



**University of
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**Taking economics to the masses: The 1970s inflation crisis and the Daily
Mirror's Shopping Clock**

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The journalists of the *Daily Mirror* in the 1970s were a talented group of people and I am glad that its left of Centre newspaper culture was something I grew up with. However, its female journalists, including the Shopping Compilers, deserve a lot more recognition for their contributions and for surviving in this particularly male dominated tabloid. This research is dedicated to my parents Dan and Mary who were typical Mirror readers. My dad brought the paper into our house folded in his donkey jacket pocket after a long day helping to build the M56 and other motorways. My mum did her shopping, like so many other mums in the 1970s, while working as a machinist in a factory and brought up two children without a washing machine or a freezer. When she had time to read the paper, I am not sure. Without their hard work I would never have gone to university in the late 1970s. I hope this is some sort of recognition of all their efforts.

Abstract

This research explores how the *Daily Mirror*, Britain's best read newspaper in the early 1970s presented inflation to its readers and the political impact of this. By examining the strengths of the Shopping Clock as popular journalism it attempts to assess the effect of the Shopping Clock on readers' understanding of inflation. Three separate elements of the Shopping Clock's role are assessed. First, the thesis investigates the *Mirror's* role as an educator on inflation for its largely working class readership. Secondly, it shows how this unusually long standing feature survived because of the skills of its female compilers, the paper's subeditors, the strengths of its design and its experimentation with format. This feature was thus able to transform from a housewife's feature into a national news item by virtue of its relevance and accessibility. This was evidenced by regular appearances on the front page and the contribution of the *Mirror's* male news journalists in the mid-1970s. Thirdly its role in pioneering consumer journalism for a mass readership is examined including the various spin-offs the Clock inspired and how their tone changed as inflation persisted during the 1970s. The political role of the Shopping Clock is explored by contrasting the Shopping Basket elections of 1970 and 1974, before and after the Shopping Clock was created. The Shopping Clock's role as a tool of opposition and the recognition by the Conservative Government of its importance by 1973-4 is examined. Finally, the reporting in the *Mirror* of the performance of Labour's Prices and Consumer ministers Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley is considered. The thesis argues that the government's emphasis shifted after 1975 from protecting consumers from the worst of food price rises to controlling the rate of inflation with little attention to the gender or prices issues that had seemed so important after the 1970 election result.

Declaration

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

I previously published a short article on the Women's History Network blog called 'Going Round the Daily Mirror Shopping Clock' in 2022 based on my research.

<https://womenshistorynetwork.org/going-round-the-daily-mirror-shopping-clock-mary-feerick/>

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Introduction 'Taking economics to the masses': The 1970s inflation crisis and the *Daily Mirror's* Shopping Clock

On 27 May 1971 a report of a one-day strike involving over 3,000 workers at Plessey factories in South East England appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mirror* under the headline 'THE SHOPPING CLOCK STRIKE'. These workers demanded a pay rise to keep pace with inflation using clippings from the *Daily Mirror's* Shopping Clock feature to back up their claim. One of their shop stewards Mrs Kathleen Kelly told a reporter 'The management don't read the likes of the *Daily Mirror* and haven't heard of the Shopping Clock – so we took along cuttings to show them.' Two days later the management agreed to accept the clippings as partial evidence for the negotiations with their workers.¹

The Shopping Clock, which began in November 1970, was a feature that showed the current cost of a basket of goods that had initially been worth £5. By May 1971 it had risen to £5.56. The *Mirror* from the late 1940s to the late 1970s was not only the most popular paper in the UK, read by a third of national newspaper readers but also a left of centre paper that redressed the right wing bias that existed in the British press for most of the twentieth century. In 1970 it sold 4,924,157 daily copies with an estimated 13 million readers.² Almost all Britons were readers of newspapers in the 1970s and this one sold to the largest social class in British society. Its readers looked to it for clear, vivid, and easy to understand journalism and its journalists were among the highest paid and most powerful on Fleet Street. Geoffrey Goodman, its industrial editor, claimed 'No Conservative Government could ignore the country's largest selling daily newspaper regardless of its pro-Labour stance' and

¹ *Daily Mirror* 27 May 1971 p.1, 29 May p.1 Refer to Chapter 1 p.53-54 for further details.

² *Daily Mirror*, 7 June 1971, p. 1 quotes JICNARS survey '14 million of the best'.

many politicians took it to be the voice of popular opinion.³ The Labour Party had a very close relationship with the *Mirror* and several of its editorial staff worked for the Labour government at different times in the 1970s.⁴ Its Shopping Clock influenced and informed mainly working class readers about rising prices and inflation at a time when the Retail Price Index reached unprecedented peace time levels. This in turn influenced politics so that even a remote technocratic prime minister Edward Heath claimed to be a clockwatcher.⁵ The Shopping Clock lasted eight years, appeared five hundred times and regularly hit the front page. This popular paper which claimed five million housewives among its readership had almost as low a proportion of female staff as the politicians in the Commons and this was one of the most significant outlets for their talents. By studying how the nation's most popular paper covered inflation, the political and economic problem that it is forever associated with the 1970s, much can be learnt about the changing aspects of popular journalism and the way the press influenced the political environment.

What was the Shopping Clock and what did it measure?

The original *Mirror* Shopping Clock was a £5 shop of 33 items, mostly food, first bought on Friday 6 November 1970 and then every Friday to be published in Saturday's *Mirror* to show how much prices had changed that week. It was a very simplified version of the official Retail Price Index published each month which contained hundreds of items. There were some key differences. The RPI was seasonally adjusted and took several weeks to produce. The RPI measured how fast the price of food rose each month but the Shopping Clock told

³ Geoffrey Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair: Fifty years reporting from the political front line* (London, 2003). p.142.

⁴ Joe Haines Wilson's press secretary moved to the *Mirror*'s as Political Editor and Geoffrey Goodman, Industrial Editor spent 1975-6 at Counter Inflation Publicity Unit.

⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 22 September 1973, p.1.

shoppers how much a shop of the same items would cost them each week.⁶ The original items cost exactly £5 and were bought in six different shops in a London suburb.

Figure 1.1 Introduction Table of original Shopping Clock items

Items	s.	d.
2lb. topside beef	14	8
1lb. minced beef	4	10
1 lb. New Zealand lamb loin chops	6	2
1 lb. cod fillets	4	0
1 doz. large egg	5	0
1lb. Danish Lurpak butter	4	2
½ lb. Stork margarine	1	2
½ lb. White Cap lard	1	1
½ lb. Spry	1	7
3 lb. Homepride plain flour	2	3
Mazola Corn Oil (32 fl. Oz.)	6	11
1lb Saxa table Salt		7
½ Typhoo tea	3	4
4 lb Tate & Lyle granulated sugar	3	0
½ lb. Cadbury's Bournville cocoa	2	11
Kellogg's cornflakes (12oz. size)	1	11
4oz. Maxwell House coffee	5	2
3 bottles pasteurised milk	3	0
Small brown Hovis	1	2
Twist Loaf	2	0
Mother's Pride sliced Loaf	1	10
Marie Elizabeth sardines	2	3
12 red Oxo cubes	2	0
4 oz. Bisto	1	2
8 oz. Baked Beans		9
Jacobs Cream Crackers	1	1
HP sauce	1	11
Birds Eye Fish Fingers	3	4
Birds Eye peas	1	2
Birds Eye corn on the cob	3	6
Birds Eye mixed veg.	2	4
Sainsbury's toilet tissue	1	5
Large packet of Dreft	2	4

⁶*Daily Mirror*, 7 November, 1970, p.9 compiler Sally Moore 'Our £5 is NOT meant to represent a typical British family's weekend shopping... haven't included fruit and vegetables because their prices are so affected by seasonal supply and demand.'

A comparison of the Shopping Clock's items with the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries Household Consumption and Expenditure Survey for 1970 and 1971 showed that many of the items were broadly accurate in terms of quantities bought as well as revealing some clear gaps.⁷ The quantities of fats, instant coffee, sugar, and carcass red meats are similar to national averages based on thousands of family shop surveys. Shinobu Majima's research, based on FES surveys from 1961-82, suggest these *Mirror* journalists probably shopped like *Mirror* readers. Except for the top five per cent of 'elite Britons' most of the population, including the poorest 40 per cent ate a very similar diet.⁸ Despite some gaps and anomalies, it is a representative snap shot of food shopping in 1970 given the limitations of bringing the original shop in at exactly £5.⁹

The Shopping Basket as a concept

The Shopping Basket had several connotations and associated meanings. In much of Seebohm Rowntree's work on poverty between 1901 and 1951 he used the term 'a basket of goods', mainly food, which was seen to represent the minimum weekly subsistence needs which a family needed to stay above the 'poverty line.'¹⁰ In popular journalism in the immediate post war period the power of the 'shopping basket' was associated with female consumers often coping with the demands of rationing. In 1950s politics the term 'shopping basket election' was used where food prices became central in appealing to women voters whatever their level of income and social class. From 1947 the Retail Price Index was

⁷ For MAFF methodology see Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries *Household Food Consumption and Expenditure (1972) Appendices A* p.209.

⁸ Shinobu Majima, 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961-2004' *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22, No 4 (2008) p.574-592.

⁹ Versions of the Shopping Clock for men, younger women and the relaunched version are discussed in Chapter 1 p. 74 and see Appendix 1.

¹⁰ Mark Freeman, 'Seebohm Rowntree and secondary poverty, 1899-1954', *Economic History Review*, Vol 64, No 4 (2011), pp. 1175-1194.

calculated by a typical 'basket of goods' which included all household spending. Between 1962 and the mid 1970s several newspapers used the term for their regular feature on food prices although this term was not chosen by the *Mirror* for the feature that began in November 1970.¹¹

Academic literature survey

This study looks at the *Daily Mirror's* reporting of the 1970s inflation crisis from several academic perspectives. From the perspective of the history of journalism much work has already been done on this exceptional tabloid by scholars. ACH Smith produced a classic study of the role of the post-war *Mirror* as a 'social educator' and its political influence in the 1950s and 1960s elections as a left of centre national paper with mass circulation. Smith identified a special relationship with readers and its style of presentation of news through verbal, visual and typographic means. He argued its use of readers' letters created a distinctive dialogue between the paper and readers, a view both Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy's research supported. Conboy saw this as an influence on the writing style of journalists, although Smith argued by the 1960s it had become an out of date parody of working class language.¹² Bingham examined the paper's mid-1930s relaunch which specifically targeted a working class audience previously disengaged from party politics to produce a populist daily newspaper including columns with the tone of a 'working-class audience talking in a local pub.'¹³ Conboy linked the loyalty of its readers to its continued use

¹¹ Refer to Chapter 1 p.52-52 regarding other papers' shopping features.

¹² ACH Smith, *Paper Voices the popular Press and Social Change 1935-65* (London, 1975) p. 245 'journalist ventriloquism.'

¹³ Adrian Bingham, 'Representing the people? The Daily Mirror, class, and political culture in inter-war Britain' p.119, in Laura Beers (ed) *Brave new world: Imperial and democratic nation-building in Britain between the wars* (London, 2012).

of readers' letters especially in the 1945 election.¹⁴ The *Mirror* faced new challenges in the 1970s with the ascent of Rupert Murdoch's Sun and a population relying on television as their main news source as TV news expanded.¹⁵ However, Smith's judgement in the 1960s that the paper was out of touch with its readers can be challenged by the influence the Shopping Clock had on the political debate around inflation in the 1970s and the Clock's role in taking economics to the masses.

Elsewhere Bingham cited the newly digitized *Mirror* archive as a valuable source for historians compared with previously overused more accessible newspaper sources like *The Times* and this could be applied to the 1970s.¹⁶ Thomas O'Malley's examination of the *Mirror's* readers showed its heaviest readership came from the age groups that made up the adult working class, who left school at 15 or 18 and so were attracted to its clear, vivid writing and presentational style of journalism.¹⁷ Both O'Malley and James Whitworth examined the way news was read and presented. O'Malley stressed how readers were often selective, 'discontinuously' focusing on items and pages and skimming headlines. This was reinforced by James Whitworth's case study of the impact of the visual in the *Mirror's* 1945 election day front page.¹⁸ Bingham also warned researchers not to overlook the visual impact of tabloids on their original readers and their existence as objects to be passed

¹⁴ Martin Conboy, 'How the war made the Mirror,' *Media History*, Vol 23, No 3-4, (2017) p.465 'the voices of real readers are incorporated in letters...no matter how constructed in nature which had become the signifier of association between reader and newspaper institution.'

¹⁵ Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century* (Oxford, 2015), p. 17.

¹⁶ Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 21, No 2 (2010), pp. 225–231. Adrian Bingham, Ignoring the first draft of history? *Media History*, Vol 18 Nos 3-4, (2012), pp. 311-326.

¹⁷ Thomas O'Malley, Chapter 3 'Readership and Readers' p.85 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017 (Edinburgh, 2020).

¹⁸ James Whitworth, 'Case Study: The Daily Mirror and the Role of the Visual in the 1945 General Election in Britain' in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017 (Edinburgh, 2020).

around. All these point to a newspaper that in the 1970s had retained a unique reporting style and represented a constituency of readers and political views not found elsewhere in the national press. O'Malley also identified a smaller group of 'institutional' readers of the *Mirror* who used it as the voice of public opinion. Sofia Johnson's work focused on how the *Mirror* was by the 1960s losing touch with its potential younger readers. The *Mirror's* links with the Labour Party had become a handicap when Labour was in power since the party was also losing touch with its natural voters.¹⁹ By contrast, James Thomas describes a much closer relationship under the editorship of Sydney Jacobson by the 1974 elections and a more balanced coverage of elections in 1970 and 1974, than the relationship between the *Mirror* and Labour in the 1960s.²⁰ Thomas, John Shepherd and Colin Hay provide analysis of the partisan coverage of the 'Winter of Discontent' in the 1979 election, including that of the *Mirror*.²¹ Hay in particular examines how media shaped the myths around events and the narrative of crisis in the 1970s. The issues around newspaper culture and female journalists identified by Bingham, Delano and Linda Steiner are particularly relevant to a paper whose large readership was 45 per cent female and had one of the lowest ratio of female journalists on Fleet Street in the 1970s.²² The successful Shopping Clock feature, and

¹⁹ Sofia Johnson, 'The Tabloid Press: Tales of controversy, community and public life' in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017* (Edinburgh, 2020).

²⁰ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers and the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005) pp.61-76.

²¹ John Shepherd, *Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the British 'Winter of Discontent'* (Manchester, 2013) pp.108-129. Colin Hay, 'The Winter of Discontent,' *Political Quarterly*, Vol 80, No 4 (2009) pp. 545-551, and 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol 63, No. 3 (2010), pp. 446-470.

²² Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers, Sex, Private Life, and the Popular Press 1918-1978* p.26. 'In 1982...22 female journalists worked in the paper's London office alongside 496 men.' Linda Steiner, 'Failed Theories: Explaining Gender Difference in Journalism,' *Review of Communication*, Vol 1, No 3 (2012). Antony Delano, 'Women Journalists: what's the difference?' *Journalism Studies*, Vol 4, No 2, (2003), pp. 273-286.

its spinoffs, were primarily written by women for women and focused not on celebrities or fashion but on inflation and consumerism.

Social historians were essential to assessing how the *Mirror's* reporting of inflation impacted on its typical readers. Laura Paterson's oral history studies of working mothers from 1950-80s and Dolly Smith Wilson's influential work on post-war working mothers provided valuable insights into the possible motivation and relative affluence of millions of paid working mothers. By 1970 over 50 per cent of married women were working, the majority as part-timers, a trend which continued between 1971 and 1981. While the full-time employment of men decreased by over a million by 1981, the relative affluence of some working class families, including Shopping Clock readers, was maintained in part by this group.²³ The individualism studied by Robinson et al and Lawrence's challenge to the stereotypes of working class experiences by the 1970s helped to assess how coverage of inflation and the emphasis on consumer advice and individualist solutions were in line with the thinking of some readers.²⁴ Selina Todd has shown how close to poverty many working class families were living before the inflation crisis and that so-called affluence often depended on insecure work and a heavy burden of credit debt for consumer goods owned outright by the middle classes.²⁵ Avner Offer's long-term study of British manual workers helped to place the 1970s within the longer term changes that the *Mirror's* working class

²³ Laura Paterson, 'I didn't feel like my own person': paid work in women's narratives of self and working motherhood, 1950-1980', *Contemporary British History*, Vol 33, No 3, (2019) pp.405-426; Dolly Smith Wilson, A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 17, No 2, (2006), pp. 206-229, cited by Jim Tomlinson, Avner Offer and Selina Todd.

²⁴ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 28 Issue 2, (2017), pp. 268-304; Jon Lawrence, *'Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post War England'*. (Oxford, 2019).

²⁵ Selina Todd 'Affluence, Class, and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class' *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22 No 4 (2008), pp.501-518.

readership were living through.²⁶ Majima and Savage also contested the simplistic picture of affluent workers as individualists who were Thatcherites in waiting and Majima's research on spending showed that even in affluent times poverty had persisted and even grown.²⁷

Economic understanding by the general population is an essential aspect of this topic. Paul Mosley's work on how economic data was presented in mass circulation newspapers from 1960-80 was backed up by recent research by Bowden et al of similar reporting from 1990-2016.²⁸ Both argued that tabloids emphasised negative rather than positive economic news. Mosley used the *Daily Mirror's* reports compared with official figures to assess how negatively voters viewed the economy and how this could linger in the mind of voters after the economic event had passed. Tomlinson's work on the British economy in the twentieth century has challenged many of the myths around decline. His *Managing the Economy, Managing the People* examined government attempts to manipulate the public's understanding of economic events, including the problems inflation in the first half of the 1970s. Re-examining the research of Behrend and later surveys by James Alt he questioned how much the public understood or were concerned about the problems of inflation in the first half of the 1970s using the records of the Counter Inflation Policy Unit (CIPU).²⁹

Evidence from Alt showed much of the population had exaggerated conceptions of the level of inflation and concluded government had by 1975 embedded the view that inflation was

²⁶ Avner Offer 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950–2000', *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22 No 4, (2008) p.537-571.

²⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun* (London, 2012) p.712 'most young workers ... dreamed of new cars, colour televisions and foreign holidays', Shinobu Majima 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961–2004' *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22, No 4 (2008), pp.573-597.

²⁸ Paul Mosley, "'Popularity Functions" and the Role of the Media: A Pilot Study of the Popular Press' *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol 14, No 1 (1984), pp. 117-129. James Bowden, Andrzej Kwiatkowskib and Dooruj Rambaccussing, 'Economy through a lens: Distortions of policy coverage in UK national newspapers' *Journal of Comparative Economics*, Vol 47, (2019), pp. 881-906.

²⁹ Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* (Oxford, 2017) pp. 188-205.

necessarily a bad thing and trade union demands were a cause rather than a symptom of inflation. Many of these messages are to be found in mid-1970s *Mirror* coverage of inflation and its effects. Adrian Bingham's recent work *Everyday Politics* questioned the emphasis on the interpretation of twentieth century politics as a class based narrative between two parties where voters were aligned consciously and continuously with 'their party.' Instead, most post-war voters are seen as intermittently involved with politics, but the everyday issues that engaged them included certain key narratives one of which could be the cost of living as presented by the Shopping Clock.³⁰ In addition by the 1970s with increased access to politicians via media and a higher level of education they are better informed voters than previous generations.

Relatively short-term political events always make news and sell newspapers. In the 1970s there were four elections and the decline in the support of both major parties was essential to analysing the *Mirror's* coverage. Ben Pimlott, Jon Campbell, and Charles Moore's detailed biographies were useful for the election strategies of the leaders of the two main parties.³¹ Martin Pugh provided a clear narrative of what is often seen as the breakdown of consensus in the 1970s. Pugh credits Harold Wilson with short-term successes. Peter Sloman's reassessment of Wilson from 1970-74 as a 'social democrat' who was determined to tackle poverty, protect living standards, and reject individualism, gives a different perspective on his use of the Shopping Clock. David Thackeray and Richard Toye's analysis of twentieth-century manifestos are useful as a starting point for investigating when and to what extent

³⁰ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics* (Oxford, forthcoming).

³¹ Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992) pp.547-576, pp.591-615; John Campbell, *Edward Heath: a biography* (London, 1993); Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume One* (London, 2013)

inflation emerged as a political issue during the 1970s.³²

Insight from historians examining the impact of gender on politics was highly relevant to research on shopping basket elections and the Shopping Clock as an economic feature aimed at female consumers. Rosie Campbell and Rosalind Shorrocks provided the background on the 'gender gap' between voters since 1945, while Amy Black and Stephen Brooke investigated the weaknesses of the Labour Party in tackling gender issues up to and including the 1970s. Bingham and Jessica Prestridge both analysed the right wing female politician who skilfully adapted and benefited from using her gender as part of her political language.³³

Methodology

Newspapers in the twentieth century were a powerful part of British society and politics. However, the *Daily Mirror* and other popular papers were until recently underused by British political and social historians for reasons of time, access, and the overwhelming quantity of information.³⁴ In addition, popular papers were often seen as trivialising and unsophisticated by historians with little to add to our understanding of events. Many accounts of the twentieth century relied mainly on *The Times*, a paper of the elite, because of its

³² Martin Pugh, *State, and society: a social and political history of Britain since 1870* (London, 2012); Peter Sloman, 'Harold Wilson, 'Selsdon Man,' and the defence of social democracy in 1970s' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 33 No.1, (2022), pp. 80-102; David Thackeray and Richard Toye, 'An Age of Promises: British Election Manifestos and Addresses 1900-97' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 31, No 1 (2020), pp.1-26.

³³ Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender' *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 36 No 4 (1997), pp. 419-452; Rosie Campbell and Rosalind Shorrocks 'Women Voters Taking the Wheel' *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 92, No 4 (2021); Adrian Bingham, Chapter 9 'Conservatism, gender, and the politics of everyday life, 1950s–1980s' in Clarisse Berthezene, & Julie Gottlieb (eds), *Rethinking Right-Wing Women: Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s To the Present* (Manchester, 2018); Jessica Prestidge 'Housewives having a go: Margaret Thatcher, Mary Whitehouse and the appeal of the Right Wing Woman in late twentieth-century Britain' *Women's History Review*, Vol 28, No 2 (2019), pp.277-296.

³⁴ Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 21, No 2 (2010), pp. 225–226.

comprehensive index.³⁵ However, with the digitalisation of newspapers there is now an opportunity to make use of newspapers read by a much larger percentage of the British population and as a left of centre newspaper, one that would give a different perspective on experience of inflation in the 1970s and the public's understanding of it. Unfortunately, its rival the *Sun* is not yet available for comparison. In using a digitized version of the *Daily Mirror*, it was important to use rigorous and sensitive word searches. Words like inflation were used less often in the 1960s than the 1970s but searches for prices, industrial action, strikes, the Shopping Clock helped to quantify the relative influence of the Shopping Clock in different years of the 1970s. As Tomlinson found, in trying to analyse the understanding of inflation, widening terms used helped to gain a clearer picture of how much readers had access to information about inflation across the decade via the Shopping Clock and other related news and features.³⁶ Although word searches were useful it was still possible to miss items. Only recently did a consumer House Sense feature surface, which overlapped with the Shopping Clock but appeared on a different day.

It was also essential not to pull the Shopping Clock feature or quotations out of context. Initially the Shopping Clock and other *Daily Mirror* content, related to inflation in the 1970s, was chronologically surveyed from November 1970 to January 1978 using the digitized British Newspaper Archive. This included creating a spread sheet of the weekly rises and falls of the Shopping Clock's cost and graphs to show the speed of its ascent. After this initial reading of each Saturday's Shopping Clock related items, an attempt to recreate the experience of reading the paper as a physical object rather than word searching or scanning

³⁵ Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 21, No 2 (2010), p. 226.

³⁶ Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* (Oxford, 2017) pp. 196-199.

the screen printed copies was made. The personal experience of being a *Mirror* reader throughout the 1970s aware of its different writers, columnists and features encouraged this approach. The talented pool of writers and cartoonists that included Marge Proops, Keith Waterhouse, Bill Tidy, and cartoons like Andy Capp gave more context of the paper. Every 'Clock' page was printed off for each month as well as any related economic items, together with a survey of all front pages to see how prominent the Clock was within the paper in that month.

Newspapers are not the creation of a single editor or a team of powerful sub-editors. The *Mirror* had a huge staff in the 1970s and so details of all the journalists connected to the Clock across eight years was helpful. Unsurprisingly it was easier to do this for male journalists, using the Association of Mirror Pensioners site which featured obituaries of 'Mirror men.'³⁷ However, the word search on the BNA made it possible to track the careers at the *Mirror* of almost all the reporters who wrote for the Shopping Clock or alongside it, whatever their gender. Close reading of their features, columns and economic and political articles made it possible to distinguish their different styles and perspectives. The different trajectories of the careers of the female compilers and male contributors and their length of service were recorded and compared.

In terms of qualitative approaches Stuart Hall and ACH Smith's analysis of the *Mirror's* style and presentation was a useful guide to closely studying the size of the feature on the page, the page chosen to put it on, the other content on the page, the visual impact of the clock, its design and logo and the language of the headlines. The readers' letters that referred to

³⁷ The Association of *Mirror* Pensioners was formed in 1990 to challenge Robert Maxwell's illegal access to the *Mirror's* pension fund. The website recorded few female employees. Attempts to gain information from the website about the Shopping Clock were unsuccessful. They did not publish a request for information about the Clock although several of the male journalists involved with the clock were featured on their website.

the clock were compiled for each year and analysed in terms of content and authors. The BNA made it straightforward to access the front page layout. It was also possible to survey all the front pages that had no main story connected with hard news but were celebrity or entertainment based so as not to overstate the importance of this item, particularly outside of the election campaigns. Much of the research involved close reading of the paper rather than simply searches, finding all the readers' letters that related to the Shopping Clock or all the articles on Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley in their time as ministers.

As part of analysis of reasons for the Shopping Clock's longevity and fame comparisons between the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock and with food price features in the *Daily Mail* and some broadsheets were done. Similarly, coverage of the two Shopping Basket elections in 1970 and February 1974 in the *Mirror* and the *Mail* were useful. The Gale Archive also provided a *Telegraph* report on Wilson's Party Political broadcast that inspired the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock. Influenced by the research of Thackeray and Toyne the manifestos of both the Labour and Conservative parties were searched manually for references to key economic terms including inflation for all the elections between 1970 and 1979.³⁸

To interrogate a site as vast as the *Mirror's* archive it was important to use other sources to cross check what was included and emphasised but also to see the impact of the Clock on political events. Political biographies and memoirs were useful to track events particularly around election campaigns but this feature read by millions was not mentioned by any of the politicians or their biographers directly, even when they had ministerial responsibility for prices. Geoffrey Goodman's memoir of his time as a *Mirror* journalist and dealings with politicians also makes no reference to it despite his coverage of the 1974 election and his

³⁸ Refer to Tomlinson *Managing the Economy* p. 189.

work at the CIPU.³⁹ In contrast the survival of some television broadcasts, unearthed party political broadcasts, interviews with Edward Heath and Prices Minister Shirley Williams, all of which referred to the Shopping Clock or shopping basket prices. A BBC interview with Harold Wilson after Labour's defeat in 1970 and the 1971 BBC documentary *Yesterday's Men* gave insights into Wilson's post-election assessment of Labour's defeat in 1970-71. *Hansard* was consulted to include all mentions of the Shopping Clock in debate and committee, to see how Ministers and MPs used it. In one case *Hansard* recorded an MP mentioning the *Mirror* as source on inflation, although the *Mirror* itself did not pick up the following day.⁴⁰

The methods of this research were both qualitative and quantitative. It is never possible for historians to measure with certainty the influence of newspaper reporting on readers or their political views retrospectively. The different ways readers read the paper, continuously or discontinuously also made definitive statements about their reactions to inflation very provisional. However, it is possible to quantify how often stories, particular headlines styles and spinoffs appeared. Precisely because this was such a regular feature for readers, every Saturday for over seven years a quantitative approach was used. This warranted careful measurement of what impact it might have had on readers. As a result, there are graphs and tables in this research. These include the shopping clock items, the gender of reporters involved in it for each year, a breakdown of readers' letters about it, its changing logo, consumer spinoffs and front page appearances. There is also close reading of the text of the Shopping Clock and related items and stories. It could be argued that if readers did not remember these features in detail later, they were not important, but that would be equally

³⁹ Geoffrey Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair: Fifty Years Reporting from the Political Front Line* (London, 2003).

