seat witnessed a more usual spread of opposition candidates.[[673]](#footnote-674) What criticism of the like of Gold also misses is that, for many people, the tabloid newspapers were seen as a bit of fun. As Bingham and Conboy have noted, their emphasis on filtering everything through the lens of entertainment meant they were designed to be treated as such. The idea of a psychic communing with the spirit of Genghis Khan to get the warlord’s view of Neil Kinnock and Labour party policy is so plainly ridiculous that it is unlikely many readers took such coverage as serious political comment.[[674]](#footnote-675) In addition, ‘consumers also tended to choose newspapers that matched their own political inclinations: there was always an extent of preaching to the converted.’[[675]](#footnote-676)

Crudely put, as it often is, sex sells. ‘Ultimately, citizens are curious about why a person would jeopardise his or her family life and marriage for temporary pleasure’, argues Latrice Thompson, which is probably the best reason why newspapers placed such a premium on the sex scandal in their coverage: it is titillating and attracts interest.[[676]](#footnote-677) After the scandals involving Cecil Parkinson and Jeffrey Archer, Mrs Thatcher confided to her friend Woodrow Wyatt about her fears: ‘We can take one or two people running off the normal track but when everybody starts doing it, it’s far more difficult to sustain the position’, she worried, as ‘when behaviour like this becomes the norm then the public don’t like it’.[[677]](#footnote-678) How much this is the case is hard to ever truly know: as one scholar put it, ‘some, politicians in the main, claim that reports give an exaggerated impression of sleaze, the public wrongly extrapolating from a few to the many. The public, for its part, believes that the cases which come to light are a random but typical sample. It is hard to know where along this spectrum the truth lies, but as already said, and it needs repeating, *that reality matters less than the reality of public opinion*’.[[678]](#footnote-679) While it is true that, as Michael Johnston has demonstrated, respondents judged dubious actions more critically when performed by people acting in public roles than by people acting in a purely private capacity, nonetheless sex scandals only seem to appear fatal for a government when they reinforce pre-existing perceptions of an administration that is tired and past its best.[[679]](#footnote-680) This goes someway to explaining why the sex scandals of the 1980s and 1990s had a very different impact on the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major respectively, neither of whom were personally tainted by scandal (Major’s affair with fellow MP Edwina Currie emerged only after he had left office). Regardless of this, there is a degree to which, in a free market economy, we get the press we deserve: as Chippindale and Horrie put it in their study of the history of *The Sun*:

*‘Public hypocrisy over tabloid behaviour knew few bounds. The punters might complain about the outrages, but the papers leapt out of the shops when there was a good, intrusive kiss-and-tell story… people said they wanted ‘responsible’ newspapers full of edifying and uplifting material. But, for the most part, they bought the exact opposite’.[[680]](#footnote-681)*

The scandal culture that first emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s was bred of very specific circumstances. Fierce competition between newspapers, with a choice in the 1990s ‘of ten national dailies and nine Sunday newspapers whose combined circulations averaged about 22 million’ throughout the decade, further exacerbated trends towards viewing practically all news through the lens of entertainment, to reach more and more readers from whom politics was not a huge part of their lives. Viewed this way, the political scandals of the period to readers like the *Sun* involve a raft of celebrities no different in importance to royalty or other figures, and perhaps even less so. In an article reflecting on the impact of the 2009 expenses scandal, Nicholas Allen and Sarah Birch observed that being politically engaged and familiar with the detail of political scandals ‘does not by itself lead to a great concern with misbehaviour. If anything, attentiveness seems to condition citizens into being more relaxed about reported misconduct’.[[681]](#footnote-682) Significantly, though Labour believed that they had *de facto*benefited from the Tory sleaze scandals due to the damage they wreaked on the reputation of the government, they themselves were extremely reluctant to use the details of sex scandals to attack the government. This is demonstrated in the recollections of Bill Hagerty, editor of the *Sunday People*, a Labour paper which broke the Mellor story, who recounted on attending a party at Peter Mandelson’s flat that ‘I knew a lot of the shadow cabinet. But a couple of them really didn’t want to talk to me. They were polite but icy’.[[682]](#footnote-683) Hagerty continued:

*‘What we surmised was that it wasn’t that they disapproved of us kicking Mellor, but that there were skeletons around in their or more likely their colleagues’ cupboards that if we could do it to Mellor, we could do it to them. And I think that’s why there was this slight feeling of disapproval. Publicly they didn’t go for him. They were very clever, and that was a lot to do with Mandelson. They didn’t go for the Tories over sex*’.[[683]](#footnote-684)

The consequences of the trends evident throughout the long 1980s with regards to scandal culture would only become fully apparent in the period after it, most obviously and tragically in the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The tabloid’s obsession with her, to report every facet and detail of her life, to obtain pictures at seemingly any cost was judged by many to have caused the car accident in Paris that had claimed her life. When Diana’s brother, Earl Spencer, declared at her funeral that the press had ‘blood on its hands’, he echoed the sentiments of many in Britain, many who themselves had avidly consumed the content which the newspapers went to ever greater lengths to procure and to report. As such, it was many of those who created the demand that felt real anger at those who had provided the supply. Moving into the twenty-first century, with the rise of the internet and social media, it becomes apparent that the enormous cultural influence, if not power, the tabloid press enjoyed was always going to decline. However, for the new political masters of the age, an unerring belief in the power of the tabloid press to make and break administrations led to an obsession with ‘spin’, a word which became synonymous with the political phenomenon of New Labour, chasing the support of publications whose backing was only ever conditional, time-limited and of increasingly little relevance. Widespread disgust with tabloid behaviour reached its apex with the revelations in the early 2010s of the use of phone hacking to obtain stories and information, leading to the closure of the *News of the World* and declining sales of other publications. In his book *Hack Attack*, detailing the phone hacking affair, Nick Davies talks of ‘monstering’, the way the press inflicts ‘a savage and prolonged public attack on a target’s life, often aimed at the most private and sensitive part of their existence, their sexual behaviour, inflicting maximum pain, maximum humiliation’.[[684]](#footnote-685) As this chapter has demonstrated, this period witnessed the turning of such vitriol on politicians, driven by commercial motives, and chiming with a political culture less willing to accept that its political elites may be benign. Even if the publications that inculcated such a scandal culture have waned since their heyday, the impulses they represented and generated are very much alive and well.

**Conclusion**

*‘We are not the masters now. The people are the masters. We are the servants of the people. We will never forget that.’*[[685]](#footnote-686)

This thesis has been an examination of three distinct ‘subcultures’ of wider British political culture in the years of the long 1980s, defined for the purposes of this thesis as being the twenty-year period from 1974 to 1994, from the fall of Edward Heath’s Conservative administration to Tony Blair’s election as Leader of the Labour Party. Using such a chronological framework allows the historian to sidestep the traditional construction and framing of the period, so dominant in historiography and popular understanding, of the ‘Thatcher years’, in which the figure of the Prime Minister herself bends the chronology around her time in office. It has adopted a deep political culture approach, with political culture defined for the purpose of this thesis as ‘a short-hand expression to denote the emotional and attitudinal environment within which the political system operates’, as Dennis Kavanagh put it.[[686]](#footnote-687) Political culture, like any culture, is multifaceted, the outcome of endless encounters both negotiated and spontaneous, and it is beyond the scope of a single thesis to examine the entirety of any nation’s political culture. This thesis has therefore focused on three broad areas – politics on television, citizenship discourse and scandal culture – where change in this period is clearly evident, and which speak to the wider changes in Britain’s political culture at the time. Of course the political culture is, as Kavanagh noted, an analytical abstraction, but it nevertheless remains a useful one, particularly so for an era as dominated by certain figures and predefined by well-established, set narratives. Assumptions that people took for granted about the operation of the political system, or changes that were afoot or seen as inevitable, are incredibly revealing.