⁴⁰ 'Read the *Daily Mirror*' *Hansard*, Vol 837: debated on Tuesday 16 May 1972. This was not reported in the *Mirror*.

true of television coverage. This newspaper feature and related articles successfully set a narrative that politicians responded to. So careful analysis of what was written about inflation for their readers informed the political debate. Much has been made of the media treatment of the Winter of Discontent and its long lasting impact, but the association of the 1970s with inflation also made the reporting of this feature worth investigating in depth.⁴¹

This study is divided into two chapters on the Shopping Clock as Journalism and the Politics of the Shopping Clock. The journalism chapter focuses on the strengths of the Shopping Clock as popular journalism. It examines its role as an educator on inflation aimed at working class readers. This includes what readers understood about inflation at the beginning of the decade, a survey of major inflation stories both on the front page and inside showing different approaches by *Mirror* journalists and analysis of how reliable *Mirror* inflation education was. The Shopping Clock feature is examined in terms of experiment, variety, and relevance across eight years. Its design, its writers, and comparisons with similar features in other papers were all considered. The response from readers' letters and the various transitions it went through from housewife feature to a national issue, including its relaunch in 1976 were also examined to see how it remained relevant and successful.⁴² Finally, its role as pioneer of consumer rights aimed at a working class readership, including its spinoff features Square Deal and Shoparound was considered.

The second chapter on the Politics of the Shopping Clock covers the context of two shopping basket elections in detail and the Labour Prices and Consumer Ministers of 1974-79. It

⁴¹ Shepherd, *Crisis what Crisis*, pp.164-66, Hay, *Chronicles of a Death foretold* pp. 457 and 466. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2022/05/28/might-back-1970s-have-learned-none-lessons/> (Accessed 01/08/2024)

⁴² For a discussion of the meaning of the term housewife refer to Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2001) Chapter 10 p. 150-62

begins with the 1970 election victory by Heath, and Wilson's response to this widening of the gender gap among voters by flagging up inflation as an issue. A short term electoral tactic to remind female voters of 'broken promises' evolved into challenging the government's individualist solutions and the development of policies on inflation by 1974. This is compared to the reaction of others on the left including MPs and trade union members and some of their leaders. The impact on the government of the Shopping Clock, initially the ministers responsible for food prices, and eventually the Prime Minister are also covered. The second section examines the February 1974 election including the changing economic language of manifestos. The reporting by the *Mirror* and other papers of the campaign which becomes about prices rather than a national crisis and the influence of this campaign on the subsequent elections of the 1970s are analysed. Finally, the chapter covers the Prices and Consumer Ministry created by Wilson and how the *Mirror* reported the efforts of its two contrasting ministers Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley.

This research gives insights into the 1970s as it was interpreted by the only mass circulation, left of centre newspaper in Britain writing about the economy for a predominantly working class readership. The Shopping Clock was a highly successful feature with all the strengths of popular journalism, accessibility, visual impact, brevity, and wit. It engaged readers and stayed relevant by experiment and reinvention. Whatever its limits it was from this feature that many working class readers gained economic information for much of the 1970s. The feature raised awareness of inflation and educated readers about consumerism, which had previously been largely available only to the middle classes. The limits of the female voice in tabloid journalism are clear but this feature shows both how female journalists were able to write about the effects of inflation and the limits of their role compared to their male colleagues. The politics of the 'shopping basket' and 'shopping clock' show the changes

happening in British politics in the 1970s. In 1970 female voters were seen as motivated mainly by issues around family shopping. This study shows how the issue of prices was transformed into the issue of inflation. The response of politicians to the Shopping Clock shows that inflation was a wider issue than rising interest rates or wage claims. This was presented as an issue that seemed to affect all families and individuals. This may have embedded the belief that inflation was a greater economic evil than unemployment.

Chapter 1 The Shopping Clock: *The Daily Mirror*, inflation, and popular political journalism in the 1970s

The Shopping Clock's success as a regular feature can be measured by several criteria: its longevity as a feature, its number of appearances on the front page, the journalistic skill of its contributors, its prominence in the paper, the reaction of readers and its wider impact on politicians, other journalists, and the public.

The Shopping Clock lasted just over seven years from November 1970 until January 1978. Other papers had similar features but none appeared so frequently or prominently or in a paper with the largest circulation on Fleet Street. The Shopping Clock appeared on a Saturday 354 times. If closely related features are included, it totalled over 500 appearances. It is mentioned on the front page 42 times including 15 appearances as part of the main story. It regularly appeared on the same page for months at a time making it easy for readers to find including 52 consecutive weeks on page three from 1973-74. To paraphrase Stuart Hall this was because this feature had been judged to be news rather than a feature.¹ Its four main experienced compilers were well known to regular readers in this role and each had an average of fifteen years with the paper. Thirty seven readers' letters were published commenting on the Shopping Clock, mostly between 1971 and 1974. The strengths of the Shopping Clock and related features can be broken down into three main areas: its role as an educator on inflation in the first half of the 1970s, its ability to experiment with varied approaches presented in a lively way which enabled it to stay relevant and its status as a pioneer writing about consumer rights for a wide audience of readers.

¹ AFC Smith *Paper Voices* (London, 1975) Introduction by Stuart Hall p.19 'some items clearly "belong" to the sports page: if a sports item appears on a news page, it is because the newspaper has judged (and expects its readers to agree) that one context has prevailed over another.'

Role as educator on inflation aimed at working class consumers

From the mid-1960s to 1970s the key researcher on public understanding of economics in Britain was the psychologist, Hilde Behrend. Her interviewees found that many of the population in their sample still associated the word primarily with pumping up a bicycle in 1971 and in her team's 1966 survey 32.9 per cent respondents said they did not know or did not understand the word's meaning. Behrend had argued that the public's knowledge of prices was very poor but acknowledged that the exception was 'everyday' commodities subject to 'frequent purchase.'² The Shopping Clock began with the simple question 'How long will a fiver buy this food list?'³ The *Mirror's* Clock with its weekly shop of the same 33 items was starting with the type of prices Behrend acknowledged most people did know about because they bought these items regularly.

As the 1970s progressed people experienced inflation at first hand at record peace time levels. Paul Mosley and James Bowden et al have examined the effects of the unbalanced view of tabloid newspapers' coverage of economic reporting compared with broadsheet coverage.⁴ In contrast Jim Tomlinson and James Alt found evidence of greater understanding of inflation and less panic among the public until the mid-1970s. In the early 1970s, when inflation was running at 7.6 per cent the Shopping Clock may have helped to build *Daily Mirror* readers' understanding of inflation. Paul Mosley argued the *Mirror* increased their anxiety levels at a

² Hilde Behrend, 'Price And Income Images And Inflation' *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, Scottish Economic Society, Vol 11, No 2 (1964), pp. 85-103 Cited by Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life from Beveridge to Brexit* p.196 and Paul Mosley, "'Popularity Functions" and the Role of the Media: Pilot Study of the Popular Press' *British Journal of Political Science* Vol 14, No 1 (1984), p.123, which also refers to Behrend's 1971 findings that a 'large proportion of those interviewed associated the word with pumping up a tyre.'

³ *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1970, p.9.

⁴ Mosley, p. 117-129 'British voters were, until very recently, made aware of unemployment and inflation levels in a highly selective way, when those variables reached peak levels' p.123 and James Bowden, Andrzej Kwiatkowski and Dooruj Rambaccussing, 'Economy through a lens: Distortions of policy coverage in UK national newspapers' *Journal of Comparative Economics* Vol 4, (2019).

time when inflation was running at below 10 per cent but the unofficial *Mirror* survey of food prices was running considerably higher. As early as January 1971 Sally Moore, its first compiler, calculated if the Shopping Clock continued to rise it would be at a rate of 26 per cent a year and in September 1973 compiler Mary Griffiths told readers it had gone up 45 per cent since it began.⁵ The Shopping Clock appeared frequently on the front page and the word inflation appeared four times as often each year than it had in the 1960s. Mosley argues in his study of the *Sun*, *Express* and *Daily Mirror* 'The domestic economy had simply become in the judgement of the popular press, a more newsworthy item.'⁶

This seems to be borne out by a survey of key words used on the front page of the *Mirror*. Inflation was not featured as much as rising prices but was discussed much more than poverty. The front pages suggest the Shopping Clock was at its most popular in 1971 and 1972 and during the first election campaign of 1974. The importance of the Shopping Clock was recognised by sub-editors who regularly created a front page banner from June 1971 to March 1973 so readers could find it inside. Analysis of front page economic stories also indicate the Shopping Clock played a role in educating *Mirror* readers about inflation in the early 1970s.

A simple word search survey indicates that when economic stories reached the front page throughout the 1970s, prices and industrial action were the issues most discussed by reporters; prices were dominant in 1973, strikes peaked as the key issue in 1975 and both were in a similar place just before the so-called Winter of Discontent.⁷ Inflation was the

⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 23 January 1971, p.4; *Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1973, p.3.

⁶ Mosley, p.122.

⁷ Refer to Colin Hay, *The Winter of Discontent*, *Political Quarterly*, Vol 80, No 4 (2009), pp. 545-551, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol 63, No. 3 (2010), pp. 446-470.

third most important of the eight economic terms over the decade. Other key terms used, cost of living, poverty, unemployment, and wage rises were less frequent than the term Shopping Clock between November 1970 and 1973. In its first eighteen months the Shopping Clock's frequent mentions and visual impact could have helped to educate *Mirror* readers about the concept of Inflation. This may help to explain the disparity between the surveys of the CIPU analysed by Jim Tomlinson and the findings of Alt based on mid-70s surveys which show much greater awareness of inflation than the earlier findings of Behrend. Of course, readers were also experiencing much higher rates of inflation but it was the words they used to describe it that were key. One very dramatic example of the education of specific readers was the use of the Shopping Clock by striking Plessey workers in May 1971 covered later in this chapter. This inspired other workers to attempt to use the Shopping Clock in their wage negotiations.⁸

The Shopping Clock also took on a major role as inflation educator in the *Mirror's* nine-page feature in the Thursday 15 June 1972 issue⁹. The previous Saturday the Shopping Clock had burst through the £6 barrier.¹⁰ This meant a 20 per cent rise overall since the Clock began in 1970, much higher than the official government measure of RPI.¹¹ By Thursday the *Mirror* produced a 'SHOCK' inflation issue across nine pages including the front page, over 25 per cent of the paper. What was striking were the range of approaches to inflation taken by six different journalists and editorial staff. Inflation and its unfairness were the message of the

⁸ For further details see p.55-56.

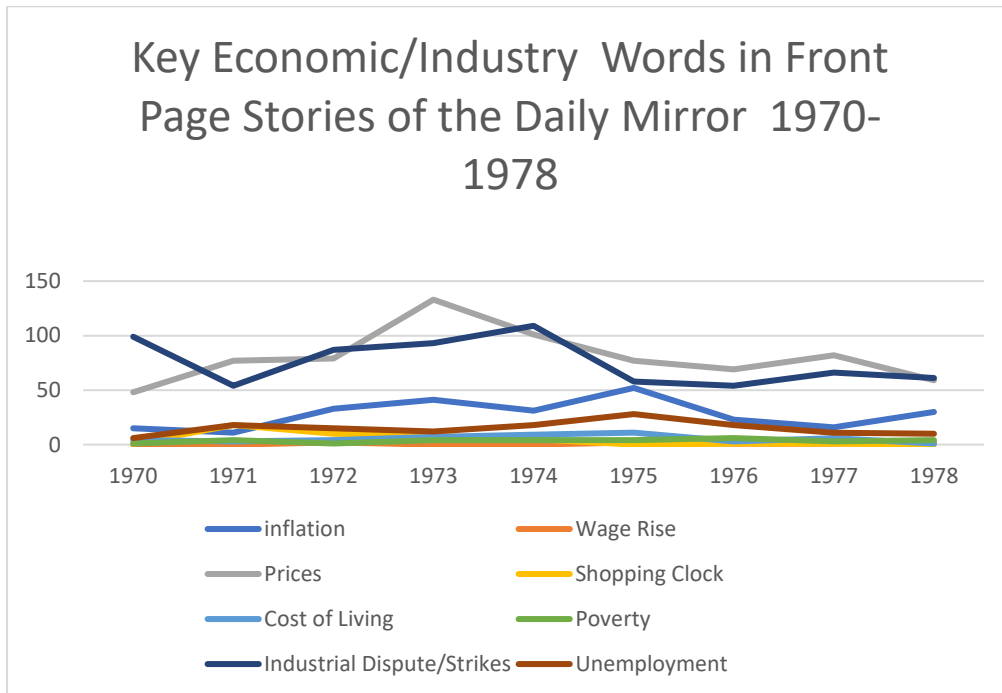
⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, pp.1-3, p.8, pp.10-12, p.14, pp.16-17.

¹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 10 June 1972, p.1, 'Over the top.'

¹¹ RPI was running at an average of 7.6 per cent each month from 1970-72.

sole front page story.¹² This prominence in the *Mirror* for an economic story was unique between 1970-1972 and backed up Mosley's findings that economic stories were becoming

Figure 1.2 Graph Analysis of major stories including Front Pages when range of journalists were involved in reporting on price issues shows several trends.



more newsworthy in tabloids. It contained a massive headline of only eight words WHO WANTS THIS FOR A FAIR DAY'S PAY? accompanied by a photograph of a dustbin overflowing with money. The image reflected the ethical/fairness approach to economics that Tomlinson argued post-war Labour politicians and this Labour supporting paper adopted when discussing economics with the public.¹³

The Shopping Clock's direct part in the inflation issue was given the most prominence by being on pages two and three. Under the headline 'INFLATION That's the way the money

¹² Only six *Mirror* front pages in those two years had similar size headlines. Four featured deaths and photographs and the other two marked the Commons vote on entry to the EEC.

¹³ Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy*, p.194 'the key appeals were indeed ethical, linking inflation to distributive justice but also treating inflation as a result of human agency...as the object of ethical judgement.'

goes' Sally Moore, the original 'shopping clock girl' appears with photographs dated at two yearly intervals showing what would happen in the future if inflation continued at the same level. In each she appeared with fewer of the original items finally ending up with only five by 1980.¹⁴ The feature was accompanied by a reprint of the previous week's clock and an explanation which focuses not only on inflation rates but how shoppers must make cheaper choices 'because it is all they can afford.' Beneath this is a *Mirror* Comment editorial that includes a pound being cut in half. The comment discussed what inflation meant to economists, politicians, and their own readers 'everybody with a pay packet or a pension ...where the rich get rich and the poor get poorer.'¹⁵ The editorial went on to claim 'you will not find any quick or slick solution peddled in these pages. There is no magic wand to brandish. No abracadabra or abrasive cure-all.'¹⁶ The clear message of the editorial was that inflation was a 'bad thing' which would cause 'social and economic chaos...opening the door to dictatorship Government of the Right or Left.'¹⁷

The stories on other pages were very wide ranging covering inflation from every angle. Matthew Coady gave it a historical context with a vivid account of the Weimar hyperinflation of 1923: THE GERMAN PAPER CHASE and the similar possible risk to modern democracy.¹⁸ Marjorie Proops the *Mirror's* famous 'agony aunt' focused on the social effects of inflation. Her article 'KEN and JANET the £30 -a-week paupers' examined the family of a relatively well paid mini-cab driver, their weekly expenditure including their council rent and his long work

¹⁴ This resembles shopping bag photographs taken of Margaret Thatcher in Halifax during the 1979 election campaign see front cover Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, p.2-3 At one glance the bite that is taken from the week's groceries. That's the way the money goes by Sally Moore Shopping Clock Girl.

¹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972 p.2 Mirror Comment.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, p. 10.

hours to keep up with inflation.¹⁹ Ken was quoted 'We're flat broke ...Of course, I'm worried, but what's the point of it? What's the answer? for people like us?' George Thaw's half page explained 'HOW THE RICH GROW RICHER' with inflation-beating investments from race horses, to diamonds and gold, works of art, silver and even trees.²⁰ He concluded with an explanation WHY THE POOR STAY POORER adopting the *Mirror's* 'us and them' tone and the theme of unfairness 'The family on the margin pays over the odds for everything and through the nose for credit...' Robin Parkin reported on soaring property prices even on empty buildings like Centre Point and the effects on those yet to get on the 'property treadmill.'²¹ Both reporters backed up the editorial view of the unfairness of inflation however, the belief that inflation was a bad thing for the whole economy, the dominant idea later in the decade was not put forward.

Robert Head, City Editor came at inflation from a wider perspective in the centre pages. As with Coady's piece on Germany he also took on the role of journalist as educator. His centre page spread was illustrated with a cartoon of a large inflation crocodile eating up banknotes.²² He explained the causes of inflation in the style of a lively textbook covering key ideas, including the law of supply and demand and the longstanding problems in the economy since the 1950s and 1960s. It pinned the responsibility on Government to control the economy taking an even-handed approach to industry and workers: 'it is dishonest of

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972 p.11. This taxi driver earned £30 after tax whereas in 1972 the average male wage before tax was £23.40.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/timeseries/> (As accessed November 2022).

²⁰ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972, p.12.

²¹ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972, p.11.

²² Drawn by Frank Bellamy *Daily Mirror*, Thursday 15 June 1972, pp. 16-17.

governments to blame trade unions or industrialists for causing inflation. Rising wages, prices and profits are the symptoms of inflation, never the cause.’²³

This centre piece showed some *Mirror* journalists were not yet buying into the wage price spiral as the explanation for inflation. James Alt’s findings that only 29 per cent of those surveyed in 1971-72 saw Trade Unions and wage claims as a main cause of inflation, compared with 51 per cent by mid-1975.²⁴ Head also put forward the view that inflation could redistribute wealth and challenged the idea it was an altogether bad thing with no winners. ‘Borrow all you can, turn it into valuable goods, pay back as late as possible in pounds of lower value. Those are the rule of the game.’²⁵ This explanation built up to an attack on Anthony Barber’s 1972 Budget and predicted another devaluation of the pound. This piece included many of the economic terms that Behrend thought so lacking in the British population’s understanding of the economy and this journalist, unlike the surveys of the CIPU analysed by Tomlinson for the mid-1970s, certainly was blaming the government. Alongside Head’s Inflation explanation was the final contribution to the Inflation SHOCK ISSUE the *Mirror*’s ‘Verdict’ on page 17. It took the government to task for an economic policy that favoured those on higher incomes and profited from property. While acknowledging ‘WAGE DEMANDS IN MANY CASES ARE UNREALISTIC’ it stressed ‘THE FACTS OF LIFE (OR SLOW DEATH) FOR THE ORDINARY CITIZENS WHO ARE NOT ON THE BANDWAGON.’²⁶

²³ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972 p.16.

²⁴ Cited by Tomlinson, pp.198, Alt, *The Politics of Economic Decline since 1964* p.162 Table 8.2 Causes of inflation.

²⁵ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972 p.17.

²⁶ *Daily Mirror* 15 June 1972 p.17.

There was clear gender difference in reporting inflation. Sally Moore wrote about and illustrated the literal effects on shopping prices and shoppers' choices while Marje Proops wrote from a human interest point of view about the effects on an individual London family.²⁷ But among the male journalists there were also different perspectives on inflation, some more balanced, others more political, about the effects of inflation on the incomes of rich and poor and the wider long-term causes of inflation in Britain. The journalists educating their readers were more like a library than a single book on inflation. It is difficult to know how many readers made it through all these perspectives. The Sally Moore photographs of shrinking piles of groceries for each year and their position on page three was certainly the most prominent and showed the effects of inflation in a striking way for readers who were skimming the paper and reading discontinuously.²⁸

The education of readers about the effects of inflation was continued by female journalists in 1973. These were written by long established features writers. Paula James produced a twenty-year guide to rising prices similar to her regular reporting on poverty, poor housing, and problems in the NHS. In July her report entitled 'How you can't live on £2.59 a week?' accompanied the Shopping Clock in a rising week.²⁹ In this article a taxi driver's wife tries to feed her family on the national average of £12.95 a week for a family of five and runs out of money by Wednesday. Margaret Jones wrote an article 'YOUR SHRINKING POUND - TO THE LAST PENNY' in September.³⁰ Not strictly speaking a Shopping Clock item it compared the budget of three contrasting working class families. One family of owner-occupiers and two

²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, pp.2-3 and p.11.

²⁸ Refer to ²⁸ Thomas O'Malley Chapter 3 p.85 *Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press* in Conboy and Bingham (eds) 'The layout of newspapers encouraged discontinuous reading' p.100.

²⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 28 July 1973, p. 11. Paula James (Howitt) at the *Mirror* 1958-1976 one of few female journalists listed on the *Mirror Pensioners* website.

³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 5 September 1973, p.17, 'Your shrinking pound to the last penny.'

council tenant families shared their weekly budget for food and household items with readers to show how much it had risen.³¹

Smith, Bingham and Conboy have all emphasised the special role readers' letters played in the *Daily Mirror's* development of its unique voice and mass popularity.³² In the case of the Shopping Clock it made its greatest impact in its first two years with 30 letters published, out of the 37 that mentioned it during the decade. It turned the nation into 'clockwatchers' claimed one reader.³³ Others pointed out areas that the Shopping Clock did not cover like clothes or spoke up for groups like pensioners especially hit by inflation. One reader challenged the claim higher wages were the cause of inflation 'Many now feel the present increases are out of all proportion to wage increases.'³⁴ In November 1972 reader Mr Allan Nell calculated the rise in his car insurance at 211 per cent in two years 'Not even your shopping clock can beat that'.³⁵ The readers' letters often challenged the practicality of advice on shopping around. The Shopping Clock certainly raised awareness of inflation and added tools to the debate on the economy but how reliable was it as a source for its readers?

Paul Mosley argues that the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock, were 'more volatile than official figures [which allowed for] ...more disturbance by weather,' and that the way the Shopping Clock presented was bound to get more reader attention even when the *Mirror* published the official figures. He also argues that readers of the *Sun*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* were

³¹ *Daily Mirror*, 5 September 1973, p.17.

³² ACH Smith, *Paper Voices: the popular Press and Social Change 1935-65* (1975) p.245, Adrian Bingham in Beers, Laura (ed) p.119. Conboy, Martin, 'How the war made the Mirror' *Media History*, Vol 23, No 3-4, p.465.

³³ *The Daily Mirror's* journalists spelt clockwatcher as clock-watcher, clock watcher and clockwatcher during this decade.

³⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 1971, p. 11, *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1971, p.2.

³⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1972 p.10.

given more economic data than they had been a decade earlier.³⁶ Dramatic rises on the Shopping Clock gained larger headlines than the weeks when it plateaued or fell but readers were given information week on week regardless. According to Mosley's analysis the *Daily Mirror's* statistics on the Shopping Clock had a much closer relationship to variations in government popularity than reactions to changes to official figures. Mosley's argument is that while papers like the *Mirror* would not convince readers that their standard of living has gone down if it failed to 'square with their own experience' it may have helped to make up their minds if their 'objective impressions are unclear.'³⁷

James Alt's surveys for 1974 showed that many voters had seriously exaggerated expectations about inflation in both February and October with over half believing it to be running 'at over 50 per cent per annum when RPI was running at between 10 and 20 per cent depending on the precise time chosen.' Given how influential if unreliable Mosley believed the *Daily Mirror's* Shopping Clock was, could it be that readers were basing their estimates of inflation not on the rate per year but the rate over the more than four years since the clock began. The *Mirror* shopping bill had gone up from £5 to £7.59 ½ p by the February election week – 51.9 per cent and by October from £5 to £8.50 – 70 per cent in 1974. This was not how statisticians worked out the rate of inflation but it might explain how the public remembered it.

When the Shopping Clock began in 1970 as an anonymous shop in a London suburb, it already had some unavoidable inaccuracies. By basing it in London it was likely to be more expensive for some foods than a £5 shop in other parts of the country. A single weekly shop

³⁶ Mosley, p.128, pp.124-5.

³⁷ *ibid* p.128.

could never be as accurate as official government figures but could be described as investigative journalism.³⁸ The first major change was that instead of 'Fred' its anonymous butcher, in 1973 it switched to a large national chain of bargain butchers Dewhurst's who advertised regularly in the *Mirror* throughout the 1970s. Both supermarkets in the original Shopping Clock – Sainsbury's and Tesco – were also regular advertisers although Tesco had the higher profile. Tesco's was often referred to as Britain's number one supermarket chain and Sir John Cohen was regularly quoted in front page stories about prices. This relationship was not always harmonious as the Shopping Clock and Cohen clashed for several Saturdays about the accuracy of Shopping Clock's Tesco prices in 1974. The Shopping Clock refused to reveal to Sir John Cohen which branch of Tesco had overcharged them and published a letter from Sir John.³⁹ By 1975 nevertheless, the Clock and Tesco had become partners in a voucher scheme for readers.⁴⁰ In 1976 the relaunched Shopping Clock quoted a single supermarket Tesco and used only four smaller shops. After Tesco decided to drop Green Shield stamps and cut its prices a potential 'price war' made the front page of the *Mirror* for three consecutive days.⁴¹ A month later a front-page teaser for the Shopping Clock asked 'Did Tesco stop the Clock?' This referred shoppers to page 7 which claimed a 61 ½ p saving on shopping came 'entirely from Tesco's switchover from Greenshield stamps to lower prices'.⁴² All newspapers sell advertising space and this does not need to overlap with their news coverage but by the late 1970s the purpose of the Shopping Clock and the interests of Tesco seemed to be overlapping. However, there is no evidence from the published readers letters that they were concerned about any overlap.

³⁸ See pp. 50-1 regarding the issue of anonymity of compiling the Shopping Clock.

³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 August 1974, p. 5.

⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 17 September 1975, pp.1, 11.

⁴¹ *Daily Mirror*, 9-11 May 1977, p.1.

⁴² *Daily Mirror*, 11 June 1977, p.1 and p.7.

In the early days of the Shopping Clock and at the time of the *Mirror's* inflation special the belief that wages were the cause of an inflationary spiral was not put forward by *Mirror* journalists.⁴³ Stories like those of the Plessey workers were about how workers were coping with inflation.⁴⁴ Robert Head's Inflation centre page in June 1972 rejected wages claims as the cause. The *Mirror's* editorial and verdict both argued that inflation required a system that tackled all the winners, both those who can gain higher wages and those who gain from property, to protect the losers: notably housewives, pensioners and the lowest waged.

In 1973 the *Daily Mirror* granted Edward Heath's request for a 'Wages Clock' to show how much wages had gone up compared with inflation which showed that average wages had gone up 37.6 per cent where prices had gone up by 33.7 per cent since the clock started. However, they were at pains to point out this was inclusive of overtime and bonuses and before tax. It is only after Labour regained power and brought in the Social Contract that the wages prices spiral was discussed except when quoting speeches by Conservative politicians.⁴⁵

Jim Tomlinson's research of the Counter-Inflation Publicity Unit set up by Harold Wilson, including Alt's surveys of the electorate's understanding of inflation in the mid-1970s, found that far more of the public by 1975 had some understanding of inflation than Behrend had found in 1966 or 1971. Most still did not blame the elected government. Tomlinson cited Alt's conclusion that 'the reaction to the rapid inflation of 1974 and 1975 was very calm, and

⁴³ Some readers disagreed 'You should also print a wages clock showing the increase in incomes over the same period. Then perhaps readers would understand why the "clock" is always rising.' *Daily Mirror*, 25 May 1972, p. 11, Public Opinion, CE Beard Magor, this suggestion was made by a reader 15 months before Mr Heath's suggestion.

⁴⁴ *Daily Mirror* 27 May 1971 p.1, 29 May p.1.

⁴⁵ Refer to Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy* p.205 CIPU'S entrenching the belief in wages prices spiral by 1975 and with it an anti-union perspective.

far indeed from the doom-laden predictions some journalists made in 1974 of chaos and the breakdown of democracy in Britain.⁴⁶ The Shopping Clock's early features on how prices were rising gave consumers some of the basic language of economics. However, readers did not seem to go along with the paper's Battle for Britain crisis agenda when the *Mirror* merged the Shopping Clock and its political commentary on p.3 from November 1974 to the summer 1975. This contrasts with the strength of the Winter of Discontent narrative analysed by Colin Hay, John Shepherd and James Thomas which became so established and long lasting during and after 1978-79. Ordinary citizens seemed able to live with inflation rather like bad weather, and despite the visual appeal of the Clock, it was not as memorable as the photographs, headlines, and front pages of 1978-9, possibly because it was not repeated during the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁷

How the Mirror's Shopping Clock lasted so long, Experiment, Variety and Relevance

Why was the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock 'famous' and so long lasting compared to similar features in other newspapers including the *Daily Mail*, the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*, which came up with the idea as early as 1962? What made it such an effective piece of popular journalism?

Essential to the clock was visual recognition. Tabloid newspapers with their bold headlines

⁴⁶ Alt, Politics p.266 cited by Tomlinson p.198.

⁴⁷Tomlinson, p.198 cited Alt's conclusion from surveys done during 1974 elections which indicated stoicism regarding public to be comparatively stoic about inflation. John Shepherd, Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the British 'Winter of Discontent' (Manchester, 2013) pp.108-129. Colin Hay, 'The Winter of Discontent,' *Political Quarterly*, Vol 80, No 4 (2009) pp. 545-551, and 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol 63, No. 3 (2010), pp. 446-470. James Thomas *Popular newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005), pp.77-86.

greater use of photographs and cartoons are clearly a more visual medium than broadsheet papers and this tendency had flourished since the 1940s in Britain.⁴⁸ Thomas O'Malley reminds us 'We have to be aware of the physical context in which it took place ...They may be read continuously, without interruption or in fits and starts in between other activities.'⁴⁹ For female readers of the *Mirror* for whom the Clock was originally designed this was likely to be true. The list of price increases might have been quickly passed over by readers if not for the Shopping Clock's distinctive logo which was noticeably redesigned six times over the course of the feature and in all changed eleven times. None of the other papers that ran family shopping 'baskets' had a consistent logo. The *Observer* inconsistently used the logo of a single eye and put a Price Watch heading above their Shopping Basket. The *Mirror's* clock had initially been inspired by Harold Wilson's speech about sticking a shopping list behind a mantelpiece clock but this logo had many other connotations. By the end of the 1970s digital clocks became commonplace but analogue round faced clocks were still a strong image. Not only did most people have them in their homes but millions of workers still clocked on. In popular culture Beat the Clock on Sunday night at the London Palladium and the chiming of Big Ben on ITV's News at Ten signalling important news were both instantly recognised.

All successful logos change over time and are refined, rebranded, simplified, and sometimes revert to their original format. The Shopping Clock logo changes demonstrated its

⁴⁸ 'The 'Vote for Him' campaign in the run-up to the 1945 general election can be seen as the culmination of this move to the visual.' James Whitworth Case Study: The *Daily Mirror* and the Role of the Visual in the 1945 General Election in Britain Chapter 20 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017*, (Edinburgh, 2020).

⁴⁹ Thomas O'Malley Chapter 3 p.85 *Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press* in Conboy and Bingham (eds) 'The layout of newspapers encouraged discontinuous reading' p.100.

continuous relevance reflecting decimalization, the celebrity of its first compiler, the smashing of significant barriers, elections and changes of government, the inflation crisis of 1974-75 and the relaunch of the £15 Shopping Clock in 1976.

Figure 1.3 Main logos



The unique element of the Shopping Clock logo was that it showed the actual cost of a weekly shop for the weekly waged rather than the monthly rate of inflation which politicians commented on. Initially the Shopping Clock appeared as the top of a clock, with some resemblance to shopping scales marked in with a hundred shillings at the top. With Decimalization less than four months away by the following week decimal money featured round the outer edge. A full clock face featured by 21 November and the clock also featured a box with the total amount the clock had moved on. The next major change in February 1971 made the decimal values more prominent than 'old money' and the total in decimal money. 'Old Money' disappeared two months later. The most radical change to the

Shopping Clock in September 1971 superimposed the clock on the side of a shopping bag with the name of its compiler, Sally Moore. By May 1972, as the clock inched towards to £6, the logo simplified with just a black clock face, and subtle shading to show how far it had moved, the caption 'Movement to date' and the total. After the clock went through the £5 barrier it was crossed out and £6 written above it. By January 1973 it was even simpler and starker. After the February 1974 election the clock became more complicated as it marked price movement from the Saturday after the election and this continued until January 1975 by which time the movement had reached £1.49 ½ p post-election, the same amount it moved in the 1970-74 period, when the clock monitored the Tory government. From October 1974 to March 1975 another logo of a pound sign with the title The Battle for Britain joined the Shopping Clock page. After the resetting of the clock at £15 in 1976 the logo no longer told readers the price movement just the cost of the shopping each week, until it stopped at £20.14p on 7 January 1978.

Popular journalism's striking headlines dramatising a story in a single phrase were particularly useful for an economic item at a time when the concept of inflation was deemed unfamiliar.⁵⁰ The editorial staff dealing with the Shopping Clock, rather like sports editors, were producing a headline that said one of three things every week. Instead of win, lose or draw it was prices up, down, or not moved, hundreds of times in seven years. As Mosley points out the emphasis was almost always greater when the clock was rising.⁵¹ Headlines in weeks the clock stood still were likely to be smaller and less inventive: 'DROP IN OIL PRICE

⁵⁰ Refer to importance of headlines and subediting Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British Press Vol 3* p.75.

⁵¹ Mosley, pp. 123-4.

CUTS FOOD BILLS' or 'Surprise! Food bill goes down 2p'. A survey from November 1970 – December 1974 shows four main types of headlines when the clock went up.

- Inventive food puns on the 33 foods in the original basket 'Tough times for roast beef brigade', 'Price of eggs whips up shopping bill' 'A milky way to slim hits sour note' 'PINEAPPLE SLICES A CHUNK OFF THE BILL', 'LET THEM EAT EGGS', 'ROASTED Meat puts 9p on Shopping Bill and 'COD GIVES CLOCK A BATTERING'⁵²
- Those emphasising upward movement used words like 'UP,' 'Zoom,' 'Shock rises,' 'Rocketed' and 'Soaring' which sometimes ended up on the front page⁵³
- Summary reminders of the overall rise of the Clock often linked with anniversaries of the clock 'SKY-HIGH. How prices have soared in 19 months', 'Mirror clock soars 7p to new record', 'UP 45 per cent IN THREE YEARS', 'PRICES HIT A RECORD' which also reminded readers how long the Shopping Clock had been going and may explain the sort of overestimation of inflation some voters had.⁵⁴
- Several post-decimalisation headlines put the changes in old money for emphasis 'JUST A TANNER FROM THE TOP,' 'Clock shock...Our food bill soars two bob,' 'UP A BOB' and for a small fall 'HAPPY HA'PENNY' which might have been specially aimed at older readers or as nostalgia for old price levels. ⁵⁵

⁵² *Daily Mirror* 6 March 1971 p.4, 14 August 1971 p.6, 4 March 1972 p.6, 6 May 1972 p.2, 21 October 1972 p.11, 9 December 1972 p.3, 3 January 1974 p.3.

⁵³ UP occurs 76 times in Shopping Clock headlines November 1970- December 1974 including *Daily Mirror* 14 November p. 9, 3 April 1971 p. 4, 1 May p. 4 & 15 May 1971 p.6, 26 April 1972 p.4, 14 June 1972 p.1, 31 March 1973 p.3, 12 January 1974 p.3. Zoom references *Daily Mirror* 12 December 1970 p.5, 27 May 1972 p.7, 20 October 1973 p.3, Shock reference *Daily Mirror* 18 December 1971 p.4, 4 August 1973 p.5, Rocketed references *Daily Mirror* 7 January 1972 p.14. Soaring references *Daily Mirror* 10 March 1973 p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mirror* 10 June 1972 p.6, 13 June 1973 p.1, 3 November 1973 p.3, 29 June 1974 p.5.

⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror* 3 June 1972 p. 7, 4 August 1973 p.5, 18 August 1973 p.3, 22 December 1973 p.3.

These well written headlines were far more entertaining than summaries of prices that had gone up and down and very much in the long established *Mirror* tabloid style of brevity and wit.⁵⁶ O'Malley identified readers' different approaches to reading including skimming headlines and attraction to visuals.⁵⁷ The Shopping Clock lent itself to this discontinuous reading for an audience who might look at the clock and the headline and skip over detailed explanation of the price changes on which they were based.

The writers of the Shopping Clock, its format, and comparisons with similar features in other papers

The actual content of the Shopping Clock survey was going to be hard to make as varied as its headlines but the *Mirror's* talented pool of writers was heavily involved in compiling and commentating on the changes in the Shopping Clock each week. As a weekly housewife's shop comparing her shopping list week on week it was hardly surprising that 90 per cent of the 'Clocks' were compiled by three women journalists Sally Moore, Mary Griffiths, and Penny Burton each bringing their own talents and perspectives to the feature. The nine female contributors to the Clock pages averaged fifteen years with the *Mirror*. The thirty-one male journalists who wrote within the borders of the Shopping Clock with items adjacent to it or about related items on the same page, had even longer careers averaging, twenty two years with the paper.⁵⁸ Four of these 'Mirrormen' served over thirty years with the paper. Most of the male journalists were involved with the Shopping Clock feature between 1973 and 1975 and they included several future deputy or full editors, three chief parliamentary correspondents and foreign correspondents. The female reporters, except for

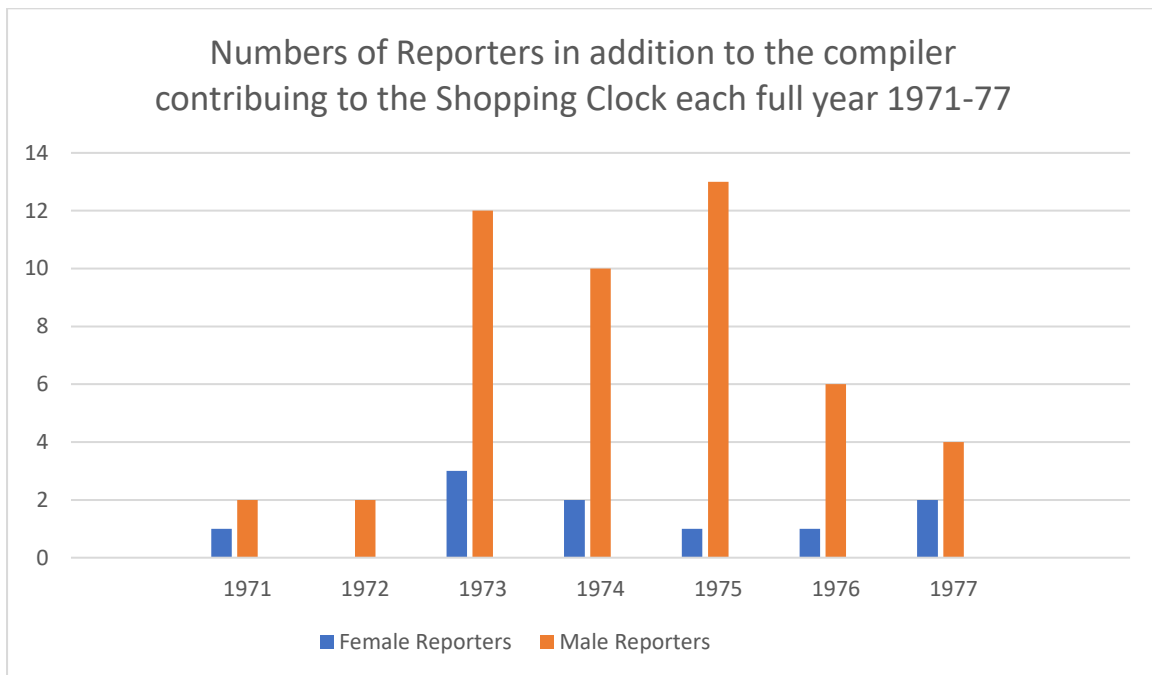
⁵⁶ Refer to Conboy, 'How the war made the Mirror,' p.457.

⁵⁷ O'Malley p.100 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the British Press Vol 3*.

⁵⁸ Two main sources used for tracking careers of journalists were the Mirror Pensioners site and BNA site.

Jill Palmer, returned to feature writing once their Shopping Clock time was done and often continued to write other features while contributing to the Clock in the 1970s.⁵⁹ The male reporters were either seen as specialist experts or were on their way up whereas the female reporters were stuck in a niche.⁶⁰ The numbers of reporters contributing to the Shopping Clock page or alongside it in each year gives some indication of the importance of the feature.

Figure 1.4 Annual Number of reporters of each gender compiling the Shopping Clock for a full year



The original 'Shopping Clock Girl' Sally Moore's *Mirror* career ran from 1964 to 1975. Before the Shopping Clock she had already written almost five hundred *Mirror* articles under her

⁵⁹ Richard Stott, Chris Buckland became editors and Paul Connew and Philip Mellor deputy news editors. Victor Knight, John Desborough, were parliamentary chief correspondents, Geoffrey Goodman was a columnist, member of the editorial board and Industrial Editor and Mark Downey foreign correspondent in the USA.

⁶⁰ 'In 1982 were still only 22 female journalists alongside 496 men [in the London office]' Bingham, *Family Newspapers* p.26. Refer to Linda Steiner, 'Failed Theories: Explaining Gender Difference in Journalism,' *Review of Communication*, Vol. 12 No.3 (2012) and Anthony Delano, 'Women Journalists: what's the difference?' *Journalism Studies*, Vol 4 No 2, (2003).

own name including forty-two that made it to the front page, of which ten were the main story.⁶¹ Her stories ranged from human interest, female or family orientated, to stories about celebrities or royalty. In 1970 she began writing consumer stories based on the Retail Price Index. While the Shopping Clock compiler she continued to write about some issues which could be classified as light hearted trivia. Some showed no evidence of the influence of feminism – ‘Show a leg girls’, ‘Girls who turn men on’ – others highlighted social issues for women, such as ‘find walkout husbands,’ and ‘wives get census boost,’ which explained the census form change which gave both members of a couple equal ranking as head of the household.⁶² During the first two months of 1971 as the *Mirror’s* ‘Decimal Watchdog Girl’ Sally Moore contributed 27 articles focused on decimalisation, including a front page.⁶³ After her last Shopping Clock in July 1972 Sally Moore disappeared from the *Daily Mirror’s* pages until October 1972. Over the next two and half years she wrote another 153 stories or columns including two contrasting front page stories. The first was on British women’s preference for hairy legs in men and the other with Paula James in September 1975 was on husbands not passing on their pay rises to their wives dealing with ‘soaring prices’, entitled ‘SCROOGES! Britain’s pay-rise husbands accused.’⁶⁴ The rest of her input for the paper again show a mixture of titillation or ‘cheeky’ stories such as ‘The Boob bomb,’ ‘Gentlemen prefer

⁶¹ Moore was part of a team in 1964 covering the capture of one of the Great Train Robbers and the same year covered the Postman’s Strike but, on both stories, she worked with at least one male reporter. Other front pages included articles about the Loch Ness monster, a ghost put on 1971 Census form, the problem with opening packets of frozen peas or the dispute about a wall between the management and miners’ showers in a Nottinghamshire pit.

⁶² *Daily Mirror*, 12 May 1970, p.17, ‘The Man most likely to leave home’, *Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1971 p. 7 ‘Wives get census boost.’ *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1971, a report on husbands who desert their families and pay no maintenance for wives and children.

⁶³ *Daily Mirror* 15 February 1971, p.1 ‘All Change!’ by Sally Moore *the Mirror’s* Decimal Watchdog Girl.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 17 September 1975, p.1.

blondes' or general 'women's features' including family food guides, serious social problems like violence against wives plus celebrity stories.⁶⁵

Sally Moore brought to the Shopping Clock experience in consumer issues and a lively bubbly writing style that dramatised the weekly shop.⁶⁶ Her first month's Clocks were written in the first person and she made several references to Fred, her butcher.⁶⁷ Initially her Shopping Clocks focused on the dangers of being overcharged due to decimalisation or mispricing of goods.⁶⁸ She was already taking on consumer issues about the price of chips, sweets, British Railway's cake and consulting the Consumer Association before her spinoff evolved. After the high profile Plessey dispute the Shopping Clock appeared under the byline for a couple of issues 'The Prices watchdog the workers watch' but many of her Shopping Clocks have a more individualist tone urging readers to compare prices even if the Clock could not. The logo of the Clock now featured on a shopping bag with her name. In the run up to Christmas 1971 she gave tips for seasonal shopping with comparisons including the prices of Santa's Grottos in five cities and five supermarket's big food shop before Christmas.⁶⁹ Eventually this became a separate Shoparound spin off on a Thursday. When the *Mirror* ran its June special on inflation Sally Moore's role, as the Shopping Clock Girl, was to be photographed with the shrinking contents of the Shopping Clock bag across the decade.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ On the effect of the contraceptive pill on bust sizes and potential beauty queens in Birmingham respectively

⁶⁶ Refer to AFC Smith et al, *Paper Voices* (1975) Stuart Hall Introduction p.20 'in general -whatever the paper-women's pages will be lighter in treatment chattier.' The *Mirror* had no Women's page but Sally Moore's style certainly had that chattier tone.

⁶⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 14 November 1970, p.9, *Daily Mirror*, 28 November 1970, p.9.

⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 8 May 1971, p.8, *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1971, p.5, *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1971, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 7 August 1971, p.6.

⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 13 November 1971, p.9, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mirror*, 20 November 1971, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, 27 November 1971, p.7, *Daily Mirror*, 4 December 1971, p.11, *Daily Mirror*, 11 December 1971, p. 7, *Daily Mirror*, 18 December 1971, p.4.

⁷⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, pp.2-3.

Mary Griffiths had a similarly long career with the *Mirror* across the 1960s and '70s, much of her copy consisted of interviews with actors and sportsmen with a very distinct female reporter's voice. By the early 1970s she wrote TV previews and reviews. She had so far never made the front page but was well-known enough to have her photograph featured next to her copy. Her 'takeover' of the Shopping Clock in November 1972 was hailed as 'into action Mary Griffiths the Shopping Clock Girl takes on the Ministry's Complaints Dept.'⁷¹ When she took over the Shopping Clock during a 90 day prices freeze, she urged readers to 'keep watching the *Daily Mirror* Clock.' She pointed out anniversaries like the 45 per cent rise in the clock in September 1973. Her copy made more direct attacks on government 'Tory Scrooges – Yes Shopping Clock agrees' and commented on the rising price of cod due to the 'cod wars' under the headline 'CODSWALLOP'.⁷² She included economical recipes for 50p family meals and a Christmas feature asking showbiz stars how they are economising.⁷³ The impact of VAT was tackled but it was other female reporters Paula James and sometime Shopping Clocker Margaret Jones who picked up on the social impact 'How you can't live on £2.59 each week' in September 1973.

Penny Burton who wrote for the *Mirror* from 1971 to 1990 could be described as the dominant Shopping Clock compiler, not only producing the most Shopping Clocks but relaunching it in May 1976 and writing the final Shopping Clock in 1978. She made it to the front page, five times while working on the Shopping Clock⁷⁴. Prior to the Shopping Clock Penny Burton wrote 'women's pieces' including 'Can a man ever understand a woman?' or

⁷¹ *Daily Mirror*, 8 November 1972, p.1.

⁷² *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1973, p.5 and *Daily Mirror*, 24 November 1973, p. 3.

⁷³ *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 1972, p.3. This included Cilla Black's wrapping paper; Lesley Crowther's presents and Michael Parkinson's new freezer something *Mirror* readers had been warned against buying for themselves.

⁷⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 15 May 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 13 June 1974, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 20 September 1974, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 8 January 1976, p.1 and *Daily Mirror*, 10 June 1977, p.1.

‘How much of a bitch are you?’ as well as copy to accompany three girls in bikinis ‘Treble Charms.’⁷⁵ She had also written consumer items for the House Sense feature as well as ‘female’ products and the countdown to Christmas Shopping. After the Shopping Clock Penny Burton continued to produce Shopping Watchdog and wrote about slimming for the *Mirror’s* Women’s Page of the 1980s. All three women were almost entirely confined by the *Mirror* to ‘women’s items’ for most of their time with the paper.⁷⁶

The Shopping Clock report followed a consistent format. This always included a listing of prices rises ‘egg prices leapt up by 5p ‘and price falls ‘a glut of cheap eggs...we paid only 20p at Tesco’s.’ Somewhere in the article would be a reminder of when the clock began and its purpose, ‘The same 33 items that cost exactly £5 cost £5.59 ½ p now.’⁷⁷ The formula differed from the other ‘shopping basket’ features in the *Observer*, *Guardian*, and *Mail* in several key ways. The personality of the ‘Shopping Clock Girl’ was much more pronounced ‘What did catch my breath was another 1d increase in baked beans, the second in five weeks’ even the butcher, ‘Fred’ in the early years of the feature had a name. The Shopping Clock total claimed to be compiled from anonymous visits to branches of Tesco and Sainsbury’s plus the same small retailers each week. It often took an ‘us and them’ tone siding with the shopper against the retailers: ‘Nothing makes shoppers more indignant than finding several different price labels stuck on top of one another – particularly if each one is a higher price...’⁷⁸ The anonymity claim is backed up by the descriptions in some early Shopping Clocks of rises due to overcharging by assistants and the row with Tesco’s in 1974 when the compilers would

⁷⁵*Daily Mirror*, 2 December 1971 p.13, *Daily Mirror* 24 February 1972 p.7., *Daily Mirror* 25 March 1972 p.3.

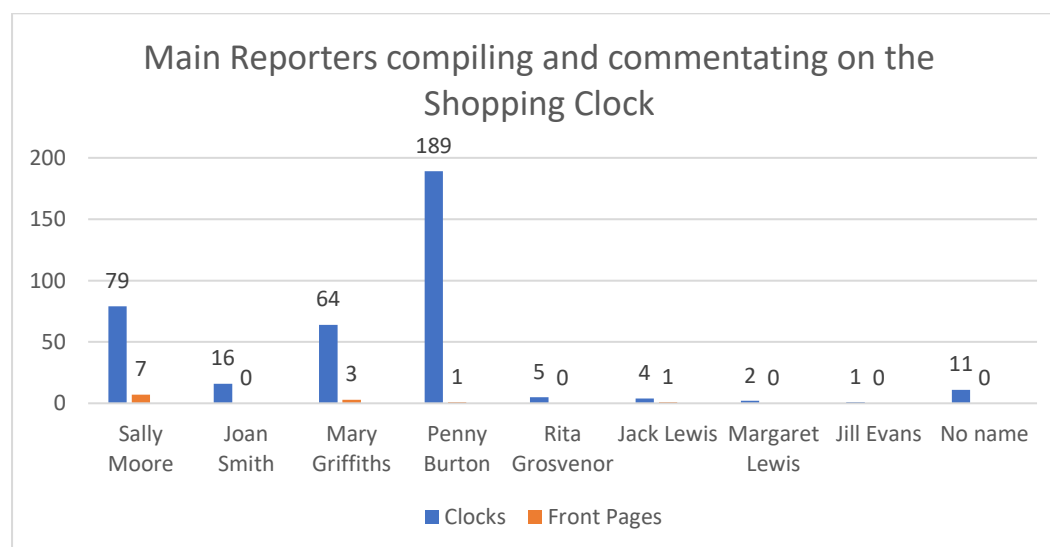
⁷⁶ Refer to Linda Steiner and Anthony Delano for further discussion.

⁷⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 6 November 1971, p.4; *Daily Mirror*, 16 October p.7; *Daily Mirror*, 1 May 1971 p.5.

⁷⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 5 June 5 1971, p.7.

not reveal the site of the Tesco's they shopped at.⁷⁹ Although government statistics were often referenced this was usually done separately as were the price rises from the *Grocer* of recommended retail prices. Most strikingly was the starting point of the clock a £5 shop, initially 100 shillings. This was not the cost of an average family shop in 1970 but it was a clear number from which to measure rises for even the least numerate reader.⁸⁰ The journalists who devised it had a winning formula for this feature which lasted until 1976 when the clock was relaunched as a £15 shop. They had a highly relevant, easy to follow feature but they also knew how to maintain that relevance. The paper updated the feature in significant ways over its lifetime.

Figure 1.5 Main reporters and compiling each year



⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1971 p.4 'No mistake, our food bill is down...prices came down because wrong price labels were attached last week...overcharging was put right.' 31 August 1974 p. 5, the compiler Penny Burton. wrote a slimming feature in 1975 which claimed she had gained weight while Shopping Clock compiler because she had eaten the food from the Shopping Clock shop.

⁸⁰ A 1968 readership survey cited by Tom O'Malley showed most *Mirror* readers left school at 15 or 18 p.93 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham, (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*.