Television had an incalculable effect on the conduct of British politics. From nervous-footed beginnings in the decades following the end of the Second World War, it quickly became the dominant medium by which ordinary voters kept abreast of political affairs, and of how politicians attempted to present their political offer to the electorate. Examining a range of different programming from across the range of the thesis, including satire, current affairs programming and popular entertainment programmes, Chapter 1 demonstrates that politics and the ‘political’ simultaneously expanded and contracted throughout the period of the long 1980s. In terms of expansion, it became expected that political figures would feature on wider and wider varieties of programme, most notably that of the ‘chat show’, and as a consequence, a similar expectation arose that politicians had to be comfortable sharing details of their private lives to the electorate. They were doing so in environs consciously designed by producers and politicians alike to ‘humanise’ their subjects, with the heat of political debate removed from the questioning. Mrs Thatcher herself, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, pioneered this approach, and it was a crucial component of how she presented herself to the electorate. Nevertheless, there was a significant contraction of political coverage too: the detail with which policies and other political matters could expect to be addressed and examined declined significantly from the 1970s to the 1990s. As shown in Chapter 1, it was not uncommon in the 1970s to have largely unmoderated discussions between politicians, who could be expected to show a level of decorum to each other whatever their personal animosities or political differences. By the 1990s this was unthinkable. While not reaching the level of abrasiveness familiar to those any viewer of political programming in the twenty-first century, there nonetheless had been a significant shift to a more combative approach by the 1990s. Given the centrality of television to most people’s lives in the late twentieth century, its approach to politics is an incredibly important component of British political culture in this period.

Due to Britain’s unique constitutional history and legal arrangements, the idea of the British as citizens rather than subjects implies a deliberate and concerted shift in emphasis, from deference to the claiming of rights, evident in the shift of the phrase from its associations with law and order towards issues of political rights. The rhetoric of the citizen and citizenship proliferated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and, as Chapter 2 argues, was expressive of a strain of discontent in British political life, dismayed at the apparent impotence of the Left to mount a serious challenge to the hegemony of the Conservative Party. The concept of citizenship became a significant part of the discourse for a section of the Left that came to see radical constitutional reform as a necessity for the proper functioning of British democracy. It is the argument of Chapter 2 that, despite an undeniable disconnect between those who thought often about the details and consequences of citizen politics and the wider mass of the public, the rhetoric of citizenship came to have a significant influence on the wider political culture of the 1990s. As the language of citizenship was sufficiently nebulous and open to redefinition and reinterpretation, both the Labour and Conservative parties adopted the rhetoric of citizenships in the early 1990s. For both parties, it was a rhetoric reached for in an attempt to distinguish themselves from previous iterations of their respective parties. For Labour, citizenship politics and constitutional reform allowed the party to demonstrate radical credentials in a way that avoided connotations with the past activities of the hard left and, most importantly, would seemingly not alienate moderate voters. For the Tories, the discourse of citizenship formed a central plank of John Major’s attempt to articulate a distinctive message in the post-Thatcher period. Both of these developments are a significant part in the evolution of a less deferential political culture, as discussed below.

The political scandal cuts to the heart of the attitudes and assumptions that are such an integral component of a nation’s political culture. For an event or occurrence to invite scandal, to invite shock, societally agreed upon conditions of morality or codes of behaviour must have been transgressed: by stepping back and seeing how the political scandal was constructed and received, important features of a nation’s political culture can be discerned. Chapter 3 has illustrated how the political scandal evolved throughout the period of the long 1980s. At the start of the period in question, newspapers were cautious to report salacious details, and strove for all the material from which they drew to be publicly available and properly sourced. By the end of the period in question, a revolution in reporting had occurred, as by 1994, newspapers went out of their way to uncover scandals, particularly sex scandals, not waiting for the details to first appear in the courts or in parliament. In doing so, an aggressive new generation of tabloid editors were willing to use sexual misbehaviour and eyebrow-raising detail to not only sell millions of copies, but also to use the behaviour to make value judgements about the trustworthiness of Britain’s political elite. Tabloid behaviour created a climate whereby no stone was left unturned to report the details of political scandal, even if those details turned out to be partly or wholly untrue. In their treatment of politics as a matter of entertainment, tabloid newspapers did much to place politicians alongside other figures of celebrity, as figures to be ridiculed. This helped shape a generation of politicians that followed, who had a deep sense of horror of the power of the press to do the same to them, and speaks to a political culture much less willing to turn a blind eye to politicians’ misdeeds, even if they are entirely legal.

A number of commonalities can be abstracted from the three political ‘subcultures’ studied in depth across the three chapters of this thesis. The first of these is the decline of deference. In their watershed 1964 cross-country analysis of attitudes to the political system, *The Civic Culture*, authors Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba had identified Britain as by far the most ‘deferential’ of the five countries studied (the others being the United States, Germany, Italy and Mexico). Factors in this deference were, according to Kavanagh’s reflections, ‘the pragmatism and moderation of the political elites, the widespread consensus about the political procedures, and the ultimate deference to rulers’.[[687]](#footnote-688) As scholars such as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite have demonstrated, the story of the decline of deference in Britain is often told in class terms. It was certainly the case that the period witnessed a period of class dealignment. This is most easily evident in the way in which Mrs Thatcher was able to appeal to sections of the working class via the language of aspiration and opportunity, smashing through a ‘red wall’ in the south of England forty years before a similar occurrence in the North and Midlands, building a coalition that was able to sustain the Conservative Party in office for eighteen years. As Labour moderate Giles Radice MP found when interviewing many working-class southern voters in the early 1990s, many articulated the view that opportunity for the individual was ‘obviously Conservative. The Labour Party would put you in a group’.[[688]](#footnote-689) The language of ‘ordinariness’ was essential to this shift, with politics less and less based on appeal to specific class interest, and the catch-all language of ordinary people and ordinary working people being better applicable to a more individualist age.

Declining deference to political elites is evident in examples drawn from across the three political subcultures studied. The savagery of *Spitting Image* was initially shocking, but it only achieved sustained popularity because, ultimately, the public believed that politicians were fair game to be treated in this way, an expectation that such caricature was *de rigueur* for those set on a life in the political arena. This is similarly reflected in the fact that newspapers were able to sell millions of copies reporting the sordid details of the private sexual exploits of politicians. Television producers that engineered programmes that allowed politicians to reveal their ‘ordinary’ selves, or at least a constructed version of their ‘ordinary’ self, were doing so because they knew such a line of questioning would resonate with audiences. For the constitutional reformists of groups like Charter 88, they believed in actively articulating their preferences as ‘demands’, in the face of a political establishment that was antithetical to the proper functioning of Britain as a democracy. There is a consistent trend across the case studies to approach politics as a topic not automatically deserving of respect and elevation, and that if politicians want to gain the ear of the British people, that they must go to them and not expect the reverse.

Another commonality is a growing treatment of politics as just another facet of celebrity culture. This is a process which was equally being applied to senior members of the Royal Family at the same time, and is linked to the decline of deference, but only partly: after all, if we take celebrity to mean famous personalities, then Britain had long had celebrity politicians: Gladstone, Disraeli, Lloyd George and Churchill stand as obvious examples on that front. The tabloid approach to politics, recognising that for most of its readers politics has no great meaning to their everyday existence, reconceptualised the world of politics as a form of entertainment. In this sense, the biggest difference from before is that politicians had to compete for the public’s attention from other celebrities with whom a vast section of the media put on an equal, if not lesser, footing. Seen in this light, politicians are considerably less glamorous than the other figures jostling to occupy the narrow bandwidth of the nation. Though not explicitly articulated as such by the self-styled active citizens and constitutional reforms of Chapter 2, much of their rhetoric and conceptualisation of the dignity of politics can be viewed as a reaction to the growing celebrity culture which had so infected the world of the political.These groups were to find, however, that for the mass of the public, a decline in deference was not automatically met by a Newtonian equal-and-opposite rise in political participation and interest, and it is fair to say Charter 88 failed to compete with the decidedly more box-office approach to politics of the tabloid press. Constitutional reform was never an issue of burning importance for the vast majority of the public, and where citizen questions did mobilise a large constituency of opposition, such as opposition to the poll tax, it is fair to say the financial implications were a much more salient motivator. Nevertheless, that both main parties adopted the citizenship agenda, to different degrees, speaks to prominence of its discourse within the world of high politics.