By comparison *The Observer's* regular Shopping Basket feature, begun after the devaluation of the pound in 1967, initially had no headline comment at all, while the *Guardian's* Shopping Basket in 1975 came with headlines like 'Shopping Basket is unchanged', or in 1977 the somewhat puzzling 'Shopping basket holds its prices', accompanied by three lists for May 1976, April 1977 and May 1977 using official figures illustrating a yearly rise of 15 per cent.⁸¹ The aim of these articles seemed to be to inform readers regarding inflation in general, rather than how it affected individuals and families. It involved tables of prices for a month e.g., 5 loaves of bread going up from 87p to 106 ½p whereas the Shopping Clock covered the rise in price of an individual loaf. Given the class profile of its readership both the *Guardian* and the *Observer* would have had more salaried readers who might manage their family budgets differently but they still would have bought much of their shopping weekly. *The Guardian's* Shopping Basket in May 1976 attempted to teach its readers about the reasons prices were changing rather than measure the change.⁸² *The Observer's* Shopping Basket was compiled by female journalists Margaret Stone and Nina Thomson but they were not referred to as 'Shopping Basket Girls' like Sally Moore or Penny Burton at the *Mirror*. However, by the middle of the 1970s at the height of inflation these broadsheet features appeared in the Business section of the paper on page 19 as very small items. The *Daily Mail* as a popular Conservative-supporting tabloid with a large female readership seemed to be closer to the *Mirror's* approach in some ways. It claimed to have bought its own list of weekly groceries in November 1972 when the government introduced a price

⁸¹ The *Observer's* first Shopping Basket was in *The Observer Weekend Review*, 4 November 1962, p.32 and appeared regularly from 1967-74. *Guardian*, 1 December 1975 p. 7, and *Guardian*, 9 July 1977 p.3.

⁸² *Guardian*, 3 May 1976, p. 4 'A further 9 ½ p of increase is due to a rise in the cost of tomatoes to 40 ½ p. This is a normal seasonal increase. Cheaper tomatoes from the Spanish mainland have been exhausted, and we have been paying for tomatoes imported largely from the Canaries.' Refer to Bowden et al pp. 881-906 for more on the difference between broadsheet and tabloid coverage of economics.

freeze but headlines like 'How food bill goes up' took a longer term view.⁸³ Some of the *Daily Mail's* headlines were as dramatic as the *Mirror's* such as 'Anatomy of the soaring grocery bill', 'Family food bill shoots up...' but the articles only appeared monthly on no regular day, on pages further into the paper and were linked very closely to political debates.⁸⁴ They differed from the *Mirror* in never addressing the shopper directly and always being written by male journalists usually Harvey Elliot or Peter Bullen.⁸⁵ Few of these features were still appearing by 1976.⁸⁶ The page position and the longevity of the Shopping Clock both suggest this paper with its less affluent readers thought the price of food still mattered to its readers up to the end of 1977. Shinobu Majima's research on changes to Family Expenditure showed the share spent on food declined from 25 per cent to 10 per cent from the 1960s 1990s. However, less well paid workers spent a larger proportion of their income on food throughout this period. Thus, most *Mirror* readers would still have spent a larger proportion on food and according to the Family Expenditure survey households nationally still spent 33 per cent of their incomes on non-housing basics in 1978.⁸⁷

The Shopping Clock's Front Page Appearances as evidence of its relevance

The lively style of the Shopping Clock compared with similar features in other papers is one way of explaining its variety and success. Another way to measure its relevance was how often this shopping feature appeared on the front page of the paper as real news. Smith and Stuart Hall argued that appearance here involved a decision that a feature's political

⁸³ *Daily Mail*, Wednesday April 4 1973 p.11.

⁸⁴ *Daily Mail*, 2 November 1970, p.3. *Daily Mail*, 19 February 1973, p.13.

⁸⁵ The Female Women's page made no references to food prices in the mid-70s unlike parenting and cooking.

⁸⁶ Refer to p.83 for the decline of these features

⁸⁷ Shinobu Majima, 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961-2004' *Contemporary British History* (2008) Vol 22, No 4 p.585 Figure 4 and p.587 Figure 5 based on UK FES Data

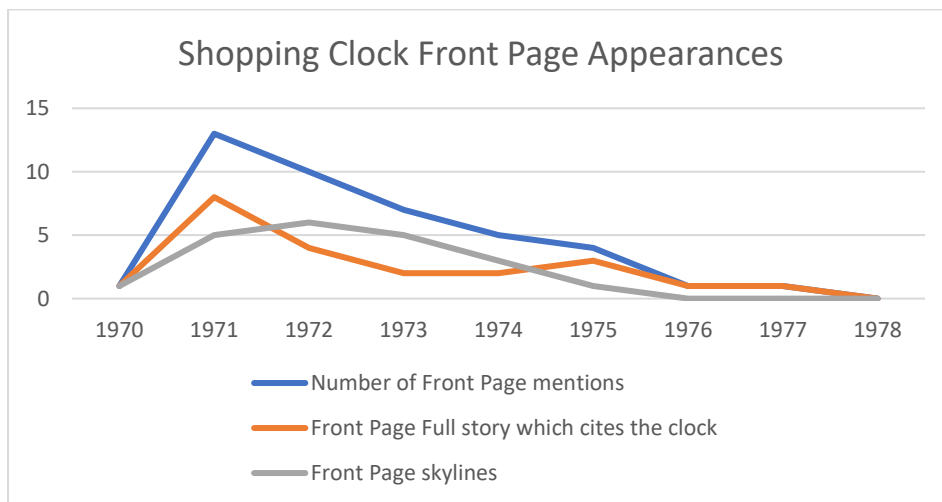
importance can be seen as greater than its usual purpose as a feature⁸⁸. The Shopping Clock appeared a significant number of times in the 1970s either as a main story or skyline for the feature inside or in a future edition. As inflation continued through the decade the Shopping Clock faded as a front page story and inflation stories were taken over by political journalists like Victor Knight whose main sources were government officials, ministers, and official statistics. Another aspect of its relevance was the teaming of the Shopping Clock with the regular Battle for Britain news feature for sixth months at the height of inflation in 1974-75. Its initial front page appearance in 1970 to launch the feature included a photograph of a women's purse, change, a receipt, and a promise to keep 'a watching brief on the shop counter' all indicated it was primarily aimed at women readers. The Shopping Clock's high point as a front page feature was during the period it was compiled by Sally Moore the 'Shopping Clock Girl.' In 1971 the Shopping Clock built up its profile as famous newspaper feature. It appeared eight times as a front page story and in total 13 times on the front page. Only Marge Proops, the *Mirror's* most well-known feature writer, appeared more during the decade⁸⁹ Its first front page story was about decimalisation but much more striking was the 'Shopping Clock Strike' in May 1971. This report was of a one-day stoppage involving over 3,000 workers in seven Plessey factories in the South East. It was headed with a picture of the shopping clock from the previous Saturday with a caption '3,000 demand a rise to keep up with the *Mirror's* guide to prices', the main headline in bold typeface 'THE SHOPPING CLOCK STRIKE'. The story included a quote from a shop steward below the headline 'Every worker buys the *Mirror*. Everyone can understand it and we know you're

⁸⁸ Refer to AFC Smith *Paper Voices* (1975) p.18-19 However since the *Mirror* also featured celebrity and entertainment features on its front page its criterium for news was not so clear.

⁸⁹ Proops averaged between six and seven front page mentions annually across the 1970s.

telling the truth.’⁹⁰ The article focused on how the shop stewards used their copies of the Shopping Clock to negotiate with management when they rejected a 9 per cent pay offer which would last until June 1972.⁹¹

Figure 1.6 Front Page Appearances



The *Mirror* was portrayed as being on the side of the workers: ‘The management don’t read the likes of the *Daily Mirror* and haven’t heard of the Shopping Clock – so we took along cuttings to show them.’⁹² The report gave no indication what these workers currently earned, what percentage were women or ‘housewives’ and only a very short quote from the employers’ spokesman at Plessey’s. The main emphasis was on how these workers have used the Shopping Clock. Two days later a similar smaller story appeared on the front page from Sally Moore headed ‘Shopping Clock in a pay claim.’ This time a smaller group of engineering workers asked to use the Shopping Clock as an inflation indicator in their wage negotiations.⁹³

⁹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1971 p.1

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1971 pp.1-2.

⁹² *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1971 p.1

⁹³ *Daily Mirror*, 29 May p.1.

The story boosted the Shopping Clock's prominence and relevance. Over the next three weeks a banner appeared on the front page describing the Shopping Clock inside as 'famous' and 'most talked about' and David Thompson's story on inflation about a 10.4 per cent rise in food prices 'UP, UP, UP' on 30 June described the government's official Food Price Index as 'the Government's own Shopping Clock.'⁹⁴ The *Mirror* Comment editorial claimed what began 'as a simple idea for housewives ... has become as important as the *Financial Times* index of share prices.'⁹⁵ Some *Mirror* front page journalists like Robert Head – 'You are earning less and paying more' – based their stories on Department of Trade reports on family food spending and prices, and made no reference to the Shopping Clock but others were happy to quote it.⁹⁶ Jack Lewis's gave the Shopping Clock a mid-week outing on the front page. His story featured the Shopping Clock logo and Lewis went shopping for the usual 33 items after a cut in SET. Sally Moore headed another small front-page story, topped by the Shopping Clock logo – 'The Mirror Clock is your best watchdog – that's official.'⁹⁷ Whereas her May stories had been about wage disputes this was about shopping around. It quoted a MAFF official 'All the publicity in the Press, including the *Mirror* Shopping Clock has aroused much interest and made housewives more aware of prices.'⁹⁸ It was then linked to a page seven story about rural housewives in dispute with a dairy charging for the delivery of milk, presented as another example of 'consumer power.'

⁹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 5 June 1971, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1971 p.1 and *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1971, p.1. The back page news summary also references it, *Daily Mirror*, 9 June 1971, p.28 reporting its appearance on afternoon television, 'The Shopping Clock makes news again.'

⁹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 8 June 1971 p.2.

⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 6 July 1971, p.1 Robert Head's story used quotes from food retailers including Sir John Cohen of Tesco's and executives from Fine Fare and Unilever. *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1971, p.1.

⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 12 July 1971 p.1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 12 July 1971 p.1.

The Clock reappeared on the front pages in September 1971 and made monthly appearances in the run up to Christmas suggesting editorial staff saw its growing relevance. In September Sally Moore, now dubbed 'the Shopping Clock Girl,' wrote a large front page piece on decimalisation. 'YOU'VE BEEN DIDDLED!' which quoted 'a number of Shopping Clock readers ...who say they can only afford sausages for Sunday lunch' which drew an unsympathetic response from Food Minister Jim Prior, 'there will always be a number of poor managers...there are very ample supplies of good food at reasonable prices.'⁹⁹ The *Mirror* Comment which shared the front page also seemed to put the responsibility back on the housewife 'to think twice, and three times and ten times before she puts her hand in her purse' and agreed with Prior that consumers might not have adjusted to paying with the decimal currency. Inside the same issue the *Mirror* announced its new partnership with the Consumer Association and the rest of the week a new feature the Square Deal focused on different groups from young couples to pensioners. A follow up piece by Sally Moore on 4 October, on page five challenged James Prior and the paper's own individualistic solution. She highlighted food poverty 'People DO live on sausages!' and appealed to readers to describe their Sunday lunch and how they managed. The September front page appearance had generated more coverage of inflation inside the paper. However, some of the messages were very mixed, including individual self-help solutions and questioning whether consumers were much worse off.

A sign of the Shopping Clock's high profile, despite hard news items like terrorism and Britain's entry into Europe in October, was there was enough space to remind readers of the imminent first anniversary of the Shopping Clock. In November Sally Moore and the

⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1971, p.1

Shopping Clock reappeared on the front page 'the prices in the prison shop which were higher than prices in most shops and prisoners 'problem is they just can't shop around.'¹⁰⁰

The 18 December front page was 'A VERY DEAR XMAS TO YOU That's today's message of the Shopping Clock' by Sally Moore. The cost of food here was described as 'biggest-ever bite of the family budget...food prices...rocketed...costing more than ever before.'¹⁰¹ The survey quoted said prices had gone up 4 per cent in a week, even carol singers were said to be asking for more and the RPI had reached 157.2 points that month. The Shopping Clock feature was clearly a major part of the *Mirror's* last Saturday edition before Christmas.

After building up the profile of the Shopping Clock in 1971 the following year it still played a major part in inflation coverage in front page stories. There are 10 *Mirror* front page appearances during the year. Six were teasers which tempted readers to dip inside spread across the year.¹⁰² There are four actual stories featuring the Shopping Clock. Three appearing in one month.

In June the approach to inflation had become more sensationalist. On 10 June topped by a banner 'SATURDAY MORNING SHOCKER' the main headline in a very large font is preceded by explanation 'Mirror Shopping Clock breaks the £6 barrier', with echoes of Concorde's breaking of the sound barrier, especially since it was paired with the large headline 'OVER THE TOP 'and the 'UP! UP! UP! Charting the way prices have soared.'¹⁰³ This was accompanied by a large Shopping Clock icon showing that week's prices. The language in

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 22 November 1971, p.1

¹⁰¹ *Daily Mirror*, 18 December 1971, p.1

¹⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1972, p.1 'Look what beef prices did to the Shopping Clock'. *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1972 p.1 'Shopping Clock highest ever'. *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1972, p.1 'Shopping Clock Highest Ever- Page Nine' *Daily Mirror*, 30 September 1972, p.1 'What does the Shopping Clock say today?' (with a large logo). *Daily Mirror*, 9 December 1972, p.1 'Shopping Clocks soars 9p.' *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 1972, p.1 'Shopping Clock Shocker.'

¹⁰³ *Daily Mirror*, 10 June 1972, p.1

the paragraph beside it is similarly dramatic ‘soaring prices...way over the top...colossal 21 percent ...hitting the Clock and the housewife for six.’¹⁰⁴ This was followed on page six with a half-page by Sally Moore entitled ‘SKY-HIGH – how the prices have soared’ without the usual shopping clock but instead a graph and a series of paragraphs with headings such as ‘Total,’ ‘Families’ and ‘Budget’ and in a larger font ‘Sympathy for the housewife.’ There was also a quote from Jim Prior saying how seriously the government was taking this milestone. This time there was no questioning by the minister of the accuracy of the Shopping Clock even though the figures were not seasonally adjusted. Just four days later, the Clock’s bursting of the £6 barrier is cited in a story about inflation – ‘UP and UP and UP and UP!’ the day before the *Mirror’s* inflation special.¹⁰⁵ The last Shopping Clock related front page story in June, ‘MIRROR CLOCK GUIDES THE MPs’ was a smaller item alongside the masthead of the paper. This also raised the profile of the Clock by quoting Labour’s Alec Jones in a Commons Committee that the Clock reminded legislators of what needed to be done. ‘Old age pensioners are not concerned with percentages or averages but with daily costs.’¹⁰⁶ Finally in September the Clock was referenced again in a story about the TUC conference – ‘BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE TUC, with a 13 per cent rise in a year.’¹⁰⁷

In 1973 inflation became hard news and international news after the Oil Crisis. The Shopping Clock was only referred to in fifty per cent of the front pages dealing with inflation but that year the Shopping Clock appeared twice a week inside the paper and the clock rose from £6.49 ½ p to £7.74p.¹⁰⁸ It was clearly seen as relevant to readers. In January the Shopping Clock was on the front page four times. Two skylines prompted readers to read the

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 10 June 1972, pp. 1 and 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 14 June 1972, p.1., *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, p.1.

¹⁰⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 23 June 1972, p.1 See Chapter 2 p.139.

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 4 September 1972, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1973, p.3 and *Daily Mirror*, 29 December 1973 p.3.

Shopping Clock inside under a story about the rising price of beef in the first week of the month, with a tiny front page reminder on the Thursday 11 and Saturday 13 January a front page entitled 'SHOPPING SHOCKER' including a large picture of the clock emphasised how much it had risen in the ten weeks since the government's price freeze followed by two bullet points

- *Mirror* clock soars 7p to a new record
- Prices up 6 per cent since the big freeze

This front page version written by the Shopping Clock's Mary Griffiths contained more statistics than the usual inside Clock: '7p to hit highest figure... risen 39p -that's 6 per cent since pay and prices freeze' and later 'The Shopping Clock now showed 'an increase of 31 per cent.'¹⁰⁹ The rest of the story referenced the Agriculture Minister's suggestion to boycott expensive foods. The article written in the first person speculated on Edward Heath's Saturday lunch: 'I can reveal...having fish...I was assured it won't be cod...no roast beef [on Sunday] leg of lamb is on the menu.' Despite the statistics the tone of the article with references to 'hefty boost' 'shopping shocker' and speculations on Heath's lunch is reminiscent of a seaside postcard or the 'us and them' voice the *Mirror* often adopted.¹¹⁰

After a minor reappearance in July, it was Edward Heath who put the Shopping Clock back on the front page in September with his request for a Wages Clock. Under a large skyline headed 'WHAT MR HEATH SAID ABOUT THE PAPER THAT MATTERS' the *Mirror* printed the Prime Minister claim to be an enthusiastic reader of the *Mirror* and a reference to the story about the Premier and the Shopping Clock on page three.¹¹¹ Although this story is analysed

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 13 September 1972, p.1.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.1.

¹¹¹ Refer to Chapter 2, pp. 134-135, 139.

elsewhere, it is worth pointing out that during September, the month of TUC and party conferences, the *Mirror* ran several front pages on inflation and pay rises as well as inside stories and printed letters in response to Mr Heath's idea of a wages clock without any direct reference to the Shopping Clock.¹¹²

The Shopping Clock re-emerged in the run up to first 1974 election with three front page appearances. The first, written by shopping clock compilers Burton and Griffiths six days before the election announcement, took an optimistic approach: the main headline 'SUNNY SIDE UP!', with a smaller font 'Bacon and Eggs start to move to cheaper food', was based on information from retailers and MAFF predicting egg and bacon prices coming down.¹¹³ The most prominent use of the Shopping Clock's Logo on 16 February 1974 transformed it into an election rosette to accompany an article about a Harold Wilson election speech. Under a smaller headline 'Wilson rams, it home: Prices are the big issue for the voters' appeared the giant headline 'SHOPPING CLOCK BLAST.'¹¹⁴ The article was written by Victor Knight, Parliamentary Editor. The Shopping Clock was used as evidence to back up Wilson's points on prices in emboldened type: 'This confirmed the Daily Mirror's Shopping Clock last month, which showed that a basket of groceries had gone up by 21 per cent during the same time.'¹¹⁵ The focus of Knight's long article was election speeches from Wilson, Heath, Thorpe, and Denis Healey. This included Thorpe's reference to the 'three-bob loaf' as a monument to Heath's failure. This was the final punchline intended to leave the reader with little doubt where the weight of the argument was. It certainly lived up to the banner at the

¹¹² *Daily Mirror*, 1973, 5 September p.17, *Daily Mirror*, 6 September 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1973 p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1973, p.16.

¹¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 1 February 1974, p.1.

¹¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1974, p.1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.1

bottom of the front page. 'The newspaper that DOESN'T sit on the fence.' Here a member of the *Mirror's* editorial team made use of the Shopping Clock as a 'reliable' economic statistical source not just a consumer feature.¹¹⁶ Other election front pages on the prices issue did not use the Shopping Clock but this front page marked a turning point in the campaign.¹¹⁷

Across the rest of 1974 the only appearance on the front page of the Shopping Clock was a teaser on 30 March highlighting its appearance on page three. Inflation was usually dealt with by political reporters mainly in terms of the Chancellor and other ministers and in August a front page editorial focused on the failure so far to deal with inflation. 'HOLD TIGHT BRITAIN' dealt with the possibility of a right wing plot but also spelt out a message to the unions to stop expecting 'rising living standards or even keeping level'.¹¹⁸ The following month Victor Knight's front page 'THE SQUARE MEAL DEAL' about EEC concessions on beef, sugar, and milk prices used official statistics including the Bank of England lending rate and quoted the previous Chancellor but its headline echoed the Shopping Clock spinoff the Square Deal, which ran from 1971 to 1973.¹¹⁹

In 1975 when the Shopping Clock went through its £9 and £10 barriers in January and May respectively it again hit the front page.¹²⁰ The January £9 barrier got the greater prominence, covering almost the whole front page. '£9 Shopping Clock shocker' was the main headline with five earlier shopping clocks for 1970-74 including the breakthrough of previous 'barriers' at £6--£8. The story explained 'the bill has risen by...83 ½ %'. The story by

¹¹⁶ See Geoffrey Goodman, *Bevan to Blair* (London, 2003) for further details of the editorial team pp 159-60, p. 221.

¹¹⁷ Chapter 2.

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 23 August 1974, p.1 HOLD TIGHT BRITAIN editorial.

¹¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 21 September 1974, p.1.

¹²⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1975, p.1 and *Daily Mirror*, 17 May 1975, p.1.

Alan Law was a wide ranging economic story that predicted more short-time working and was only based on unofficial figures.¹²¹ When the Shopping Clock broke the £10 barrier on 17 May 1975 although it featured on the front page it was not the main story.¹²² It was only as a teaser to prompt readers to extensive coverage inside on page five. Given that this barrier meant the shopping clock has doubled in price between 1970 and 1975 it got less coverage than the £9 barrier. In between the smashing of these two barriers there was a front page on 8 February in which the Shopping Clock was coming - 'DOWN, DOWN, DOWN' with a shopping clock logo and 44 ½ p! knocked off the Shopping Clock which directed readers to the Shopping Clock feature on page four.¹²³

In the year inflation reached its greatest height, 1975, *Mirror* journalists wrote about inflation in response to new political situations. They did not rely on or cite their own paper's consumer feature as often, perhaps because they now had closer links to the government in power.¹²⁴ They may have been looking for new approaches to the unprecedented level of inflation to make the front page. The six month coalition of Battle for Britain journalists and the Shopping Clock compilers showed prices was only one angle *Mirror* journalists emphasised in covering inflation. The forthcoming referendum also influenced the content of the front page and the Shopping Clock features inside. A survey of these 1975 *Mirror* front pages shows five different approaches to inflation. In order of frequency, they were political policies, economic contexts, social effects, gender, and

¹²¹ 'there will be no official jobless figures this month because of a staffing dispute among the civil servants who make the count' *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1975, p.1.

¹²² *Daily Mirror*, 17 May 1975, p.1, 'KIDNAP ORDEAL OF POOLS GIRL' and a Wimbledon story about Ilie Nastasie.

¹²³ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1975, p.1.

¹²⁴ Geoffrey Goodman believed even under a Conservative Government the *Mirror* journalists had greater access to ministers 'not so readily available to other newspapers' Goodman, p. 142. James Thomas *Popular newspapers, the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005) argued Labour and *Mirror* especially close from the mid-1970s to 1979 pp.67-76.

consumerist. Nine of the ten articles were written by male journalists. The economy made the front page in some form in sixty issues and there were only eighty nine hard news stories on the front page so it was the dominant hard news story of the year for the *Mirror*. But in the year when inflation was portrayed as the national crisis, 238 issues appeared without any reference to it on the front page.¹²⁵

Figure 1.7 Survey of other inflation front page stories in 1975

Main theme	Dates	Number	Headlines	Reporters
Political Government Policy and need to act urgently	25 June 26 June 12 July	3	Wilson's order in inflation battle HURRY IT UP! COME ON HAROLD THE FATE OF THE NATION	Chris Buckland & Geoffrey Goodman <i>Mirror</i> Comment Editorial Terence Lancaster
Economic Extent of inflation	13 May 26 May 14 June	3	POUND HIT FOR SIX Lies, lies, and More Lies and those damned statistics NOW THE BAD NEWS 25 per cent inflation	Chris Buckland & Robert Head <i>Mirror</i> Comment Editorial Bryn Jones
Social Effects Food Poverty	30 June 6 October	2	HUNGRY BRITAIN School ration dinners SCANDAL HUNGRY CHILDREN	Roger Todd <i>Mirror</i> Editorial Roger Todd

¹²⁵ Other serious news front pages for the *Mirror's* editors included the John Stonehouse Affair, several IRA bombings, the EEC referendum, the Conservative leadership contest, and Labour rebels but many front pages continued to be dominated by crime, human interest, or celebrity stories.

Gender Husbands keeping rises	17 September	1	SCROOGES! Britain's pay rise husbands accused	Margaret Jones & Sally Moore
Consumer Protection	8 October	1	WAR ON THE PUB CHEATS	Terry Pattinson

In 1976 and 1977 the last full years of the Shopping Clock, the Clock was only mentioned twice on the front page and both as positive evidence of improvement. In February Bryn Jones's small article cited it as back up evidence for his 'THREE CHEERS' headline with a decrease in the cost of living, 'our Shopping Clock shows a big drop in prices.'¹²⁶ The final appearance of the original Clock on 15 May and relaunch on 22 May as a £15 shop did not appear on the front page. In August 1977 Mary Griffiths' article 'Housewives win cut in cost of a cuppa' explained the factors that have led retailers to sell tea for less and then directed readers to the Shopping Clock on page four.¹²⁷

Inflation had not left the front pages in 1977 and was sometimes linked to detailed double page spreads similar to the June 1972's inflation issue. The largest focus was food prices and the headlines could have been devised for Shopping Clocks: 'Food Prices set to leap again' 'Bread War' 'You and Your purse' 'Your soaring bills...FOOD PRICES SHOCK A *MIRROR* INVESTIGATION.'¹²⁸ Many of the same images and even photographs were used of groceries and shopping trolleys. The journalists David Thompson, Alan Law and Terry Pattinson had all worked on the Shopping Clock between 1973-77. Only one of the main Shopping Clock

¹²⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 14 February 1976, p.1.

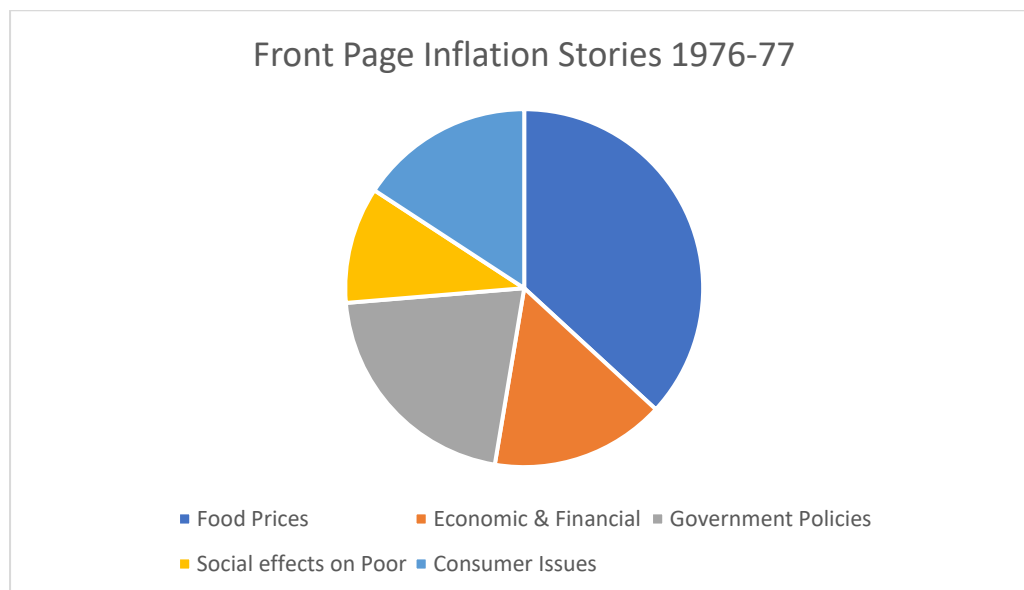
¹²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 6 August 1977, p.1.

¹²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 19 January 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 2 February 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 4 March 1977, p.1 mostly written by David Thompson, Terry Pattinson, and Alan Law.

compilers Mary Griffiths appeared in a consumer based story over these two years about a 'shopping frenzy' just before Christmas 1976 entitled 'BOOM! Wives splash out.'¹²⁹

The approaches on front pages that Sally Moore and other early Shopping Clock journalists had used now seem to be accepted by the *Mirror* as the house style. While the Shopping Clock itself shrank in size and appeared further back in the paper, male journalists were hitting the front pages with these stories. The Shopping Clock may have had less direct influence on *Mirror* readers but had influenced *Mirror* journalists.¹³⁰ The Shopping Clock may not have always hit the front page but had retained its wider and more versatile influence as a pioneer of consumer rights journalism for working class readers through the spinoffs and features it inspired

Figure 1.8 Types of inflation stories 1976-77



¹²⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 6 December 1976, p.1.

¹³⁰ Food Price Stories on the front page *Daily Mirror*, 9 March 1976, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 18 November 1976, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 19 January 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 2 February 1977, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 4 March 1977, p.1 mostly written by David Thompson, Terry Pattinson, and Alan Law.

Reader Audiences and Reader Reactions

Two possible ways of measuring the relevance of the Shopping Clock feature are to examine who it was addressed to and how readers reacted to it in readers' letters. A survey of Shopping Clocks from 1970-78 looks at which groups were directly addressed in the feature and the range of issues it covered beyond price rises and falls. This shows greater variety and experimentation in its first two years. Only a minority of Shopping Clocks in the first two years were addressed directly to housewives in their first paragraph when the Clock featured the price of food and even these were sometimes addressed to 'clockwatchers.' The more popular focus in 1970-72 was wider consumer issues, which eventually developed into the separate spinoffs the Square Deal and the Shoparound, dealt with later in this chapter.¹³¹

These consumer Shopping Clocks often dealt with products not in the original 33 item list or wider issues like packaging, labelling, or safety. Once other consumer lists for men and toiletries were wound down at the end of 1972 the 'housewives' Shopping Clock focus on food became dominant. But during the highest years of inflation Shopping Clocks addressed to all readers were the second most common after housewives.

One striking feature of the clock despite its longevity and its political impact is how seldom it related clock movements to their effect on the poorest groups in society. For a paper of the left, known for its crusading past, the impact of price rises on specific poorer groups was discussed only 13 times out of 354 Clocks (0.037 per cent). The aim of the clock was to reflect the effect of inflation on 'Mr and Mrs Average' not to campaign about poverty; these

¹³¹ The Square Deal is not included in this table but the Thursday Shoparound which appeared under the Shopping Clock logo is.

issues were covered elsewhere in the paper and in this sense the Shopping Clock's biggest aim was to defend the relative affluence of typical readers.¹³²

Figure 1.9 Reader audiences and messages November 1970 – January 1978

Audience	Nov 1970 - Dec 1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977-Jan 1978
'Housewives' only	11	16	40	39	29	44	49
Wider Consumer Issues	22	17	12	4	3	7	9
Other Consumer Lists	14	28	-	-	-	-	-
Decimalization Issues	7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poorer Reader Issues	3	1	2	3	1	3	-
Relevant to all readers	1	3	10	19	20	10	8
Linked to workers and industry specifically	-	1	-	19	12	1	0
EEC Referendum Issues	-	-	-	-	5	-	-

The *Mirror's* pioneering work with readers' letters helped it to find its voice from the mid-1930s to mid-1940s.¹³³ By the 1970s it had two regular letters features: *Live Letters* answered by the *Old Codgers* with their own views and the daily Public Opinion which featured most of the letters about the Shopping Clock. 'Research for the 1974–7 Royal Commission on the Press showed that letters to the national press tended to come from the

¹³² O'Malley p.100 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the British Press Vol 3*.

¹³³ ACH Smith, *Paper Voices* p.63 and pp. 99-101, Adrian Bingham, *Representing the people?* in Beers, Laura (ed) *Brave new world* p.119, Martin Conboy, 'How the war made the Mirror' p.465.

more educated and affluent sections of the population'¹³⁴. This finding was for the whole Press but could still apply to *Mirror* letter writers as being atypical of its readers. In 1971, for example, while the Shopping Clock only featured three items on poorer groups, the 16 readers' letters include four from pensioners even though they made up a small proportion of *Mirror* readers according to readership surveys.¹³⁵ In addition, all newspaper letters were likely to be filtered and selected by the paper. The *Mirror's* publication of letters citing the Shopping Clock is shown below.

Figure 1.10 Letters referring to the Shopping Clock

Year	Total Number of Letters	Letters from 'Housewives'	Letters from 'Pensioners'	Letters from Retailers	Letters making a wider political/economic point
1970	0	0	0	0	0
1971	16	6	4	0	6
1972	13	4	2	2	5
1973	2	0	1	0	2
1974	5	3	0	1	1
1975	0	0	0	0	0
1976	1	0	0	0	1
1977	0	0	0	0	0
1978	0	0	0	0	0

As there was a wider range of audiences addressed in the first two full years of the Clock there were far more letters referring to the Shopping Clock directly in those two years. Who wrote these letters? In 1971 as well as four pensioners, six 'housewives', another two came from 'clockwatchers', one from a rural reader, and another from a young female reader who

¹³⁴ Cited by O'Malley p.96 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the British Press Vol 3*.

¹³⁵ "The bulk of readers fell into two age groups, 25–44 and 45–64, with readership dropping off after 65 (Jeffrey and McClelland 1987: 39). 'People in their middle years, and approaching and just beyond retirement were the heaviest readers of newspapers' cited by O'Malley p.92.

described herself as not taken in by Mr Heath's 'lies [about prices].' Most were warmly supportive of the Shopping Clock and many used it to measure their own struggles with inflation. 'We read that that the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock has been used to back extra wage claims ... to whom we senior citizens...can make our claim. We have to shop at the same prices but we've no union to back us up.'¹³⁶

One theme that emerged in 1971 and 1972 was scepticism about the practicality of shop around advice from both the Shopping Clock and the government. A reader from Dorset asked about those 'in small villages where there is only one shop' while a healthy pensioner letter under the heading 'Shop Around there's a snag' questioned how would it work 'for the old infirm and disabled? And mothers who have to lug several children around.'¹³⁷ A 'strong healthy husband' in November 1972 wrote

'I decided to shop around for the best buys of weekend meat and groceries...After two hours tramping about, making notes, and comparing prices I was a physical wreck. Shop around indeed – it half killed me. How are old people on low incomes expected to cope with miles of supermarkets and cunningly calculated prices?'¹³⁸

These comments from readers' letters are very similar to the attack on the shopping around solution made by Harold Wilson in a Commons debate the following summer.¹³⁹

While some readers' letters challenged the premise of the Shopping Clock asking for a wages clock, as Mr Heath later did, or pointing out it did not include bills for utilities, the letters

¹³⁶*Daily Mirror*, 4 June 1971 p.2.

¹³⁷*Daily Mirror*, 17 July 1971, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 20 October 1971, p.6.

¹³⁸*Daily Mirror*, 26 November, 1972 p.8.

¹³⁹ '...easy advice. What about working wives? What about wives with young children? What about wives in area such as villages or underserved estates with only one shop?' *Hansard* Volume 860: debated on Wednesday 18 July 1973, Column 537.

became increasingly consumerist in tone the longer the Clock was established. With the price freeze in place in November 1972 a special letter page was on 'price rises that readers regard as unnecessary.' This feature included overcharging at Fine Fare and six specific price rises. Many are followed up by an explanation or justification by the manufacturer, retailer, or wholesaler.¹⁴⁰

Although inflation was a live issue throughout the 1970s the clock appeared more regularly in the letters' pages in its first few years? This may not be a sign of its declining relevance. Although readers did not write directly about the Shopping Clock, readers did write about related issues, such as budgeting for a family's weekly food in 1973 and in 1975 including the need for shopping around because 'husbands are so mean with their housekeeping allowances that wives ... have to shop around for bargains otherwise our families would go hungry.'¹⁴¹ Consumer rights problem pages like Margaret Jones' 'Help' column, which started in January 1975, focused on the same consumer issues. One explanation could be the political solutions brought in by Labour governments after 1974 helped to cushion the worst off *Mirror* readers by pegging certain food prices and subsidising essential foods for pensioners that took the steam out of this issue for the *Mirror's* older readers.

How relevant was the Shopping Clock to its principal clockwatchers, women? Of the 37 letters written relating to the Shopping Clock less than forty per cent were written by women describing themselves as housewives. Anna Pollert's research of married female factory

¹⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 3 November 1972, p.13.

¹⁴¹ *Daily Mirror*, 2 August 1973 p.7 letter writers 'Angry Mother' and Mrs. Gane took issue with the *Mirror* and the Government's statistics on the cost of feeding a family. Both said it could be done economically and criticized the *Mirror's* own housewife for not making her own puddings and feeding her children expensive fresh fruit. *Daily Mirror*, 27 January 1975, p. 10 letter headed 'Meanies' responding to a shopping duel the week before between a grain expert and the chair of Leeds Branch of the Housewives Association to buy 22 items for £6, *Daily Mirror*, January 24 1975 p.5.

workers in Bristol found they still regarded themselves primarily as housewives. Many went out shopping for food in their lunch hour from the factory and during the monotony of working on low skill factory work would daydream about 'whether they could catch the usual bus and fit in the shopping.'¹⁴² How in touch with women 'keeping a house' was the Shopping Clock feature, with its emphasis on shopping around and economical cooking at a time when 50 per cent of all married women in Britain worked full or part-time as well as keeping a house?¹⁴³ Many women would have read the paper selectively but whereas the earlier women's feature House Sense had been written to highlight new products and appeal to affluent workers buying new products the Shopping Clock was not about promoting 'extras'.¹⁴⁴ Instead, it was initially about the ability to buy the most important everyday essentials that made up a large part of a family's expenditure. Dolly Smith Wilson's work on post-war women workers argues that part-time women's financial contribution was often downgraded to the status of 'pin money' for extras in the 1950s -1960s.¹⁴⁵ In the 1970s whether the Clock was read by women working outside the home or those who managed the family budget without their own paid wage it was relevant to both groups. However, as the Clock changed in the later 1970s, with advice on how to cook in more economical ways, the *Mirror's* journalists seem to have become out of touch with how its younger adult female readers managed and shopped for their families. Delano's research showed that female journalists in the 1990s, some of whom would have been employed since the 1960s and 1970s, were far less likely to

¹⁴² Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (Oxford, 1981) pp, 112,115 and 132.

¹⁴³ Refer to Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain.' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 17, No 2 (2006), pp. 206–229.

¹⁴⁴ The House Sense feature ran from 1961-1975 promoting new consumer items like furniture, co-ordinated bedding but also making use of Consumer Association information.

¹⁴⁵ Smith Wilson, p. 226.

be married or have children; the working lifestyles of journalists of both genders were very different to many families who bought their paper.¹⁴⁶

Experiments with the content of the Shopping Clock 1970-72

Harold Wilson's original speech in November 1970 that inspired the Shopping Clock included a far wider list of expenditure than groceries: 'write down what you are paying today, what your family are paying with all the main items of household expenditure: fares to work, your rent, rates, coal, gas, electricity, your groceries, yes, and school meals.'¹⁴⁷

Even before they began to publish readers' letters applauding the feature, the *Mirror* experimented with widening the scope of the Shopping Clock.¹⁴⁸ A month after it began the *Mirror* launched two more Shopping Clocks based on a £5 list, one for 'toiletries' and one for men which both appeared regularly whenever there was a change in their total until 28 October 1972.¹⁴⁹ Once Mary Griffiths took over as the main compiler they were quietly dropped, probably because they moved less often. The toiletries list contained 21 items which included a range of household medicine cabinet items, as well as toothpaste, soap, denture cleaners, baby power and baby cream for the family and then specifically cosmetic items; but not any female sanitary products.¹⁵⁰ The male list contained only 6 items, two of which beer and cigarettes cost over 50 per cent of the list, but two other items petrol and bus fares could be seen as based on Wilson's original ideas.

¹⁴⁶ 'Women journalists were more likely to be associated domestically with another journalist (29.6 per cent of those in a partnership compared with 19 per cent of men). Divorce rates were similar for both sexes, with 1.5 per cent of all journalists being divorced and 1.5 per cent separated. Many journalists of both sexes had no children.' Anthony Delano citing London College of Printing surveys for US, Australian and UK surveys done in 1990s Anthony Delano 'Women Journalists: what's the difference?' *Journalism Studies*, Vol.4, No. 2, (2003) pp.273-286.

¹⁴⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 5 November 1970, p.36 'Wilson sets a sum for voters.'

¹⁴⁸ 16 letters from readers were published in 1971 commenting on the Shopping Clock, most very positive.

¹⁴⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 5 December 1970, p.5.

¹⁵⁰ See appendices for full list of items and original prices on the toiletries list.

Figure 1.11 Male Shopping Clock

Items	£	s	d
2 Gallons Shell 4-star petrol		13	4
80 Embassy cigarettes	1	1	0
10 pints Whitbread tankard	1	10	10
Pkt. 5 Wilkinson's New Sword razor blades		4	0
Colgate lather shaving cream		3	4
Week's fares to work (return)	1	7	6

The *Mirror* male reader appeared to drink regularly, own a car but travel to work by bus or train and smoke 10-19 cigarettes a day. The earliest precise government data for smoking showed that by 1974 in the UK 51 per cent of men smoked and 45 per cent of women.

Although smoking sharply declined during the 1970s the percentage was higher in less affluent socio-economic groups which again would reflect the profile of *Mirror* readers.¹⁵¹

Major changes to the Shopping Clock were made in 1976 which reflected the rise of supermarkets and changes in the British diet and are discussed later in this chapter.

From information for the housewife to a national issue 1972-73

Sally Moore's time as the Shopping Clock Girl had been one of lively innovation and limited collaboration with other journalists. The next phase of the Shopping Clock between the summer of 1972 and the run up to the first 1974 election was very different. The Clock was clearly regarded as an important part of the paper in terms of its position and staffing. In this period the Saturday Shopping Clock makes 39 consecutive appearances on page three alongside the editorial column *Mirror* Comment on page two and some of the most senior

¹⁵¹ 19 million cars were available to drive or temporarily off the road in 1971 RAC foundation. ASH Fact Sheet on: Smoking statistics 2016 in 1962 the *British Medical Journal's Report Smoking and Health* Figure for men showed 70 per cent were smokers.

Mirror journalists Geoffrey Goodman, John Desborough and David Thompson who appeared regularly on these news pages. Page three carried no advertisements and showed the Clock being seen as part of the news. The Shopping Clock and its accompanying features between 1970-1973 left its regular compilers to describe price rises with some female journalists writing about the effects on families whereas male journalists provided the 'expertise' on politics, industry, and finance. This was scarcely surprising on a paper like the *Mirror* with such a small number of women journalists but shows the limitations on female journalists to describe effects rather than causes.

In 1973 the number of reporters with stories paired with or directly expanding the Shopping Clock indicated it was no longer a housewife, or even consumer issue, but increasingly relevant to all readers and inflation was one of the big stories even before the oil crisis. A feature that focused on prices was now linked to the wider aspects of inflation.¹⁵² Fifteen journalists wrote on the Shopping Clock page in 1973 besides its compiler and five of those wrote about inflation elsewhere in the paper including four on the front page.¹⁵³ The other three female journalists writing with the Shopping Clock – Margaret Jones, Jill Evans, and Paula James – all took on new perspectives not covered by the consumerist Shoparound aspect of the Clock. Jones, an occasional clock compiler and Square Deal feature writer produced a *Mirror* VAT desk. This included a story on miners who paid VAT on pithead shower soap and the impact on the elderly of VAT on heating. James produced several articles discussed elsewhere including a long-term guide to rising prices, and two cost of

¹⁵² Refer to Figure 1.9 Reader audiences and messages November 1970-January 1978.

¹⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, 5 January 1973, p.1 Mark Downey, *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1973 p.1 Mark Downey, *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1973, p.1 Joan Smith, *Daily Mirror*, 5 September 1973, p.17 Joan Smith, *Daily Mirror*, 9 October 1973 p.1 Victor Knight, *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1973 p.1 John Husband, *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1973, p.5 Mary Griffiths and David Thompson.

living stories about managing on the average budget of '£2.59 a week' for food and comparisons of three families rising weekly costs.¹⁵⁴ Jill Evans produced an ice cream wars piece in the summer 'FREEZE OUT THE PIRATES,' about overpriced ice cream sold by 'pirate ice cream vans.'¹⁵⁵

The eleven different male reporters also reported from their different perspectives and areas of expertise. Bryn Jones, Alan Law, John Husband, and James Beecroft attempted to link the effect on prices to other cost of living issues including interest rates and the retail price index.¹⁵⁶ The financial and parliamentary journalists Roy Assersohn and David Thompson reported on the rise of mortgage lending rates announced in the Commons in the autumn.¹⁵⁷ Other political journalists, John Desborough and Chris Buckland offered a Common Market context on rising food prices – MARKET BATTLE OVER BUTTER.¹⁵⁸ Paul Connew produced a David and Goliath story of a local grocer cutting his prices to take on a large supermarket.¹⁵⁹ Industrial editor Geoffrey Goodman filed a story, alongside the Shopping Clock, explaining Jack Jones's call for a £25 minimum wage and Victor Knight on the same page wrote about Harold Wilson's 'furious attack ...on the government's pay and prices.'¹⁶⁰ While the Shopping Clock often contrasted with these more in depth pieces its lively style probably drew readers in who might have skipped over these other economic and political news items. This was a variation of Hugh Cudlipp's original approach to political

¹⁵⁴ Paula James *Daily Mirror* 23 June 1973 p.15, see also *Daily Mirror* 1st January 1973 p 9-10, *Daily Mirror* 2nd March 1973 p.21, *Daily Mirror* 12 April 1973, p.9.

¹⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 30 June 1973, p.3.

¹⁵⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 24 March 1973, p.3, *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1973, p.3.

¹⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 13 September 1973, p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 28 April 1973, p.3. John Desborough went on to be the *Mirror's* Chief Political Correspondent in 1977 and worked as a press adviser at Conservative Central Office.

¹⁵⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 26 May 1973, p.4. Paul Connew was a future editor of the *Sunday Mirror*.

¹⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1973 p.3. Geoffrey Goodman, pp.164-5 credits Jack Jones as the original author of the Social Contract.

coverage, 'that an audience attracted initially by entertainment and titillation could be tempted to try other types of material.'¹⁶¹

Sometimes the Clock was pushed into a corner of the page to make room for these other articles. When the Shopping Clock had smashed the £7 barrier, Mary Griffiths' report was reduced into a smaller corner of the usual page, which gave James Beecroft room to present Edward Heath's the wages clock. However, in November, the Shopping Clock's third birthday, Mary Griffith's copy headlined with 'UP 45 per cent IN THREE YEARS' and was accompanied by John Desborough's brief and very relevant report on the new Consumer Credit Bill to protect those using Hire Purchase.¹⁶² This period of the Shopping Clock was an accessible economic and political page unlike anything the *Mirror* had provided before the Shopping Clock. Unlike its inflation Special in 1972 it was not all on one day but on a regular page every week.

The Battle for Britain 1974-75

Although the appearances of the Shopping Clock on the front page declined after the February 1974 election, its relevance and adaptability were demonstrated by a new partnership with the 'Battle for Britain' page whose title had all too familiar echoes of the Second World War and the Crisis Elections of 1974. This feature, largely written by male journalists, began after the October 1974 election result and appeared on pages two and three. It was more than a Saturday feature becoming a trademark for the *Mirror's* industrial, political, and economic stories in the early months of Harold Wilson's final government. Surveying all the issues, particularly from November 1974 to February 1975, it appeared as

¹⁶¹ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, (Oxford, forthcoming) p.151.

¹⁶² *Daily Mirror*, 3 November 1973, p.3.

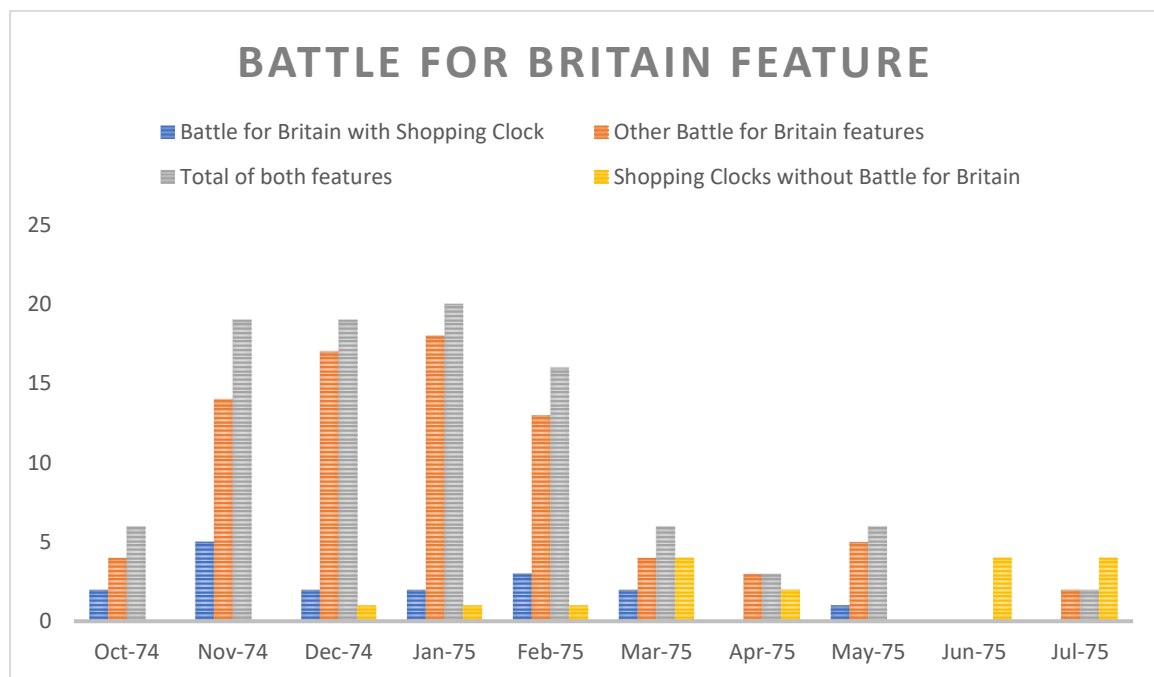
often as three times during the week in the *Mirror*, as well as in combination with the Shopping Clock.

When the Clock was paired with the Battle for Britain it appeared under a Battle for Britain Logo with a pound sign. When the Battle for Britain reported during the week the logo was adapted, on Friday 25 October 1974 it appeared with Big Ben attached to the logo. From November reports on pay, prices, and the fight against inflation appeared on a Saturday page shared with the visual Shopping Clock and the Battle for Britain logo.

The collaboration and teaming of the Shopping Clock and the Battle for Britain points up several things. Female journalists were largely confined to reporting price rises and their effects so that even when writing about inflation as 'Mirrormen' they were rarely involved in the analysis of why inflation was rising. 'Mirrormen' journalists contributed from their different specialisms – industrial, political, motoring, economic and a lot of statistical information was presented in relatively straightforward language but it produced a kaleidoscope picture rather than joined up analysis for *Mirror* readers. The difference in purpose and tone of the Battle for Britain from the Shopping Clock and its spin-offs was striking. While the Shopping Clock shared the Battle for Britain's political view, especially in its early years under Sally Moore, the other two strands of educator- watchdog and individualist self-help were very far from the Battle for Britain's content and emphasis. Among the *Mirror's* Battle for Britain journalists the view that housewives and consumers were a separate group from those who put in wage claims was not always assumed but was the dominant perspective particularly in the round of pay claims and industrial disputes of the winter of 1974-75

It is tempting to speculate that journalists, whose own paper had been disrupted by a printers' dispute, were becoming fixed in their ideas about industrial disputes long before the myth of the Winter of Discontent has been formulated.¹⁶³ Alternatively, Tomlinson's research into the archives of CIPU suggested it was only by 1975 that the view that trade union wage claims were the cause of inflation rather than a symptom had become embedded.¹⁶⁴

Figure 1.12 Battle for Britain and Shopping Clock items 1974-75 October 1974-1975



¹⁶³ Jeremy Tunstall, 'From Gentleman to Journos' *British Journalism Review*, Vol 6 No 3, (1995), p.57 on 'love hate relationship' between NUJ and NGA; Colin Hay 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism' *Parliamentary Affairs* (2010) Vol. 63 No. 3, pp. 446-470.

¹⁶⁴ Tomlinson p.205 'of course, the CIPU did not invent the wage price spiral, but ...seems clearly to have entrenched an anti-union perspective.'



Figure 1.13 Battle for Britain logos

By October 1974 three weekday Battle for Britain issues had begun to stray into Shopping Clock territory specifically with the pegging of bread prices, coal prices and the cost of living compared with inflation rates.¹⁶⁵ In November a sugar shortage featured for three days running on the Battle for Britain page, although already covered in the previous Saturday's Shopping Clock. By December the Shopping Clock only featured the Battle for Britain logo twice, whereas the weekday Battle for Britain featured food and inflation stories sixteen times suggesting it had taken over from the Shopping Clock as the main inflation watcher. The stories were often written by Shopping Clock regular compilers, including Mary Griffiths and Margaret Jones.¹⁶⁶ Mary Griffiths also contributed a story about 'Metric Price-Rise Fear' on 17 December which predicted sugar prices by the New Year of 20p a pound.¹⁶⁷ When the Battle for Britain's George Fallows covered a bread dispute resulting in shortages of bread and flour, his tone was very different from compilers of the Clock. He described 'harassed housewives scouring the shops,' panic buying, 'and an enterprising 'blonde canteen worker' who bought quantities of bread to sell to workers on a local building site and even reported scuffles between pensioners. The following day's coverage included panic biscuit buying and

¹⁶⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 29 October 1974, p.7, *Daily Mirror*, 30 October 1974, p.4 and *Daily Mirror*, 31 October 1974 p.5.

¹⁶⁶ The first story could be described is an industrial one about the Bread Strike called for 4 December 1974. Mary Griffiths wrote four pieces for Battle for Britain, two about baking bread. Margaret Jones wrote about the misleading of shoppers and consumer rights.

¹⁶⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 17 December 1974, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, 3 December 1974, p.4 and 4 December 1974, p.4.

concluded with three cheery 'slices of life' including about a Ramsgate port worker getting a daily baguette from France. The jocular, almost mocking, tone of the bread stories contrasted with the serious tone of motoring correspondent Patrick Mennem on '10p Petrol Prices Rise on Friday.'¹⁶⁸ Petrol price rises were seen as a real crisis for the 'hard pressed motorist' unlike stories about bread which all families bought.

While the Shopping Clock adapted a price watching style some *Battle for Britain* stories on inflation were more positive. John Husband and Phillip Mellor in December 1974 reported *Money Which's* advice to buy expensive consumer goods like cars and washing machines to beat inflation - 'Spend! It's a way to save' and 'HOW BRITONS FORGOT THE INFLATION BLUES.'¹⁶⁹ However more typical was the *Battle for Britain's* coverage of Government figures which predicted '23 or 24 percent early next year' rise in inflation and linked this to wage rises 'at 26 per cent higher than a year ago' and future 'wages explosion.'¹⁷⁰ This agreed with the Shopping Clock page's 'RISING GLOOM' based on predicted shortages and the price of Christmas foods which shared the page with *Battle for Britain* stories about pay increases for teachers and doctors.¹⁷¹

January 1975 saw the peak of the *Battle for Britain* pages which appeared in 87 per cent of all issues. However, it was only coupled with the Saturday Shopping Clock for two of the three Saturdays that month and there were only eight food price stories in weekday *Battle for Britain* pages¹⁷². Penny Burton and Mary Griffiths contributed factual reports based on official sources on falling food prices and spending for July-September 1974 but decorated

¹⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 18 December 1974, p.4.