The coming of the information and digital age in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century is often judged, correctly, to have wrought incalculable change to societies the world over, including the conduct of their politics, with the internet allowing communication across the world at a speed previously inconceivable. During the period of the thesis, when such changes were clearly on the horizon, there was periodic chatter among informed commentators of how such developments would have a profoundly beneficial effect on the conduct of British politics. Raymond Plant, professor of Politics at Southampton University, published a piece in *The Times* in July 1989 entitled ‘Push-Button Democracy’ which epitomises these claims. Reflecting on a Labour Party policy document, ‘Meet the Challenge, Make the Change’, which had included a commitment ‘to link every home in the country to an information network by the year 2000’, Plant argued that arguments for the current system of representative democracy ‘would be much less persuasive in an information network were established’.[[689]](#footnote-690) With no barriers to information, Planet argued, what was to become known as the internet would enable ‘each and every citizen to participate much more in democratic decision-making’.[[690]](#footnote-691) It is a view not dissimilar from those held by groups like Charter 88, rooted in the belief that Britain was in dire need of democratic reform: whilst they took the route of radical constitutional reform, others believed the information age would be a perfect time to transition to a direct, or ‘push button’ democracy. The case studies of this thesis also demonstrate that, far from dispelling many of the trends evident in the long 1980s that observers such as Professor Plant deplored, the information age was instead to extend and amplify them. The changing approach to politics pioneered on both television and in the popular press, with a premium placed on direct, snappy, ‘authentic’ political communication, was clearly transferred by politics onto the new digital platforms of social media in the twenty-first century. Ridicule, often savagely metered out, passed from the hands of tabloid editors to the everyday public, with ‘viral’ posts performing much the same function as once did a pithy newspaper headline.

In the process of researching and writing this thesis, and by taking a deep political culture approach, it became increasingly clear that the political project of New Labour was, in so many respects, born of the convulsions in political culture of the long 1980s. As such, this thesis can stand as a corrective to the usual story of the rise of New Labour as a political project, beyond the conventional narratives rooted in a policy accommodation with the central tenets of Thatcherism. Throughout the 1997 election campaign, Tony Blair told journalist Andrew Rawnsley that ‘since the Labour Party was founded in 1900, we have had five Labour governments. All were, in varying degrees, failures. This is our sixth and perhaps last chance. We have got to get it right this time’.[[691]](#footnote-692) In many respects, the way New Labour attempted to ‘get it right’ relied heavily on the changes in political culture as outlined in this thesis.

New Labour from its inception was calibrated for the age of television news and the ‘soundbite’, with Tony Blair appearing effortlessly at ease with the format. Such qualities were very much in evidence in a Labour Party political broadcast, the fourth of the 1997 general election campaign, broadcast on 24 April. Produced by award-winning ‘fly on the wall’ documentary maker Molly Dineen, the *Financial Times* told its viewers to ‘set your videos: Blair “the documentary” hits the airwaves tonight’.[[692]](#footnote-693) It is a fair summation: the broadcast features the Labour leader in a variety of ‘everyday’ situations, playing football, playing tennis, pouring tea from a teapot, eating breakfast with his children, speaking from a moving car or train, being truly a product of a political culture in which ‘ordinariness’ had triumphed any notion of class. Blair draws attention to this specifically. Dineen, from behind the camera, peppers the observations with questions, one of which is asking Blair why he is Labour and not a Conservative: Blair’s answer stresses that, in his view, aspiration and social justice are essential co-dependents rather than mutually exclusive. The use of family detail, pioneered on television by Mrs Thatcher as shown in Chapter 1, is much deployed in the broadcast, with Blair reflecting on his father suffering a stroke when he was young, and the 24 hour period afterwards where the family were unsure whether he would survive. He talks about the death of his mother at the age of 21, describing it as giving him an ‘urgency’ which has influenced his determination to succeed in politics, abstracting details from family life to make political comments as Mrs Thatcher had done with her father and her upbringing. With his casual manner (dressed ‘in an open-necked navy blue shirt, standing in front of a cupboard, well-stocked with spices and olive oil’, the *Guardian* noted), his semi-estuary English accent, and talk of his ‘generation… trying to get to a different kind of politics’, Blair was no doubt the product of trends begun in the period which preceded him.[[693]](#footnote-694)