¹⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 12 December 1974, p.7.

¹⁷⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 December 1974, p.4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.4.

¹⁷² The *Daily Mirror* did not appear on 17 -20 January due to industrial action by NATSOPA see *Daily Mirror*, *Battle for Britain* Tuesday 21 January 1975 p.4.

with daffodils. It was in startling contrast to other Battle for Britain headlines. The most significant food story on the front page on 23 January was a political report about the pegging of bread prices headed 'Shirley boosts the family budget.'¹⁷³ Buckland's story was balanced by a Tory prices spokesman warning it would distort the market and create shortages.

On 11 January the Shopping Clock went through the £9 barrier and appeared on the front page in a story written by Penny Burton and Alan Law but there was no teaming inside the paper between the Battle for Britain and the Clock, as it reached £9.16 ½ p. When it next appeared two weeks later it had gone up by another 14½p. It was relegated to a small corner of page four. Although the Battle for Britain was tagged as a *Mirror* report on pay, prices, and the fight against inflation the final months of the Battle for Britain feature show less and less interest in the price of food with only three relevant stories appearing in February. On 18 February food prices linked to EEC negotiations and the rising energy bills were combined 'dig deeper into your pocket for coal and electricity' and in smaller case 'fork out more for milk' which only briefly mentioned at the end of the article that milk, butter, and cheese were already subsidised.¹⁷⁴ The Battle for Britain increasingly covered industrial disputes but made little connection between wage claims and rising prices from the point of view of the need for higher wages to pay for more expensive food. Instead, when it did refer to wage claims it was as a cause of inflation.¹⁷⁵ The Saturday Shopping Clock meanwhile went down by 34 ½ p across February.

¹⁷³ *Daily Mirror*, 23 January 1975, p.1.

¹⁷⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 18 February 1975, p. 4.

¹⁷⁵ See Tomlinson, p.200.

By March 1975 the Battle for the Battle for Britain appeared less frequently and was paired with the Shopping Clock only on the first two Saturdays of the month. How much of this was just a sign of a flagging news approach or does it suggest a political change?¹⁷⁶ The Battle for Britain featured anonymous short fillers about the rise in butter and beef prices and Mary Griffiths wrote a detailed story from the Prices Commission on how annual fresh food prices had risen far less with inflation than manufactured foods. By contrast the actual Saturday Clock showed a rise to £9.72 across the month. The first two Saturdays of March the Shopping Clock and Battle for Britain shared a half page with a headline from a Roy Jenkins speech about inflation caused by wage claims leading to the ‘Darkest days “since Hitler”’ and a story of Ford laying off two thousand workers while the Shopping Clock went up 35p because of rises in the price of beef.¹⁷⁷ The following week under the banner Battle for Britain a call from the EEC for Britain to ‘Tighten Belts’ suggested an austerity budget. The Shopping Clock was a smallish item amidst four separate economic stories.¹⁷⁸ April’s budget was covered with three separate Battle for Britain reports on 16 April. ‘OF COURSE, IT’S TOUGH It had to be!’ warned the front page and the back page explained ‘The pounding in your pocket.’ On the centre pages under the headline ‘THE HACHET AND THE HELPING HAND’ Margaret Jones provided detailed coverage of delayed child benefits ‘CHILD PAY-OUT HAS TO WAIT.’ In ‘Family Bills go soaring’ Mary Griffiths warned that as well as rises to energy, rail, and postal charges food subsidies would be ‘slashed by a third’ in 1976.¹⁷⁹ She predicted the foods most likely to be hit – cheese, butter, tea, and milk. That Saturday 19

¹⁷⁶ Denis Healey April budget wound down food subsidies among other government spending cuts.

¹⁷⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 1 March 1975, p.6.

¹⁷⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 8 March 1975, p.8 Battle for Britain - ‘TIGHTEN THE BELTS’, ‘Lending Rate Drops’, ‘Aston boss raps ‘dangerous’ Benn’, ‘No City jingles pledges Wilson’, The Shopping Clock headlines were ‘Farm price rises push up Clock’, Egg men demand ban on imports.’

¹⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 16 April 1975, pp. 1, 32 and 16-17.

April the Shopping Clock page took an equally downbeat tone 'PRICE RISE DAY OF GLOOM' in which Bryn Jones reported on rising prices including cost of living figures that showed prices rising at 21.2 per cent and linked these to rising rail prices due to wage settlements for workers. The clock itself 'sounds the alarm' edging towards £10 at £9.91p.¹⁸⁰

The final brief appearances of the Battle for Britain in May and July 1975 made no mention of food prices and concentrated on industrial disputes, unemployment, and the government's anti-inflation package. July was the last time the heading was used. The government had now scheduled the European Referendum for the 5 June 1975. Perhaps this explains why the Battle for Britain heading faded with its patriotic war-time overtones once it was clear Britain was remaining in the EEC.

The Shopping Clock and Europe 1975

After its marriage to the Battle for Britain campaign was over, how did the Shopping Clock remain relevant for readers despite dwindling appearances on the front page? Its first new approach was its contribution the 'Europe Big Debate.' In the run up to the EEC referendum the Shopping Clock ran three European Shopping Baskets looking at the weekly shop of major EEC members Italy, France, and Germany on Thursdays in May.¹⁸¹ Each featured a breakdown of their food spending by Penny Burton including twenty of the most comparable items. These French, German and Italian families were all paying considerably more for their shop compared with the same items on the clock. Although some items like instant coffee might be a British taste, others like soap powder and flour were comparable. What Penny Burton's shopping lists did not consider was the comparative value of sterling

¹⁸⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 19 April 1975, p.7.

¹⁸¹ *Daily Mirror*, 1 May 1975, p.9, *Daily Mirror*, 8 May 1975, p.7, *Daily Mirror*, 15 May 1975, p.11.

against other European currencies. This reapplication of the Shopping Clock to a very different feature showed that the Clock was still seen as relevant and recognisable to readers after four and a half years. Its influence can also be seen two weeks later when No campaigner Barbara Castle and Yes campaigner Vicki Crankshaw carried out a similar visits to Brussels and Oslo to publicise European prices which were featured on page two.¹⁸² The *Mirror* pointed out to its readers that all Mrs Castle's items were 'based on goods from the Mirror's Shopping Clock.'¹⁸³ The same day the *Mirror* carried a detailed centre spread by experienced Shopping Clock compilers Margaret Jones and Penny Burton. Margaret Jones of the Square Deal spinoff, interviewed the Consumers' Association for advice under the headline 'Why the Consumers Association says YES.' Penny Burton 'The Mirror's Shopping Clock reporter' advice on food prices also gave a positive prediction that housewives would probably be better off but acknowledged that buying habits were different 'pricing cornflakes in Calais...is like buying salami in Salford.'¹⁸⁴

Two months after the referendum a Friday feature called the Shopping Watchdog began. Unlike the original Clock it could be used to 'shop around' before the weekend and recommended fresh foods that might be comparatively cheaper than others. On 5 July the Shopping Clock announced 'Mirror launches a vital new service . . . Shopping Watchdog... BEFORE you do the weekend shopping.... It will help you decide what is a good buy and what to avoid, because fresh food prices fluctuate so fast.' It appeared every Friday in 1975 and regularly in 1976 and 1977 and outlasted the Shopping Clock in 1978.¹⁸⁵ Its tips did not

¹⁸² *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1975, p. 2. Robert Saunders, *Yes to Europe! The 1975 Referendum and Seventies Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) pp.189-91, as cited by Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, (Oxford, forthcoming) p. 282.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹⁸⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1975, pp.14-15.

¹⁸⁵ 1975- 35 times, 1976- 33 times, 1977 19 times and 1978 – 14 times.

make exciting reading: 'POTATOES: English new potatoes are 8-10p a lb. against 13 ½ p- 14p last week. MEAT...beef and lamb prices of up to 10p a lb, or even more in some shops...', and of questionable use.¹⁸⁶ But like the Shopping Clock it was topped with lively headlines 'Spud prices get a bashing' and a new logo featuring a supermarket trolley.

From July 1975 Mary Griffiths, produced fifteen Family Food Guides on the Saturday Shopping Clock page with 'nutritious' fresh food recipes. She also published a cookery book and gave free copies to readers who sent in economical recipes. This and the Shopping Watchdog were very much in line with the individualist approach to alter shopping behaviours to cope with rising food prices but also with the approach of the Prices and Consumer Minister Shirley Williams.¹⁸⁷

The Shopping Clock in September 1975 launched a partnership with Tesco which claimed to help readers save £5 off their shopping. To do this, readers had to collect 12 tokens from different issues of the paper and send these off to a PO Box in Burnley.¹⁸⁸ This commercialising of the Shopping Clock was in marked contrast to the row the *Mirror* had with the head of Tesco Sir John Cohen in 1974 on the *Mirror* Shopping Clock page. He argued that not disclosing the name of the Tesco branch that overcharged the Clock for fish fingers was harming their company.¹⁸⁹ A year later the Shopping Clock and Tesco were on better terms and the country's largest supermarket would be the only supermarket the *Mirror* new Shopping Clock would use in 1976.

¹⁸⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 July 1978, p.4.

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 2 for list of all 16 items.

¹⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 17 September 1975, pp.1, 11.

¹⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 August 1974, p.5.

Shirley Williams' voluntary Price Check scheme covering 49 items and limiting price rises to five percent, marked with red triangles was introduced in February 1976. In March the Shopping Clock briefly included in its logo the government's Red Price Check Triangle.¹⁹⁰ A more radical decision to keep the Shopping Clock relevant came when the paper stopped the clock in May and then relaunched it on 22 May 1976. During the 1970s MAFF produced annual or bi-annual Household Food Consumption and Expenditure reports which showed considerable changes in spending habits across the decade.¹⁹¹ The *Mirror's* relaunch had tried to keep up to date with the shopping habits of its readers. This worked in several ways. The £15 new shop was much closer to the actual amount spent by a family on a weekly shop rather than the arbitrary fiver they had started with in 1970. Secondly, the shop contained more items, including milk which many Britons bought daily and was much more in line with the foods Britons were buying by 1976. The fresh family roast of beef was now accompanied by a frozen chicken and the Shopping Clock compilers seemed to have accepted freezers or at least frozen foods as part of readers' kitchens. There were less fats, more frozen foods, instant coffee, and it now used four shops and a single supermarket (Tesco) rather than the six different shops the *Mirror's* journalists had originally used. The overlap between the items on this new shop and the 'essential' foods targeted by Shirley Williams Prices Minister was a far closer match than the original 33 items.¹⁹² However, although it featured cooking oil, burgers, and rice it did not include any of the well-known convenience foods heavily marketed in the 1970s.¹⁹³ This change was a brave step for the

¹⁹⁰ See Chapter 2.

¹⁹¹ FES Surveys cited by Shinobu Majima, 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961-2004', *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22, No 4 (2008), p.574.

¹⁹² Refer to Chapter 2 pp 172-73, 179.

¹⁹³ Smash powdered potatoes, Boil in a bag fish and rice, Pot Noodle see Janet Shepherd and John Shepherd, *1970s Britain* (Oxford, 2016) pp.47-53.

Mirror since they could no longer compare the Clock's overall difference in price since 1970. There was less chance of eye catching barrier breaking front pages, but since Labour had been in power for eighteen months, this might not have been as important or even an advantage. It was still much clearer than rival newspaper features. The *Observer's* final Shopping Basket appeared in its Business Section on 12 January 1975 and the *Mail* reported food prices as stand-alone news items on official surveys and no longer referred to its own shopping list.¹⁹⁴

Was the Shopping Clock still relevant by 1977?

There is no doubt the Shopping Clock did shrink in size and move to less prominent pages over its last year but the continued inventiveness of its compilers and sub-editors was evident.¹⁹⁵ One that would not have been foreseen in 1970 was the competition in November 1976 to win a hamper by sending the name of a famous personality with the reasons you would like to have your Christmas Dinner with them.¹⁹⁶ Despite the shrinking of the Shopping Clock its influence continued. Terry Pattinson and Robert Head produced several front pages on inflation but also worked on the Shopping Clock page in January and February 1977. Head and John Husband also produced a centre page which at first glance seems classic Shopping Clock with Clocks at £15, £18 and a future clock at £22.91. Under the headline 'WHY WE PAY TOO MUCH' the piece featured a picture of a purse and columns on beef and lamb, margarine, fruit and vegetables, butter, bread and flour, cheese, sugar, and eggs. Head and Husband's focus however, was on the Common Agricultural policy. 'Our investigations boil down to the fact that the Common Market Agricultural Policy...keep prices

¹⁹⁴'Slowdown on family's food bill' *Daily Mail*, 21 June 1976 p.10.

¹⁹⁵ 1977-8 it spends 16 continuous weeks on p. 7 but overall is more erratic being on five different pages across the year.

¹⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 20 November 1976 p.8 'Win your feast for Christmas.'

artificially high.’ This was in contrast with the *Mirror’s* coverage before the Referendum but in line with stories coming from Brussels and appearing on the Shopping Clock page in recent months.¹⁹⁷ Head and Husband’s use of the Shopping Clock logo showed that the sub-editors and reporters still saw value in the feature and its role in helping readers to understand inflation.

Mary Griffiths wrote several self-help pieces with industrial reporter Alan Law, a ‘Birds Eye Home Economist’ and a nutritionist on how families could save money on their weekly shop. One included cooking more frozen and tinned fruit ingredients during the week, cheaper cuts of meat, batch cooking and eating toad in the hole and bubble and squeak. In 1973 Paula James had suggested to *Mirror* readers it was impossible to feed your family on the average wage, and now the *Mirror* writer was advocating frugality.¹⁹⁸ In July’s ‘Shop In and Save Money’ feature Mary Griffiths worked out how to feed a family of four on less than £20 a week and compiled a weekly shopping list.¹⁹⁹ Several things stood out. This feature was only significant enough to be put on page 26, the quantities of more expensive meats, lamb and chicken were less than the 1973 article, there was no Sunday roast of beef and twice as much mince and potatoes. Mary Griffiths later reported that many readers had been in touch to say they did not shop as this nutritionist or the government suggested. ‘One woman said her family’s meat bill alone was £15.’ According to modern economists, the proportions of family incomes spent on food and non-alcoholic beverages were shrinking by the late 1970s nationally. Nevertheless, for those readers whose employers were sticking to

¹⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, May 26 1975, p.1 ‘Lie No1 The Common Market has put up food prices. Come out, and there is cheap food for the asking. Answer: There isn’t any cheap food any more, anywhere in the world. Prices would be about the same if we waved goodbye to the Market.’

¹⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 28 July 1973, p.11 ‘How you can’t live on £2.59 a week’ A taxi driver’s wife tries to feed her family on the national average of £12.95 a week for five and runs out of money by Tuesday with two more days to go until pay day.

¹⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1977, p.26.

the wage restraint of the Social Contract they would still be coping with prices rising faster than their wage increases.²⁰⁰

While some male reporters wrote optimistic *Mirror* front pages in 1977 on how inflation was going down with predictions of single figure inflation the clock continued to rise and passed £20 by Christmas. Only female journalists contributed to the Clock from mid-September 1977. The *Mirror* and its Clock were disrupted by an industrial dispute at the paper and its last five appearances were compiled by Penny Burton alone before it disappeared without explanation on the 7 January 1978.²⁰¹ The *Mirror's* explanation which appeared on the 16 February was that prices were so 'wildly different from those found by many readers in other areas' and that supermarket special offers had distorted the reliability of their sample.²⁰² Penny Burton promised the *Mirror* would continue to 'Spotlight unreasonable price rises and the bargains too. To CAMPAIGN for shoppers' rights and to HELP you make the best use of the food you buy' in an article relegated to page 21.²⁰³ No longer was there a weekly focus on prices or an overall long-term measure of how prices had gone up. Supermarket special offers of course only lasted a few weeks. Family shoppers no longer had an easily accessible measure of how much worse off they were long-term, unlike the Plessey workers in 1971. The Prices Minister Roy Hattersley and other politicians talked only about the monthly rate of inflation. When the *Mirror* got rid of the Shopping Clock the rate

²⁰⁰ *The Census 2021 Consumer price inflation, historical estimates, and recent trends for UK: 1950 to 2022*' This compares with much lower contributions from food and non-alcoholic beverages from 1978 onwards.' The Clock stopped in January 1978 so the impact of these trends would not have been felt yet and for working class families the proportion was still a higher percentage of their weekly expenditure. Refer to Shinobu Majima, 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961–2004', *Contemporary British History*, (2008) Vol.22 no. 4, pp.573-597 for the difference in spending on food and other items of household budget from 1961-2004 by poorest 40% from rest of population.

²⁰¹ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1978, p.21 'Why the Clock stopped' Penny Burton contributed to a week-long special on inflation including on how supermarkets 'cheat shoppers' entitled the £1 million robbery and with emphasis very much on individualist solutions like 'How to be a better shopper' on Day Three.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 16 February 1978 p.21.

²⁰³ *Ibid* p.21.

of inflation was still higher than when they introduced it in 1970 and would return to double figures before the election.²⁰⁴

Pioneer of Consumer Rights aimed at working class readers

The early 1970s Britain was a daunting place for consumers. Labels on products gave little information, taking purchases back to shops was intimidating and unlikely to result in getting your money back. Buying goods on hire purchase involved high rates of interest and the danger of repossession if consumers fell behind with payments.²⁰⁵ Although Sally Moore's butcher Fred was friendly, greengrocers would not usually let customers handle vegetables or fruit to see if they were past their best. In 1970 two new problems decimalisation and higher inflation piled in. Although the Consumer Association's *Which* magazine already existed a tabloid version of consumer journalism fulfilled a real need and an 'Us and Them' approach to retailers fitted well with the paper's style.

Originally the only way the Shopping Clock helped consumers was by giving them an easy-to-understand barometer of inflation, based on the cost of part of a weekly shop. It did not help shoppers to look for bargains since the shops were anonymous. In fact, since it came out on a Saturday many would have done their weekly shop before they had the chance to read it. As the Clock evolved it developed various consumer spin-offs. Some were featured on other days of the week from the Saturday Shopping Clock, such as the Square Deal and the Thursday Shoparound, and others sat alongside the Shopping Clock.

²⁰⁴8.4 per cent in 1978 but 12.5 per cent in 1979 and 16.4 per cent in 1980.

<https://www.economicshelp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/inflation-1970s-1.png> (as accessed in May 2023).

²⁰⁵ Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class, and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class,' *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 22, No 4 (2008), pp. 501-518.

The consumer related stories on the Shopping Clock pages allowed the *Mirror* journalists to do several things. They could cover items they had not put in the original shopping baskets, introduce price comparisons between products that were seasonally popular, like visits to Santa, and cover issues of particular concern to consumers. Initially this was decimalisation and possible overcharging. As fear of decimalisation declined this was replaced by a partnership with *Which* magazine in September 1971 which featured strongly during 1973. It may appear the consumer items declined in later Shopping Clock pages by the mid-70s but they often appeared elsewhere in the paper, in its Thursday 'Shoparound' feature for example.²⁰⁶

Over the years the tone of these consumer items changed. Initially they appeared to stand up for the shopper against the retailer: 'Christmas sweets should get the Scrooge award,' WATCHDOG WANTS DATE STAMP ON GROCERIES,' 'CHEESED OFF -BY CHARGE OF A SANDWICH.'²⁰⁷

By 1975-76 the emphasis shifted to money saving and nutritious family recipes, 'YOUR GOOD-BUY GUIDE' by Penny Burton and starting with the headline 'Cor! Bring on the Bramley's' a Family Food Guide by Mary Griffiths.²⁰⁸ If something worked well on the Shopping Clock page it could be moved to become a separate feature as with Family Food Guide by Sally Moore and later Mary Griffiths. In 1976-77 the Shopping Clock featured items on how to feed families nutritious and cheaper meals to stretch weekly budgets. The tone of these later pieces was reminiscent of war-time Ministry of Food pamphlets and recipes

²⁰⁶ March 1972-12 July 1972 and February 1973-December 1974 almost weekly.

²⁰⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 19 December 1970, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mirror*, 14 August 1971, p.6, *Daily Mirror*, 2 December 1972, p.3.

²⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, July 5 1975, p.7, *Daily Mirror*, March 20 1976, p.6.

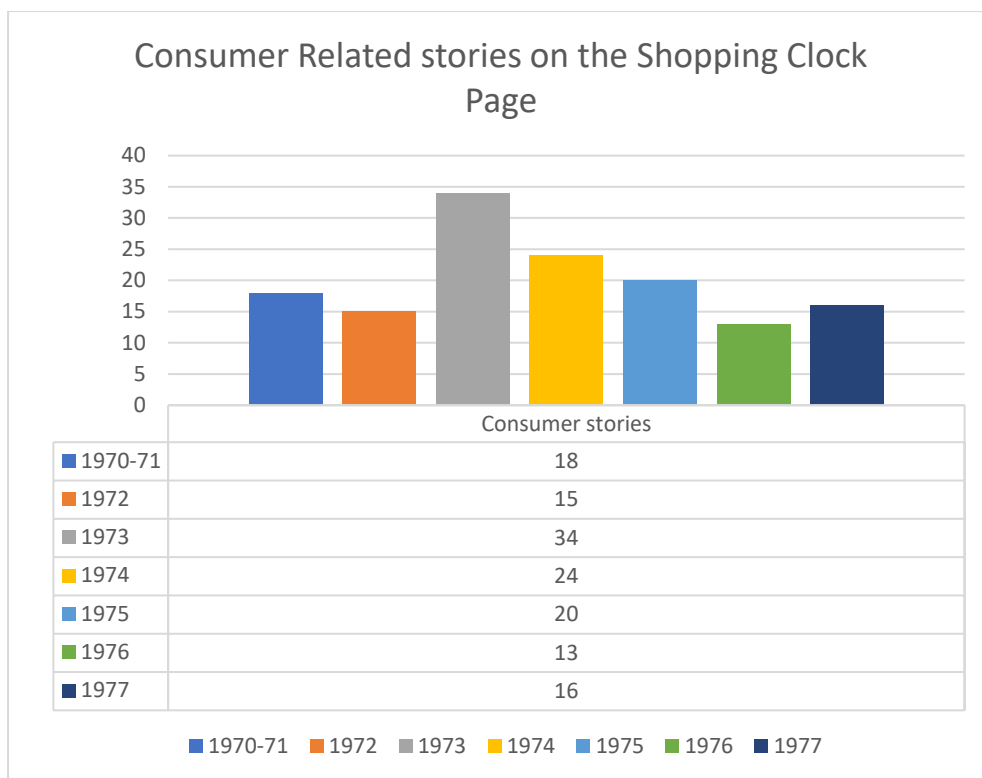


Figure 1.14 Consumer related stories on Shopping Clock Page annually

for Woolton pie. It is very different from the early 1970s Shopping Clock headlines about the price of roast of beef and the value of fish and chips as a takeaway.

The main spin-offs from the Shopping Clock – the Square Deal and Shoparound had elements of both

- Educator and Watchdog regarding decimalisation, metrification, and other consumer issues in the less regulated shopping world of the early 1970s²⁰⁹
- Individualist, self-help solutions

and in addition, because of the Square Deal’s connection with the Consumer Association there was a campaigning message which had an implied political purpose to introduce better consumer safeguards and trigger legislation.

²⁰⁹ Sell by did not appear on most supermarket shelves until 1973 and much consumer legislation was introduced after Britain’s entry into the EEC.

It was the more campaigning Square Deal spin off that featured first in the *Mirror*. Written by Margaret Jones who had already used some Consumer Association materials early in 1970. On 28 September 1971 the leader page announced a new partnership between 'the *Mirror* and the Consumer Association 'the No1 independent watchdog organisation...to make sure YOU get a square deal in the complicated, often confusing, world of Britain.'²¹⁰ The paper initially ran a double page feature on the cost of living including mortgages, welfare benefits and advice on heating bills. The next day it reappeared featuring a young couple, followed by two pensioners and on the final day focused on the cost of living issues for the rural poor. All these Square Deals featured real people and were followed by three more 'Square Deals' in November. From January 1972 to February 1973, the feature appeared almost every month. Many focused on buying big consumer items or related concerns such as hire purchase credit. Others were consumer campaigns like the Square Deal on beer, or date codes on tins and at least one feature was simply trivia about aphrodisiacs under the Square Deal Banner.

The campaigning success of the Square Deal is supported by the fact that two of the Square Deal articles appear to have directly led to political reaction by Conservative and Labour backbenchers in the form of private members bills in 1972.²¹¹ The *Mirror's* Richard Sears celebrated his paper's 'Crackdown on the Doorstep Hustlers' and saw the connection between the *Mirror's* Square Deal feature and the legislation proposed by Patrick Cormack MP and Arthur Davidson MP.²¹² Later that year five Conservative backbenchers published a

²¹⁰ *Daily Mirror* 28 September 1971 p.2.

²¹¹ See Chapter 2 Conservative Patrick Cormack's bill in March 1972 on packaging progressed to a second reading and a bill put forward in early May 1972 by Arthur Davidson (Labour) aimed to protect consumers from doorstep selling giving buyers the right to cancel within four days.

²¹² *Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1972, p.7 'CRACKDOWN ON THE DOORSTEP HUSTLERS' 'will be the second put before the House of Commons following the *Mirror's* Square Deal campaign.'

Figure 1.15 Square Deal Stories

Date	Headline/Topic
28.09.1971	Mortgages Welfare & Family Heating
29.09.1971	Newly Weds and Pensioners
30.09.1971	One Shop Problem of a Country Housewife
17.11.1971	Hire Purchase
18.11.1971	Shopping around for money
20. 11.1971	Holiday Watchdog Service
03-04.02.1972	Great Label Muddle & Contents of Orange Juice & Tins
13- 14.03.1972	Family Insurance value for money and different families
27.05 1972	Enquiry into aphrodisiac foods and drinks
10-11.07.1972	Is British Beer as Good as it used to be?
19.09.1972	Efficiency of Freezers & Credit repayments issue
09-10.11.1972	Actual content of tins – gross, net & drained weight - fruit & vegetables
01.01.1973	Square Deal Poll on 10 Continental Customs as we enter Common Market
02.01.1973	Date codes on Tins
16.01. 1973	Manufacturers Recommended Retail Prices v Sale Prices for Freezers, Washers, Vacuum Cleaner & Camera
19.02.1973	Reading between the bargain lines

report entitled ‘Square Deal for the Consumer’ proposing among other things Consumer Advice Centres and a government minister for Consumer Affairs. ²¹³ Both these recommendations became government policy that year. The Square Deal and the *Mirror* could be seen here as agenda setting and politicians may have believed the paper was the

²¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1971, p.7.

voice of public opinion as Mass Observation had argued in the 1940s, 'Politicians continually mistake press opinion for public opinion.'²¹⁴

The first Square Deal feature presented itself as a vital new service aimed at very different ways working class families could manage their incomes. On the one hand by becoming owner occupiers with a mortgage and by contrast how a mother of seven could support her family by careful spending and knowing her welfare rights. The tone was very similar to a public information leaflet. The following day's issue focused on 'Newly Weds' and a retired couple who needed to claim supplementary benefit. The article made the point 'Money spent on a big wedding and a not-so-cheap flat could provide a deposit for a house.'²¹⁵

The pensioners Jim and Betty were presented as a model of thriftiness but needed to know the benefit system to survive. Finally, they featured a rural mother of three who had no fridge and access to only one local shop. It appeared critical of the young mum and gave advice on thriftiness and economising. 'HOW COULD SHE SAVE MONEY AND EAT WELL?' while advocating the value of a fridge it questioned the economy of having a freezer.