In addition, Labour’s 1997 election campaign famously featured a ‘pledge card’, the size of a credit card and designed for voters to keep in order to hold a future Labour government to account. Traditional understandings of the pledge card are rooted in the apparent timidity of the five pledges featured: to cut school classes to 30, fast-tracking punishments for young offenders, cutting NHS waiting lists and so on.[[694]](#footnote-695) The pledge card if often characterised as indicative of the pains to which the Labour party was going to demonstrate its moderate credentials, but little commented upon is how such pledges were perfectly calibrated for the television age. Short, snappy, immediate and clear: television had helped mould a political culture which places a premium on such attributes. In addition, Blair had an unerring ability to talk in soundbites, to produce a quip that was perfect for television news packages, with apparent sincerity. During the Northern Ireland peace process, when Blair addressed the television cameras and declared that ‘a day like today is not a time for soundbites’, before proceeding to utter the infamous words ‘but I feel the hand of history upon our shoulder’, it is probable that he had realised that he could not help but communicate via the soundbite. Blair was the first politician truly born of the seismic changes in television political culture in the long 1980s.

In many ways, New Labour was also a product of the citizenship culture that proliferated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the rhetoric of citizenship a critical component of how Blair attempted to present New Labour as moving ‘beyond’ traditional distinctions of left and right which he viewed as petty and anachronistic in the modern world. By maintaining Labour’s commitment to constitutional reform which he had inherited, Blair was able to appear convincing on the topic to true believers without alienating the moderate Conservative swing voters whose support he so desperately craved. The government elected in 1997 would carry out a sweeping programme of constitutional reform. Devolution for Scotland and Wales was delivered in 1999 after successful referenda the year before, the right of the vast majority of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords was removed, and the Lords was stripped of its judicial capacity, which was transferred to a newly-created Supreme Court in 2005. A Freedom of Information Bill reached the statute books in 2000, establishing in legislation for the first time a public ‘right to access’ to information held by authorities. A commission chaired by former Labour cabinet minister Roy Jenkins was established in December 1997 to deliberate upon a change to Britain’s electoral system, reporting in the following year and recommending the implementation of ‘Alternative Vote Plus’ system, similar to the mixed-member systems used in Germany and the devolved parliaments but using the alternative vote system instead of first-past-the-post in the single-member constituencies. That the Labour government did not adopt electoral reform, and its increasingly authoritarian tendencies on law and order (such as proposals for 90-day holding without charge for suspected terrorists), did eventually alienate long term advocates of citizen politics. Groups such as Charter 88 would regain momentum after the 2001 general election, dubbed the ‘silent landslide’, with the Labour government winning another huge parliamentary majority on the support of only 23.6 per cent of eligible voters.[[695]](#footnote-696) In 2007, Charter 88 merged with the New Politics Network to form Unlock Democracy, which took forward the cry for constitutional reform into the next decade. Nevertheless, the New Labour project was just as much a product of the citizenship culture as those that eventually disavowed the Blair government for being insufficiently committed to the cause.