Although linked to consumerism and budgeting none of these early Square Deal features explicitly mentioned inflation and rising prices as an issue.

²¹⁴Sussex University Archives, Mass Observation (1942), Report on Books & the Public, p. 18 cited by O'Malley in Chapter 3 p.102 in Conboy and Bingham (eds) *Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press* 'Vol. 3.

²¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 29 September 1971, p.13.

By contrast with the austerity of its first features, the November 1971 Square Deals were about purchasing large consumer items like washing machines, radios, vacuum cleaners, and holidays. To follow up from this they tackled how consumers could find their way through the largely unregulated hire purchase system which 72 per cent of working-class families used.²¹⁶ Shopping around for the best credit system was the message here, as with mortgages and heating in the first Square Deal and this made the feature more like Sally Moore's Shoparounds for smaller items in the Shopping clock, except the items were more costly. The follow up tackled the reluctance of banks to lend money to those who were not established account holders and why the public did not think of borrowing from banks. The next Saturday's Square Deal concentrated on setting up a Holiday Watchdog at a time of year when many British people would begin booking their summer holidays.

The remaining ten Square Deal features included two on which simply flew under the Square Deal banner. There were three 'weights and measures' issues, very much standard Consumer Association stories which could also easily have appeared as items on the Shopping Clock page in other years. The Family Insurance Square Deal helped to provoke a reaction about door-to-door selling from politicians. The two-day feature on freezers covered familiar territory on credit buying, and seemed to return to a Margaret Jones obsession about the dangers and costs for some British families of buying freezers.²¹⁷ This may be explained not only by the relative high cost of freezers and the frozen food inside

²¹⁶ Refer to Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class, and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class,' *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 22, No 4 (2008), pp. 501-518.

²¹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1972, p.7.

them, but also widely held fears about the safety of chest freezers.²¹⁸ The main aim was to protect families from unscrupulous doorstep freezer salesmen. Much of the advice was sound but it is not difficult to detect a patronising tone about the aspiration to own a freezer in this 'Square Deal' article which underestimated issues, like time saving for working women: 'if the shops are near you and you don't grow your own food ... cash spent on a freezer could be earning you money in a savings account.'²¹⁹ However, the message to buy in shops not from the doorstep was rammed home the next day by the story of someone who never received his freezer but was landed with an HP debt. Perhaps the most far sighted Square Deal was written not by Margaret Jones but by Richard Sear 'Is British Beer as Good as it used to be?' only a year after the founding of CAMRA. This Square Deal feature brought the issue to the *Mirror's* millions of readers. The final two 'Square Deals' were about accurate pricing, the specific meaning of a 'sale price' and how they related to recommended retail prices. Both articles contained paragraphs advising consumers to shop around rather than the strong emphasis on the legal rights of the early Square Deals about the cost of living.

The Thursday 'Shoparound with Sally Moore' evolved from the 1971 issues of the Shopping Clock and demonstrate the Shopping Clock's popularity. The term 'shoparound' featured eight times on the Shopping Clock as headline between March and December 1971.²²⁰ These articles included comparison tables in the *Which* style on the price of chips, food, alcohol and Santas in the run up to Christmas. Shopping around was a key issue in the early 1970s

²¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 24 March 1971, p.25, 'Bob runs for life...locked in a freezer.' *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1973, p. 2, 'Freezer Case Arrest.'

²¹⁹ *Daily Mirror* 6 May 1972 p.7. See Janet Shepherd and John Shepherd, *1970s Britain* (Oxford, 2016) p.48 on the spread of fridges and freezers in the 1970s

²²⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 7 May 1971, p. 25 by Margaret Jones 'Fish and Chips wins', *Daily Mirror*, 12 August, 1971 p. 4 'BLOW UP SLIMMING AIDS ARE HOT AIR' by Margaret Jones. The Square Deal feature ran from 28 September 1971 to 19 February 1973.

where responsibility was put on consumers especially 'housewives' to cope with and beat inflation by putting pressure on retailers. However, the concept of shopping around continued to divide readers as a practical option. 'may I suggest you send your shopping review writers into small villages where there is only one shop—or at most two...I'm afraid you won't be able to 'shop around.'²²¹ 'Shoparound' was also a buzz word in 1971 used in many advertisements in the *Mirror*.

The Thursday Shoparound appeared from March 1972 until July 1972. It featured Sally Moore in the byline and an image of Shopping Clock logo to identify it as direct spin off from the Saturday Clock. In contrast to the Square Deal, it dealt were relatively modest items that came within the weekly cash spend. Many also had a seasonal tie in, starting with Easter Eggs, foods for the Easter meal and cleaning products for the traditional Spring Clean. It went on to cover fake Marks & Spencer seconds and problems with self-service petrol stations. Its standard format were comparison charts covering a range of products or services.²²²

While the Square Deal covered campaigns and consumer issues sometimes hoping not only to raise awareness but trigger legislation, the Shoparound targeted retailers and individual small items and was firmly wedded to the concept of the bargain hunting, thrifty housewife as individual agents. When Sally Moore temporarily disappeared from the *Mirror's* pages in the summer of 1972 so did the Shoparound, but it reappeared under the name of Mary Griffiths in February 1973 and then weekly from July 1973 to December 1974, with

²²¹ Editorial quotes letters *Daily Mirror*, 17 July 1971, p.2 'Claims that housewives are shopping around 'are a lot of eye-wash the Consumers' Union said yesterday.' *Daily Mirror*, 13 July 1971 p.2

'Calling for a boycott on expensive shops, the organisation said that wives were 'doing without' rather than shopping around.'

²²² This included pet food, pre-packed tomatoes, pre-packed cheese brands and spreads, ice cream, baby foods, LPs and cups of tea and coffee in cafés.

occasional appearances in 1975. It differed from Sally Moore's version in several ways. It never featured the Shopping Clock as part of its logo, although Griffiths was a Clock compiler. It had a regular weekday slot on a specific day and was initially in the front half of the paper but for more than half the time was further inside the paper. It used less comparison tables than Sally Moore's version.²²³ Mary Griffith's Shoparound instead contained a lot more advice adopting a very similar tone to Margaret Jones 'you believe that freezers save on the food bills. Well, they don't!'²²⁴ She also offered helpful but time consuming recipes including homemade jam and wine, as well as advice on buying fresh vegetables.²²⁵ But the Shoparound with Mary Griffiths was not a consistent column of healthy eating and lifestyle, it also included comparisons on cigarette prices and instant mash.

Why did these two features the Square Deal and the Shoparound last three and one year respectively while the Shopping Clock rolled on for over six? In the case of the Square Deal there are several possible causes. Firstly, it was based on a partnership with the Consumer Association in 1971.²²⁶ Secondly when Jones began a partnership with Mary Griffiths as Shop Clock compilers in November 1972 there was less point in a stand-alone Square Deal feature. Alternatively, as with other features it had simply run out of angles and as belts tightened among *the Mirrors'* readers stories about larger consumer spending seemed less relevant. Margaret Jones continued to write on consumer affairs and in 1975 answered questions on a Help page. Shoparound's original column was designed around Sally Moore

²²³ 56 per cent containing a table compared with 88 per cent.

²²⁴ COLD COMFORT ON FREEZERS Shoparound with Mary Griffiths *Daily Mirror* Wednesday 8 August 1973 p.17.

²²⁵ Other advice was on making fishcakes, Christmas stuffing, battered fish, and buying different types of fish.

²²⁶ Stories based Consumer Association surveys appeared regularly in the *Mirror* up to 1973 the *Mirror* continued to cite the Consumer Association in consumer articles throughout the 1970s and published its details regularly for readers who wanted to join but further research would need to be done on this relationship.

‘the Shopping Clock Girl’ who appeared to drop out of both the Shopping Clock and Shoparound in July 1972 never to return as the ‘Shopping Clock girl’. Under Mary Griffiths it became more of a good housekeeping feature, with very limited comparison tables, easy to merge with the Shopping Clock when Penny Burton became the main compiler.²²⁷

These consumer spin-off features show working class *Mirror* readers urged to be aware of their rights as consumers. Including their right to affordable food and protection from price rises after decimalisation with access to help-lines was the first focus. Later their right to fair credit, clear labels and a choice between competitively priced holidays featured. These main features, by turns appealed to affluent readers who could afford to buy their own houses or new white goods for their kitchens but also to those who needed to rely on the benefit system of the welfare state. What they initially had in common was a changing attitude to consumerism in the 1970s with more emphasis on choice. No longer just shopping around for basic commodities, which many working people, including paid working women, simply did not have the time for, but a fair shop whatever they were buying.

The journalism of the Shopping Clock and its spinoffs, reflected major changes in attitude to inflation problems in the 1970s. As inflation peaked in 1975 but persisted the Shopping Clock front page appearances declined.²²⁸ The crusading spin-offs of the early 1970s are replaced with self-help advice on how to save money and stretch budgets by cooking more nutritiously. When advice was given to shop around it was no longer about emphasising unfairness but put the responsibility back on the consumer. Whereas the Shopping Clock

²²⁷ By late 1974 Mary Griffiths had written most of her Shopping Clock features and Penny Burton takes over as main compiler. It may have been an editorial decision to move Griffiths on to other features. She published an economy cookbook in 1975.

²²⁸ In 1975 it is mentioned 4 times and is part of a main story 3 times but in 1976 and 1977 it appears only once each year.

takes on Tesco's in 1974, it has gone into partnership with them by 1975-76. The later consumer features like Shop 'N' Save, Shopping Watchdog and the Family Food Guides offer advice that is intended to teach consumers, rather than siding with them like the early Shopping Clocks. The Shopping Clock had begun as a campaign in the war against inflation now the message was about endurance until it was over.

Why was the Shopping Clock so successful?

The Shopping Clock really caught the spirit of the times. Its original aim was to show readers how their money was going down in value week on week. As the *Mirror* had helped to make politics accessible to its working class readers in the 1930's so the Shopping Clock took basic economics to the masses by starting from where they were. Research suggested the element of inflation people understood was the rising price of things they bought regularly. The Shopping Clock's lively accessible design, suited to discontinuous reading, and catchy headlines created a feature about rising prices that people wanted to look at as well as read. It was tabloid journalism at its best. Its impact can be shown by how often it appeared on their front page as news, particularly from 1971-74. It also suggested several competing ways of coping with inflation from the individualist, self-help shoparound to government intervention with food subsidies. It resonated with readers as evidenced by their letters. What the *Mirror* did not foresee was inflation as a decade long, serious economic problem which would increase the relevance of the Shopping Clock. The Clock's initial journalists, particularly Sally Moore, wrote in a lively style and all four of its main female compilers enjoyed one of the few important platforms for women journalists on this bestselling newspaper. The involvement of male colleagues which peaked between 1973-75, also showed how important

this 'famous' feature was to the paper. However, as inflation and the Clock continued compilers increasingly turned back to individualistic solutions for their readers, based on endurance and frugality rather than their rights as voters and consumers. Where once the Clock had been linked to strikes by female factory workers it was now linked to advice on time consuming recipes. The political impact of the Clock should help to make sense of this change.

Chapter 2 'What every housewife knows': The Politics of the Shopping Clock

At the start of the 1970s the Fleet Street press had not moved decisively to the right; the *Mail* was more balanced and the *Sun* still Labour supporting. The 1970 campaign was less partisan even on election day, partly due to the electioneering style of Edward Heath.¹ In Ascot week the *Express* urged readers to 'pick the winner' given the closeness of the polls, and the *Mail* depicted Mr Heath as a cartoon jockey about to overtake the favourite.² The *Daily Telegraph* and *Times* focused on the poll predictions. However, four papers, including the *Guardian*, featured another key element on their front pages, the attempt to appeal to 'housewife voters.' This received no mention in the *Mirror* whose front page simply urged a high turnout, 'YOUR X IS VITAL TODAY' and inside argued for continuity and loyalty.³

John Campbell's biography of Heath credited the surprise Conservative victory to Heath's hard work and a professional campaign.⁴ In the view of the *Sunday Telegraph's* Ivan Rowan, much of this came rather late in the campaign, 'Heath changes gear – but late.' Campbell acknowledged that the last minute emphasis on prices played a decisive but 'unscrupulous' part in the outcome.⁵ The campaign had turned into the 'shopping basket election' that some Conservative-supporting papers had felt was essential to victory. In May, *The Economist* had drawn attention to the 'sensitivity of the British public ...to changes in food prices' while the *Sunday Telegraph's* Celia Haddon wrote that the 'Boom in prices hits the

¹ See Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century* (Oxford, 2015) pp.84-86.

² *Daily Express*, 18 June 1970, p. 1, *Daily Mail*, 18 June 1970, p.1, 'Come on Ted.'

³ *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 1970, p.1, 'HOUSEWIVES VOTE IS TORY HOPE', *The Guardian*, 18 June 1970, p.1 'Tories pin hopes on housewives', *The Daily Mail*, 18 June 1970, p.1 'Heath woos the wives', *Daily Express*, 18 June 1970, p.1 'Up goes your grocery bill...66 times', *The Times*, 18 June 1970, p.1, 'Heath keeps attack going on economic issues.' *Daily Mirror*, 18 June 1970, p.3 'It is Labour, the Party led by gifted men and women who came from US. Labour the Party of Government in 1964. In 1966. AND AGAIN IN 1970.'

⁴ John Campbell, *Edward Heath: a biography* (London, 1993), p.281.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.282

shopping basket.⁶ Initially this had no impact on Heath's campaign, although the Manifesto referred to inflation and housewives 'struggling to make ends meet', its main focus was listing Labour's mistakes and the only relevant Conservative policy included was likely to increase food prices to aid farmers.⁷

The term 'shopping basket election,' used by journalists and politicians in the post-war era applied to elections focused on food prices to capture the female vote.⁸ This was how the shock 1970 result was explained by the Labour Party and journalists. The gender gap between male and female voters was seen as a decisive factor in the Conservatives' favour during the 1950s.⁹ In 1964 the swing had moved in Labour's favour. The gap was reduced to 4 per cent from the 1950s height of 17 per cent, and since women made up more of the electorate this was a measurable advantage. In 1966 the gender gap in the Conservative's favour was 8 per cent but numerically more women voted Labour than Conservative.¹⁰

In the last week of the campaign with encouraging polls for Labour, the Conservative campaign specifically targeted women voters, especially those described as housewives. On 11 June in a marginal constituency the *Nantwich Chronicle* under the headline 'Wooing the Wives' asked 'Will this prove to be the shopping basket election?'¹¹ On the 14 June Reginald Maudling told party workers 'if we concentrate on the votes of the housewives, who know the truth of rising prices, victory is in our grasp.'¹² Gordon Jackson in the *Evening Express* on

⁶ *The Economist*, 16 May 1970, p.64, *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 May 1970 p. 21.

⁷ Campbell, p. 282. *Manifesto A better tomorrow* pp. 2, 8 and 12 'The resultant small increase in food price will amount to just over a penny in £ on per year on the cost of living for three years.'

⁸ See Introduction p.13.

⁹ Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender' *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 36, No 4 (1997), pp. 419-452.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 419 Citing a Labour Party's Home Policy Committee for 1966.

¹¹ *Nantwich Chronicle*, 11 June 1970, p.12 'Wooing the Women' Percy Walker and Michael Arnold.

¹² *Daily Mail*, 15 June 1970, p.2, 'Tories go for the wives' vote.'

16 June saw both leaders in a 'Fight for the key vote of the Housewife' and a shopping basket of key food items was prominently on display at Conservative Party headquarters.¹³ At that morning's press conference Edward Heath promised reduced taxation would cut prices 'at a stroke' but the *Mirror* only included this on page seven in a one line quote without that key phrase.¹⁴ Heath's final constituency speech the night before the election told voters 'Mr Wilson has made his biggest mistake. He has underestimated the mood of the women of this country by forcing up prices.'¹⁵The eventual gender gap was 11 per cent, enough to produce a significant advantage to the winning party and far higher than it would be during Mrs Thatcher's three victories.

Did Labour, and the mass circulation paper that supported it, neglect the housewife issue? A better question might be, did they neglect issues generally in favour of personalities and style over substance? In Ben Pimlott's view the campaign was personalised around Wilson because of his undoubted skill as a political performer, especially on television.¹⁶ This resulted in a complacent campaign where Labour appeared as the party of power not change. Labour began the campaign with an apparent lead in the polls which averaged 3 per cent, with some polls like Gallup much higher. According to both Pimlott and Geoffrey Goodman, Wilson, compared with 1966, appeared to have lost his fire and the campaign was pragmatic and peaceful.¹⁷ This made it easier for Heath to attack its presentation of the

¹³ Aberdeen Evening Express, 16 June 1970, p.6 Gordon Jackson.

¹⁴ *Times*, 17 June 1970, p.4, *Financial Times*, 17 June 1970, p.10, *Daily Mirror*, 17 June 1970, p.7, 'Tory Leader Edward Heath, at his Press conference, spoke of 'roaring inflation,' with 250 grocery price rises in the past week making a total of 4,398 this year' This *Mirror* round up of about price cuts did not include the famous phrase 'at a stroke.'

¹⁵ *Daily Mail*, 18 June 1970, p.1 'Heath woos wives', *The Journal (Newcastle)* 18 June 1970, p.1 'Heath stakes all on late swing.'

¹⁶ Ben Pimlott *Harold Wilson* (London, 1992) pp.555-7 'Whenever he could Wilson kept off politics...clever and funny, he had ceased to be uplifting.'

¹⁷ Pimlott p.554; Geoffrey Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair* (London, 2003) p.127 'Labour voters seemed apathetic, disinterested and detached.'

economy as 'sham sunshine.'¹⁸ Labour and the *Mirror* gave much attention to new first time eighteen year-old voters.¹⁹ Although there were 1.8 million new voters the actual overall turnout was lower than 1966. The election address in the *Mirror* on election day made no reference to mothers or wives but to 'old and young,' 'talented young,' 'all the young' and a government led by 'gifted men and women.' Despite the fact Labour had a very popular Cabinet member in Barbara Castle the *Mirror* headline tagline 'The men (and woman)' was far from inclusive, and they did not write much about housewives either. At the end of May Harold Wilson's attack on the Conservative proposal to tax imported foods 'as a direct and deliberate tax on the shopping basket' appeared on the *Mirror's* front and back pages.²⁰ 'Wilson taunts Tories over Prices' was a large front-page headline but at this stage it was only one issue in the campaign not the central one it became in the last week.

The *Mirror* claimed to present a balanced coverage of the Conservative campaign but Heath's 3 June speech headed 'Hard up wives' only appeared on page five. It was not given as much coverage as Wilson's speech on wage freezes or even that of Screaming Lord Sutch. Two days before election day, when the trade figures dominated the front page, the Shopping Basket finally emerged as a key issue for the *Mirror* and Labour. A reader's letter was selected asking Mr Heath the effect on housewives of raising the price of school dinners.²¹ Jim Callaghan's claim that retailers had deliberately put up prices during the election campaign, was dismissed by the Food Manufacturers Federation as 'damned nonsense.'²² The following day Geoffrey Goodman wrote a back page story about an

¹⁸ Cited by Pimlott p.557 from D. Butler, and M. Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* p.154.

¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1970, p.13, *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1970, p. *Daily Mirror*, 18 June 1970, p.14 'Do it yourself guide for new voters.'

²⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1970, p.1 and p.28.

²¹ *Daily Mirror*, 14 May 1970, p.28 Wilson Speech, *Daily Mirror*, 4 June 1970, p.5 and *Daily Mirror*, 8 June 1970, Readers' Postbag, pp.12-13.

²² *Daily Mirror*, 17 June 1970, p.28.

expected fall in the prices index and a planned ice cream prices probe by Barbara Castle.

Labour's approach to food prices as an issue was reactive and apart from Wilson had mostly come too late to impact on voters.²³

The narrative was quickly established that this shock result was due to the appeal to housewives. The first politician to articulate this was Harold Wilson. In a morning-after TV interview with David Dimbleby he acknowledged that the cost-of-living statistics had worked in the Conservatives' favour and it had been an election 'not about economics but about prices and taxes.'²⁴ The view that Wilson had done his best was accepted by Labour's national agent Ron Hayward a week later and the Conservatives' win was explained by their 'successful concentration on the rising cost of the housewife's shopping basket.'²⁵

During the dock workers' dispute the following month, the *Mirror* warned the new government that housewives expected to be protected against rising prices after winning a 'shopping basket election' with a last-minute swing. Using the term 'shopping basket' election seemed to be a term of disparagement for both journalists and politicians, a last resort, almost a trivial issue on which to win an election. The inflation of the 1970s would show the importance of the rate of inflation was not only about the price of a loaf of bread but about so much more. By the February election in 1974 the treatment of inflation by the Labour Party and the *Mirror* after three years and four months of the Shopping Clock would be very different.

²³ *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 1970, p.1.

²⁴ Harold Wilson BBC interview with David Dimbleby on 19 June 1970

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Election+1970> (Accessed 9 February 2024)

²⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 25 June 1970 p.15 'How Heath won on rising prices. *Daily Mirror*, 21 July 1970, p.6 Geoffrey Goodman The wages of a lie...' suggested women had voted Conservative because husbands had not passed on wage rises.

Harold Wilson, the Shopping Clock, and inflation in the Daily Mirror 1970-74

Harold Wilson had three distinctive relationships with the Shopping Clock before his election campaign in 1974, which sometimes overlapped. Firstly, Wilson inspired the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock as part of his attempt to reclaim female voters by reminding them of 'broken promises' from the 1970 campaign. This kept the issue of inflation high on the political agenda as economic issues became hard news and he inevitably returned to this as another election came closer. He also challenged the individualism of 'shopping around' and showed empathy for the declining standard of living of working class families, which Peter Sloman has argued was part of Wilson's rediscovery of poverty and move to the left after 1970's defeat.²⁶ Finally, by 1973 he has developed policies including food subsidies and other forms of protection for working class families' standard of living. These included the 'Housewives' Charter' which would form a basis for the Social Contract by offering Trade Union leaders price controls in exchange for wage restraint when Labour regained power. He was also the first party leader to create a specific Prices and Consumer Protection Minister.²⁷

Harold Wilson was often portrayed as a shocked leader of the opposition after his party's unexpected defeat in June 1970; too busy writing his political memoirs to return to effective leadership until 1971.²⁸ Wilson denied this in the controversial BBC documentary *Yesterday's Men*. At the party conference in October 1970 prices and the election campaign were still very much on the agenda.²⁹ By November 1970 he had almost finished writing *The Labour*

²⁶ Refer to Peter, Sloman 'Harold Wilson, 'Selsdon Man,' and the defence of social democracy in 1970s' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 33, No 1 (2022), p.85 and pp.93-100.

²⁷ Geoffrey Howe's brief for Trade and Consumer Affairs did not include responsibility for prices.

²⁸ Ben Pimlott pp.568, 571, *Yesterday's Men* interviews, David Dimbleby with Richard Crossman 'He was shell shocked' and Harold Wilson 'No it probably hit them [his ministers] worse ...I was always ready for it...Dick got that wrong' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVKJ--UwRY&t=475s> (Accessed 23/02/2024)

²⁹ 'I recall that moving appeal the Conservative Leader made to the housewives of Leicester... He wept that the housewives were telling him that they had to go for the cheaper cuts of meat, buying standard eggs instead of large ones.' <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/harold-wilson-1970-speech-to-labour-party-conference/>

Government. When Anthony Barber produced his mini-budget Harold Wilson took an energetic part in five days of Opposition attacks. The *Mirror's* headlined this as 'WILSON'S FIREWORKS DISPLAY ROCKS TORIES.' He also fronted a party political broadcast on 4 November which the *Telegraph* described as a return to 'his old aggressive style.'³⁰ The *Mirror* report 'Wilson in TV attack on prices' however, gave more coverage to Roy Jenkins's speech and the debate in the House on the 4 November. The party political broadcast went out at 9pm on all three channels and viewers could only have avoided it by turning off the television set. It began with a pre-recorded, straight to camera address by Harold Wilson but then cut to clips of Edward Heath's election promises about reducing rising prices. Wilson advised viewers to write down on paper 'the main items of household expenditure: fares to work, your rent, rates, coal, gas, electricity, your groceries, yes, and school meal...Then put the paper behind the clock. Keep it safe. We will look at it together in a few months' time.' The *Telegraph* noted that to drive the message home: 'Mr Wilson had a little clock behind him as he spoke. With careful forethought, it was showing the correct time though the broadcast had been pre-recorded.'³¹ The *Telegraph* dismissed the 'paper behind the clock' gimmick as a 'hostage to fortune,' reminding readers how inflation had risen between 1965 and 1968. The *Mirror's* journalists however, did the future homework for their readers. Two days later the *Mirror* brought out its first Shopping Clock concentrating on the groceries which were part of Wilson's list. A year later Wilson reminded delegates at the Brighton Conference 'last October [1970] on TV, I asked you to list the prices you were then paying

³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 6 November 1970, p.2, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 November 1970, p.36.

³¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 5 November 1970, p.36.

and put them behind the clock on the mantelpiece. Take them out today, and you will think you're reading the Dead Sea Scrolls.'³²

Wilson's initial aim was to remind women voters of those election promises but as the Shopping Clock took off, he made regular use of the *Mirror's* 'famous clock.' Over the next three years *the Daily Mirror* reported five direct references to the Shopping Clock in his speeches. He understood its recognition factor with Labour voters. In addition, at the Brighton Conference in 1971 the *Mirror* reported Wilson's comparison to the original prices on their shopping list behind the clock. Harold Wilson, often described as the only professional economist to have been Prime Minister, had held several ministerial and shadow ministerial posts with an economic focus. Both Shirley Williams and James Prior as ministers would criticise the Shopping Clock and other newspaper features that had not been seasonally adjusted, but Wilson praised its usefulness to *Mirror's* readers. He saw its value as an opposition tool. Conservative private polls suggested their swing in 1970 was due to gaining a million middle aged manual workers' votes who had previously supported Labour, the gender was not specified.³³ However, Wilson was very keen to close the gender gap he felt had widened in 1970.

He continued to hark back to the 1970 election result throughout his time in opposition.

Wilson accused the Prime Minister of splitting homes wooing housewives 'with a promise of better tomorrow' and three years later 'seducing more than 6,000,000 women with his

³² Speech Archive Leader's speech, Brighton 1971 <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech+1971> (Accessed 23/02/2024)

³³ Sloman p.90; Philip Zeigler, *Wilson: An Authorised Life* (London, 1995) pp.352-3.