If New Labour is associated with any single word, then it perhaps is ‘spin’, being when information is crafted a certain way to try to provide the best ‘spin’ for the government. The ‘new’ in New Labour was in itself a masterful use of spin, creating a rhetorical division between Labour under Blair’s leadership and the days of ‘Old’ Labour that the electorate had repeatedly rejected. New Labour’s reputation for spin was to inspire the satire of *The Thick of It*, the closest that the twenty-first century has come to providing political satire comparable with *Spitting Image*, with the foul-mouthed ‘spin doctor’ Malcolm Tucker as the epitome of New Labour’s obsession with headlines and controlling the political narrative, Tucker himself a thinly veiled portrait of Tony Blair’s Communications Director Alistair Campbell. A ‘grid’ system had been instituted in 10 Downing Street after the Labour victory, with media appearances, policy announcements and visits all meticulously planned and scheduled. Such an obsession with control was a direct consequence of the scandal culture which had proliferated in the period of this thesis. Tony Blair infamously courted Rupert Murdoch, proprietor of the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, believing Labour could only regain power of it worked with and not against the tabloid press. ‘The Sun Backs Blair’ screamed the front page of *The Sun* on 18 March 1997, although ominously for Labour, its endorsement was rooted in the figure of Blair, and not the party, but this was nevertheless as significant boost. As Chippindale and Horrie pointed out, Labour already had a 25-point lead in the opinion polls when the *Sun* announced its endorsement, ‘but there was little doubt that the *Sun* could have at least dented Labour’s majority if it had used its negative power to monster leading Labour figures’.[[696]](#footnote-697)

As Chapter 3 has demonstrated, the actual impact of Tory sleaze on the 1997 election result was debatable at least, but the figures around Blair believed it had been crucial. The new government was to find, however, that the tabloid press was no less forgiving to Labour cabinet ministers than it had been to Tory ones. In 1998, Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies, became the first scalp of a scandal when he was mugged by a man he had met whilst cruising on Clapham Common: ‘Cabinet Minister in Gay Sex Scandal’ was the *Sun* headline, whereas the *Mirror* led with ‘Shame of Gay Sex Cabinet Minister’, and the *Sun* delighted in informing its readers that the spot Davies had headed for was so well-known for anonymous liaisons between men that it was known locally as ‘Gobbler’s Gulch’.[[697]](#footnote-698) New Labour’s media techniques were honed by the party’s traumatic experience in opposition at the hands of the tabloids, but just as equally by the challenges the tabloids had posed to John Major’s administration. For the newspapers, the lure for ‘celebrity’ information – with celebrity being used in the broadest definition of the term – would set certain papers on a path that would lead to the phone hacking scandal.

By taking a political culture approach, this thesis has demonstrated a number of key trends in the conduct of British politics, such as a distinctive new approach to politics on television, the emergence of a rhetoric around citizenship and the proliferation of political scandal culture, throughout the long 1980s. New Labour was the ultimate expression of these trends, responding to them astutely and effectively: television performance mastered, citizen rhetoric utilised and liberal amounts of spin employed to keep the tabloid press at bay. This conception of a political culture in flux in the long 1980s derives from the conviction of this thesis that traditional accounts of the period are too heavily focused on raw policy politics, such as the collapse of the ‘post-war consensus’, which obscures some of the changes in the wider conduct and operation of British politics. When Tony Blair declared ‘we were elected as New Labour, and we will govern as New Labour’, in 1997, he was referring as much to the shifts in political culture identified in this thesis, as much as any policy accommodation with the eighteen years of Conservative government that had preceded him.

While New Labour responded extremely effectively to the shifts thrown up by the convulsions in British political culture in the long 1980s, New Labour’s solutions could not ultimately address the more fundamental political, global, and economic tensions that it would face. This is evident in two particular areas, the first of which is foreign policy. Like George Bush in the United States, as well as reflecting the prevailing attitudes of the post-Cold War era, New Labour did not enter government with a strongly focused and articulated doctrine on foreign affairs, largely imagining and defining itself as a project of domestic policy. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the subsequent involvement in wars in the Middle East forever altered the assumptions and trajectory of western foreign policy, knocked New Labour considerably far off its original axis. The second area is that of economic policy, being content for the most part to use the enormous wealth being generated from the boom of the mid-1990s onwards to fund its large increases in public expenditure, but the advent of the 2007-08 financial crisis left a gap for which New Labour was perilously underprepared. While Gordon Brown in particular pioneered the global response to the international banking crisis, it is undoubtedly the case that, as with problems of foreign policy, New Labour ultimately struggled to provide a convincing political narrative to explain itself in this area. The shifts in political culture in the long 1980s might have encouraged a generation of politicians to master presentation, but presentation, it turned out, was not sufficient to tame raw politics.

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