General Election pledges'.³⁴ In a Commons debate a month later he recycled comparisons he had made between Mr Heath and Casanova at the Brighton Conference in 1971 which had

Figure 2.1 Harold Wilson's references in speeches to the Shopping Clock 1971-74

Date	<i>Daily Mirror</i> Headline and Theme	Audience
29 March 1971	Warning from Wilson on Budget Tax Cuts 'Clock proof Mr Heath has not kept his election promises' cited by the <i>Mirror</i> on 12 June 12 1971 ³⁵	Labour Women's Conference Scarborough
12 June 1971	'Wilson hammers the Tories over rocketing prices' Suggested <i>Daily Mail</i> 'publish this little price list once a month and keep on the mantelpiece behind the <i>Daily Mirror</i> clock'	Post Office Engineering Conference Blackpool
29 April 1972	'EVERYONE IS A CLOCKWATCHER' cited as a user of the Shopping Clock 'has used the Clock to show how prices have risen'	Quoted on Shopping Clock Page
16 June 1972	'HEATH TICKED OFF! Don't ignore the warning of the <i>Mirror</i> Wilson tells Ted ' That week the Clock went over £6 barrier. 15 June <i>Mirror</i> produced an inflation special. On 16 June Wilson speech reminded audience of his 1970 party political broadcast with clock and repeats parallel with Dead Sea Scrolls 'Send not for whom bell tolls don't ignore ticking of clock' Heath reply said he was delighted to see any article that called attention to inflation was also included in the article.	Woodworkers Union in Brighton
4 January 1973	'CLOCK WATCHER WILSON' alongside Shopping Clock headline urged all papers to carry similar lists but quoted how much mince had gone up since 'November '7s to 7s 6d in old money...topside 13s to 14s...the <i>Mirror</i> Clock is now up by 5p in the pound since the freeze was started. So much for Mr Heath's promises'	Huyton Constituency

³⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1971, p. 2 and 19 July 1973, p.1 'Taunts by Wilson at Casanova Ted'.

³⁵ Cited by the *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1971, p.5 James Beecroft but does not appear in original article saved on the *Daily Mirror* BNA copy.

appeared on page 7 of the *Mirror* 'AFTER CASANOVA BEWARE DON JUAN.'³⁶ 'He said that he would fight on the side of the housewives. In three years, the Prime Minister...has broken many more trusting female hearts than Casanova did in a lifetime.'³⁷

Peter Sloman argued Harold Wilson 'retained a highly traditional view of the 'housewives' vote which assumed that many women were mainly concerned about food prices at the beginning of the 1970s.'³⁸ Was he that out of touch? Wilson had taken part in a pioneering, televised party political broadcast on food prices with Dr Edith Summerskill in the 1955 election campaign, 'explaining with the aid of piles of goods with price tags how much prices had gone up.'³⁹ On 4 January 1973 the *Mirror* report from Huyton showed he knew the price of mince and topside beef and during his 1974 campaigns he did walkabouts in shops.⁴⁰ If this was a traditional view, it was shared by the *Mirror* and other Fleet Street papers and by the Conservative Party in their 1970 Election campaign. How far was it shared by female readers?⁴¹ Adrian Bingham's *Everyday Politics* and Brooke and Black suggest that Harold Wilson was ahead of his own party where 'Women's issues were not consistently high on the agenda of the Labour Party, and they did little to respond to the Conservatives in this area.'⁴²

³⁶*Daily Mirror*, 6 October 1971, p. 7. Don Juan was a reference to Geoffrey Rippon Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster July 1970-November 1972.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.7

³⁸ Sloman p.84.

³⁹ Pimlott, p. 190 '...both spoke forcefully, using telling and homely images' citing DE Butler *The British General Election of 1955* (London, Macmillan) p.51.

⁴⁰ Refer to Figure 2.1.

⁴¹ Refer to Laura Paterson, 'I didn't feel like my own person': paid work in women's narratives of self and working motherhood, 1950-1980', *Contemporary British History*, Vol 33, No.3 (2019), pp.405-426. Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 17, No 2 (2006), pp. 206-229.

⁴² Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, (Oxford, forthcoming) pp.188, Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender' *Journal of British Studies*, Vol 36 No 4 (1997), pp. 419-452.

In July 1973 after two days of reporting on Commons economic debates the *Mirror* followed it up with a Friday centre spread 'What the women of Britain think of CASANOVA TED'. This vox pop of 27 women gave reactions to Wilson's accusation about Edward Heath's 'broken promises.' They ranged in age from 19 to 68, with fifty per cent in their 20s, and came from all areas across the UK, except Northern Ireland. Fifty five per cent supported the view that Edward Heath could be blamed, 'Mr Wilson was right about Mr Heath's broken promises,' 'and 'I think Mr Heath has hoodwinked the housewife.' Six did not blame Heath because they felt there were wider causes, including two who blamed decimalisation or Britain's entry to the EEC.⁴³ One questioned if things were so bad 'we are not really doing too badly, are we? The standard of living has gone up?' Others said they did not trust any politicians, and felt they were out of touch with everyday life, 'I don't suppose they ever do the shopping.' These female vox pop responses were somewhat different from Alt's research where higher numbers did not blame government, but Alt's respondents would presumably have been of both genders and his sample was far larger.⁴⁴ Although this group included more young female *Mirror* readers, considerably younger than the average *Mirror* readers, it did reflect the changes in the average age of marriage with 45% of women marrying between the age of 18 and 24.⁴⁵ These responses may also have been filtered like readers'

⁴³ *Daily Mirror*, 20 July 1973, pp. 16-17, 'He has tried harder than most to control prices,' 'I don't think any previous prime minister has done more.'

⁴⁴ Surveys done by James Alt, *The Politics of Economic Decline since 1964* Table 8.2 cited by Jim Tomlinson *Managing the Economy, Managing the People*, (Oxford, 2017) p. 198 only six per cent of respondents saw the government as the main cause of inflation, 31 per cent saw the world situation as the main cause, 28 per cent joining the EEC, 21 per cent decimalization and 14 per cent saw Trade Unions/wage claims.

⁴⁵ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, (Oxford, forthcoming) p.217. Thomas O'Malley, Chapter 3 'Readership and Readers'. 91-92, in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017 (Edinburgh, 2020).

letters to give the views the paper wanted to print. Nevertheless, they seemed to suggest Harold Wilson's broken promises strategy had worked.

Sloman concluded that whilst in opposition from 1970-74 Harold Wilson moved from attacking the broken promises of the 1970 election to construct a narrative of 'Labour as the party of social solidarity and the Conservatives as exponents of selfish and divisive individualism.'⁴⁶ The need to keep food inflation at the top of the political agenda, which inspired the Shopping Clock, was about more for Wilson than reminding voters of broken promises from the 1970 election. According to Sloman, Wilson's attack on prices was also part of his wider campaign to portray the Conservatives as privileged and 'heartless.'⁴⁷ In his November 1970 party political broadcast he had claimed 'This Conservative Government is set on a course to divide the national community. They are determined to create a mean and means-tested system of society.'⁴⁸ Government policies on subsidies for school meals, free school milk, prescription charges and sickness benefits were described by Labour's Shadow Chancellor Roy Jenkins as 'redistribution in the wrong direction.'⁴⁹ The labelling of Mrs Thatcher, the Education Secretary, as a 'milk snatcher' was certainly hard for her to shake off.⁵⁰ By the Queen's speech in November 1972 Harold Wilson and Roy Jenkins were united in attacking the government's failure to keep their promises to housewives with their proposed 90 day freeze on prices. Wilson pointed out the wide range of prices already pushed up since the collapse of government talks with the unions. The *Mirror* reported Wilson's new approach which asked for talks between the Government, CBI, and TUC and

⁴⁶ Sloman p.100.

⁴⁷ Sloman p.92 quotes Survey of younger voters 1973 by Sir Michael Fraser et al CRD3/42/18 suggests this approach worked.

⁴⁸ *Daily Telegraph* 5 November 1970 p.36.

⁴⁹ Parliamentary Debates (Commons) 805, 4 November 1970 1123, 1120 as cited by Sloman p.91.

⁵⁰ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher the authorised biography*: Vol 1 (London, 2013) pp.220-224.

for the restoration of the Prices and Incomes Board and the Consumer Council.⁵¹

Meanwhile Roy Jenkins asked the Prime Minister in the House, 'do you now regard the short-term situation you have produced as so disastrous that you cannot afford any longer to think about the long term?'⁵² The Labour leader was presenting economic problems as a moral issue of unfairness not just mismanagement.

Throughout 1973 the *Mirror* reported Harold Wilson's frequent references to prices and the effect on families. In February Wilson asked 'There must be someone in the Cabinet who knows that food and housing are the main burdens on a family budget.'⁵³ March's Shopping Clock reported continued rises.⁵⁴ However, other *Mirror* journalists trivialised and personalised the appeal to women voters of the two political leaders. In April 1973 the *Mirror's* Inside Page reported that a poll that put Mr Wilson 15 per cent ahead with female voters: 'WHAT GIVES A POLITICIAN WOMAN APPEAL - THE EXPERTS' analysis. 'The *Mirror* journalist turned to 'expert' psychologists to explain the gap. One was quoted as saying 'Women tend to vote on less logical terms...they look for what they think politicians mean.' Beneath pictures of the two very middle aged, serious looking politicians the 'experts' were quoted in greater detail. Heath was described as a 'square' who women readers would think resembled a 'bank manager. You can't imagine him at an orgy.'⁵⁵ The female voters it was implied made their choices according to attraction rather than political beliefs. Mr Wilson,

⁵¹ *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1972, p.2, 'Wilson: We Need a New Approach' Barbara Castle in the same report was quoted as saying 'You cannot switch on the idea of social justice like the Blackpool illuminations when you are talking about wages and off when you talking about all the other policies that redistribute wealth'

⁵² *Ibid*, p.2.

⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, February 15 1973, p.1.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 3 March 1973' p.3, 'Prices are all steady in the shopping markets', *Daily Mirror*, 10 March 1973, p.3, 'Beef sends Clock soaring again', *Daily Mirror*, 17 March 1973, p.2, 'Ticking up again', *Daily Mirror*, 24 March 1973, p.3, 'Fourpenny one rocks the clock', *Daily Mirror*, 31 March 1973, p.3, 'UP again goes the Clock', *Daily Mirror*, 7 April 1973, p.3 'Over the top!'

⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 10 April 1973, p.15.

according to these 'experts' came across as evasive and able to make the best of things and these were qualities women could relate to. The journalists and their expert psychologist did not suggest Harold Wilson was attractive to women physically but that women's responses were emotional rather than logical or ideological. It was personality and style over substance not the price of mince or the rate of inflation that mattered.⁵⁶

Wilson was not afraid to appeal to emotion when he focused on the poverty of the elderly. In June 1973 he made page two with an account of how his wife was left in tears by the sight of an elderly female shopper unable to buy more than two slices of meatloaf in a supermarket. Wilson repeated his accusation that the Prime Minister seduced 'more than 6,000,000 women with his General Election pledges.' He cited the rise of the cost of living by 28 per cent and food prices by 35 per cent, but then made a very dubious comparison of small gaps in price rises to pauses taken by a 'wife beater who knocks his wife about for half an hour and then claims credit when he pauses for breath.'⁵⁷ This treatment of the abuse of women in the language of seaside picture postcard, 'knocks his wife about' would seem shocking to any political audience well before the end of twentieth century. In the 1970s however, there was still limited laws against 'domestic violence' and the clumsy language was intended to be sympathetic to women.⁵⁸ The speech seemed emotive, aimed specifically at women voters and the poorest who have been left behind by inflation. A week later Edward Heath made a technical correction to Wilson's tear-jerking story of the impoverished pensioner. He pointed out pensions would have risen by 55 per cent in three

⁵⁶ 'Wilson needs to be read between his lines. Heath a more open person has to spell everything out. Which can be fatal.... Mr Wilson is human and women find that easy to understand...most of all Mr Wilson wants to and can sell dreams. And Mr Heath can't do that' *Daily Mirror*, 10 April 1973, p.15.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 19 June 1973, p.2.

⁵⁸ 1970s reforms Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 and Magistrates Courts Act 1978, Erin Pizzey opened the first modern women's refuge in Chiswick in 1971.

years by the autumn. The *Mirror* concluded the story with a reference to the current Shopping Clock's rises of 35 per cent since November 1970.⁵⁹

On 7 July 1973 Victor Knight, chief parliamentary correspondent, reported alongside the Shopping Clock on page two, a Wilson speech, 'WILSON'S FURY' on how the standard of living for families was falling. This refuted the explanations by the government for inflation, 'You can't blame the price of a house built before World War Two or even World War One on the wages of builders in 1972.'⁶⁰

Harold Wilson made several other key points in the July 1973 debate. He attacked the Government's advice to shop around in his speech... 'easy advice. What about working wives? What about wives with young children? What about wives in area such as villages or underserved estates with only one shop?' and a wider point defending the right of families to maintain their standard of living. After detailing a range of foods housewives had been encouraged to boycott, he went on the attack. 'We had all those sanctimonious speeches from the Prime Minister praising the housewives: the little woman was magnificent. What he did not realise was that families wanted to buy those things, just as they were able to in June 1970.' The four-hour debate saw Labour attack the government for putting too much energy into wage talks rather than food subsidies or rises in pensions.⁶¹ What had begun as a short-term political attempt to win back women voters, reminding them of broken election promises had now become about fairness and defending their families' standard of living.

⁵⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 30 June 1973, p.11.

⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1973, p.2.

⁶¹ *Hansard* Wednesday 18 July 1973, Volume 860: 1973.

In January 1973 the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock was once more on the front pages on 13 January when it broke the £9 barrier on 13 and featured also on 11 and 15 January.⁶² At the end of January, the *Mirror* announced 'THE SECOND COMING OF HAROLD WILSON' after he announced more radical policies in the Commons than those put forward by Edward Heath's government in 1972 to control wages and inflation.⁶³ The following week a policy specifically to tackle prices when his party regained power was announced. The *Mirror* presented Wilson as the only leader who could strike a deal with the unions, for an effective prices and incomes policy where trade unions would restrain wage demands in exchange for price control for poorer consumers. 'TUC chiefs promised wage restraint under a Labour Government...Mr. Wilson pledged a massive assault on prices, rents, fares, and housing shortages.'⁶⁴

It was this bargain to trade price restraint for wage restraint that formed the foundation of the future Social Contract. Three things stand out about this report. Firstly, the *Mirror* chose to stress it was Wilson and the TUC rather than Labour who struck a bargain. Secondly, they emboldened '*A new Housewives Charter*' as the cornerstone of the six-point bargain, and thirdly Wilson's criticism of the Government for concentrating on wage restraints rather than the fact that 'food prices are raising heavily and some firms are making huge profits.'⁶⁵ To communicate this policy, once in power Wilson set up the CIPU and appointed the *Mirror's* Industrial Editor Geoffrey Goodman to explain in '*Mirror* language'

⁶² See Chapter 1 p.64.

⁶³ Edward Heath had reversed his hands off policy regarding the economy in four stages beginning with the rescue of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders see Campbell *Edward Heath* p. 442, and pp.468-82.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1973 p 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.2.

the Social Contract to a mainly working-class audience.⁶⁶

A subsidised food prices policy returned in a *Mirror* article headed 'Everyman's Britain' based on a Labour NEC document which promised 'effective price controls on key items in the household budget' as part of its economic strategy on 8 June 1973.⁶⁷ Later that month Wilson's demand in the Commons for food subsidies to deal with rising food prices made the front page of the *Mirror*. On 5 July the *Mirror* reported on a forthcoming debate in the Commons on prices under the heading 'PRICES: WILSON GOES TO WAR' and two days later Saturday 7 July the report 'WILSON'S FURY' on his speech in Bradford appeared opposite the Shopping Clock which had now reached £6.77 ½ p.⁶⁸

In November 1973 Wilson had also appointed the party's rising star Shirley Williams as Shadow Secretary for Prices and Consumer Protection. In the *Mirror's* view this was about 'seeking the housewives votes and Williams was now in charge of heading Labour's attack on 'prices, living costs and consumer protection.'⁶⁹ In what the *Mirror* dubbed 'Crisis Britain' in late 1973, prices slid down the political agenda in the wake of the miners' strike and the three-day week. When mentioned, it was in terms of future Labour government pledges as the call for an election increased.⁷⁰

Harold Wilson inspired the creation of the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock in November 1970. Despite his sophisticated knowledge of economics, he understood the Clock's role in communicating inflation to a popular audience and claimed to be a clock-watcher. This may have pushed inflation up the political agenda when the rates of inflation were still in single

⁶⁶Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* p.193 and Goodman p.175-6.

⁶⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 8 June 1973, p.7.

⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 1973, p.1. *Daily Mirror*, 5 July 1973, p.2 and *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1973, p.2.

⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1973, p.2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.2.

figures. The crisis that prompted the Conservative's U-turn, pushed Wilson to develop radical alternative policies. By the time he gained power, inflation was something that *Mirror* readers were more aware of and had more experience of. After the shock of the 1970 defeat Harold Wilson was determined to present his leadership and his party as in touch with ordinary Labour voters. He stressed not just compassion for the poor as in Heath's One Nation Toryism but the reality of working class life which did not fit in with 'shoparound individualism' and where families felt entitled to maintain the standard of living, they had worked so hard for.

Elsewhere in the opposition - Labour MPs and the Trade Union Movement

If Harold Wilson led on the prices issue what were the rest of his party doing and were they influenced by the *Mirror* and the impact of the Shopping Clock? In 1979 23% of MPs read the *Mirror* and only 19% of Trade Union leaders, compared to 48% and 72% respectively who read the *Guardian*.⁷¹ Rising food prices were a regular debating and question point in the autumn of 1970. On 17 November 1970, during Question Time Doris Fisher MP reminded Jim Prior 'Every housewife would tell you that competition is not keeping prices down'.⁷² In the same debate Roy Jenkins, deputising for Harold Wilson, challenged Edward Heath on the lack of price reduction referring to the *Financial Times's* grocery prices index. The *Mirror's* Sally Moore explained to readers that the official figures used by Jim Prior were out of date and based on June to September figures, and cited the Shopping Clock's rise over the previous two weeks. The Labour gains in the May 1971 local election results were

⁷¹ Shepherd, *Crisis What Crisis* p.116 citing Peter Kellner and Robert Worcester 'Comparisons of newspaper readership' in Robert M Worcester and Martin Harrops (eds) *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1979* (London, 1982) p.66.

⁷² Doris Fisher MP for Ladywood 1970-74 one of Labour's ten female MPs elected in the 1970 election *Daily Mirror*, 18 November 1970 p 28 'Minister in Commons row on food prices' by Victor Knight [with Sally Moore].

credited by the *Mirror* to rising prices '11 per cent in six months on the cost of food – See the *Mirror* Shopping Clock on Page 6' but this was still the voice of a paper giving its own feature political importance.⁷³

There were several hundred references in the Commons to food prices by Labour MPs before the 1974 election. While several MPs cited the Shopping Clock, Harold Wilson seemed ahead of his own party on this. The first to follow suit was Greville Janner in April 1972. He raised the issue of price fixing on cleaning products praising the 'excellent and helpful column called '*Mirror* Shopping Clock'.⁷⁴ In June 1972, Alec Jones used the Clock in a Commons Committee regarding pensioners' rising living costs 'the *Daily Mirror* does a valuable service to MPs...in *Mirror* language reminds us legislators of what really matters... constant price rises in essential goods and foods.'⁷⁵ In a long debate attacking the government's inflation policy on 26 June 1972 Labour's Doris Fisher made a clear reference to the Shopping Clock when she referred to the £5 a housewife spends and refuted James Prior's implied attack on the Shopping Clock:⁷⁶ 'The housewife is now able to purchase only 24 items for her £5 as against 33 items ... two years ago'.⁷⁷ Not only did Mrs Fisher know exactly how many items were in the *Mirror's* shopping bag, but linked rising food prices to wage demands. She challenged Jim Prior on whether he was doing enough: 'he can blame the housewife for asking her husband for extra money, but he is not keeping down prices and nobody can blame any man for wanting to maintain the standard of living to which his

⁷³ *Daily Mirror*, 15 May 1971 p.2.

⁷⁴ *Hansard* HC Deb 14 April 1972 Vol 834 cc1669-80, cited in *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1972 p.3 Everyone's a Clockwatcher.

⁷⁵ Alec Jones was MP for the Rhonda, *Daily Mirror*, 23 June 1972 p.1. See Chapter 1 where this speech made the front page.

⁷⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 27 June 27 p 4 'Shopping Clock A minister hits out'.

⁷⁷ *Hansard* 26 June 1972 Vol 839 Food Prices Debate 'That this House strongly condemns Her Majesty's Government for their utter failure to control rising prices, in total breach of their election pledges to the British people.'

family has become accustomed.’ She also corrected Jill Knight, who claimed prices had come down: ‘they are simply promotions by big business in the food industry.’⁷⁸ In the same debate Norman Buchan, the Shadow Minister for Agriculture disputed shopping around and consumer boycotts as solutions ‘as if the aged and infirm can shop around...we found that consumer resistance to beef increased the price of lamb.’⁷⁹

After four *Mirror* front pages dominated by prices in early July, the 18 July 1973 Inflation debate was a major opposition opportunity. As well as Harold Wilson’s speech eight Labour MPs spoke at length including two front benchers and two newly elected MPs Roger Stotter and Betty Boothroyd. Betty Boothroyd, like Doris Fisher in the previous year’s debate, came nearest to the *Mirror* Shopping Clock’s approach. She explained how during her recent campaign ‘the rocketing price of food...has worn out the elasticity of wage packets’ and for three weeks of her campaign, ‘carried out a survey of retail prices... even in one week many essential items had crept up in price.’⁸⁰ Many of the other Labour MPs concentrated specifically on pensioners and the poor and Roger Stotter’s references to housewives was based only on the shopping experiences of his wife. The most frequent line of attack by Labour MPs was a rebuttal of the government’s defence that world food prices were the real reason for rising food prices. Edward Short, like his leader, took issue with the government’s advice to housewives to shop around as

‘not much comfort to the housewife trudging from shop to shop trying to save a few coppers. Has the Prime Minister ever seen old people going from shop to shop with a

⁷⁸ *Hansard* 26 June 1972 Vol 839 Food Prices Debate

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Hansard* Volume 860: debated on Wednesday 18 July 1973.

handful of coupons for special offers? I expect the Government call it “shopping around.”⁸¹

If it took most Labour MPs until 1972-3 to catch on to the *Mirror* Shopping Clock, Trade union members and shop stewards in some workplaces were citing it within months of its creation. The report on the front page of 27 May 1971 of a one-day strike involving over 3,250 workers from seven different unions in five Plessey factories and the follow up strike by a smaller group of engineering workers that week showed how the Shopping Clock caught the attention of union members and their shop stewards.⁸² Trade Union Leaders like Vic Feather, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon were much more focused on the curbs to union power in the Industrial Relations Bill, rising unemployment and even EEC entry in the early 1970s. At 1971's Labour Conference Jack Jones spoke about a compact between the Labour and Trade Unions on incomes, tax reforms, greater equality, and industrial relations which Geoffrey Goodman saw as the foundations for the Social Contract.⁸³ At the time the *Mirror's* report made no reference to price restraint and Jack Jones was not quoted as referring directly to inflation in the *Mirror* until September 1972.⁸⁴ It was Harold Wilson who struck a deal on inflation with the TUC reported in the *Mirror* on 30 January 1973 which contained a new 'Housewives Charter' which agreed to subsidies to hold down the prices of essential foods like bread. This was a milestone in Labour's search for a new policy on prices and wages.⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Hansard* Volume 860: debated on Wednesday 18 July 1973 Column 537.

⁸² See also pp.10, 31, 40,49, 55-56.

⁸³ Goodman, pp. 164-5.

⁸⁴Of the 85 major stories written quoting Jack Jones in the *Mirror* from June 1970 to January 1973 the largest number concern dockers strike against containerisation, followed by opposition to the Industrial Relations Bill.

⁸⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1973, p.2, 'IT'S A DEAL'

Edward Heath Inflation and the Daily Mirror Shopping Clock 1970-74

Despite winning a Shopping Basket election Edward Heath took little notice of the Shopping Clock in its first eighteen months. Was this the obvious reaction to a feature by a left wing tabloid? Goodman argues the *Mirror's* massive readership meant the paper was never discounted and had access to ministers unavailable to other papers.⁸⁶ John Campbell highlights Heath's 'failure of communication' with the media once in power and dislike of the lobby system.⁸⁷ Heath's view of his office and his priorities, especially Europe, meant that much else was left to ministers until 1972. His inflation strategy in a *Mirror* headline was 'SIT TIGHT.' It was very much a hands-off, long-term approach with no question of an incomes policy in November 1970.⁸⁸ In the Commons prices debate when Labour's Doris Fisher and Roy Jenkins took Jim Prior to task, Heath's only contribution was a scornful putdown of Jenkins⁸⁹

By the second anniversary of his election victory, he had already reversed many of his 'sit tight' policies. In a June 1972 TV interview Jonathan Dimbleby used the Shopping Clock to remind the Prime Minister of the rate of inflation. Heath responded by disputing the technicalities of food price rises and how the cost of living was calculated.⁹⁰ He maintained the need to compare price rises with wage rises. By autumn 1972 the rate of inflation was still rising and the Shopping Clock hit £6.23p in October. In early November after talks with the CBI and the TUC failed, Heath announced a 90-day prices and wages freeze in the

⁸⁶ Goodman, p.141 and pp.147-8.

⁸⁷ Campbell, p.503 citing James Margach *The Abuse of Power* (London,1978) p.157.

⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1970, p.28, 'HEATH:MY SIT TIGHT STRATEGY'

⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 18 November 1970 p.28 'I think Mr Jenkins will have to do better than that if he is to permanently occupy the place of his leader'; John Campbell *Edward Heath* p. 502.

⁹⁰ 'What do you say to the housewife when she reads for example in the *Daily Mirror's* Shopping Clock that in the last 19 months a box of groceries which then cost £5 now costs over £6?' Jonathan Dimbleby's question to Edward *This Week* Thames Television June 1972 Heath. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Gh9Usl_5Eg (accessed 28 February 2022).

Commons. The *Mirror* devoted its first three pages to this with the supportive large headline 'WELL, WE ASKED FOR IT!' but pointed out many of the details had been in the TUC's final proposal.⁹¹ The Prime Minister's deal not only covered food inflation but rents and fuel. The three-month prices freeze was another U-turn, this time on the manifesto promise of no prices and incomes policy.⁹² His earlier economic policies had been about reducing unemployment, and some of Heath's policies prepared in opposition probably increased inflation but rising prices were now the top priority.⁹³ The price freeze for food in November 1972 did not cover variable fresh or imported foods. The price of nine of the most expensive items on the Shopping Clock were thus not covered so the price freeze was not fully reflected in the Clock's total.

The first half of 1973 saw a counter inflationary policy in place but often reports of Edward Heath in the *Mirror* showed him focused on technicalities that failed to create a persuasive narrative. He would dispute how much food prices had gone up or the price of specific foods rather than how government policies were dealing with it. He challenged Wilson's story of the impoverished pensioner by pointing out future pensions rises.⁹⁴ Complex policies about means tested benefits to cushion the poorest against rising food prices, were dismissed by the *Mirror* as a long way from his 1970 pledge to cut prices 'at a stroke' which would have benefitted all consumers.⁹⁵

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1972, p.1.

⁹² 'The need to curb inflation will come first...we utterly reject the philosophy of compulsory wage control' *Conservative Party General Election Manifesto 1970: A better tomorrow* pp.2-3.

⁹³ Tomlinson pp.189- 190 on how much the Conservative Manifesto devoted to inflation problems compared with Labour 'most of our policies were designed to put it up' Brendon Sewell ICBH Witness Seminar 4 October 1989 as cited by John Campbell p.282.

⁹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 30 June 1973, p.11.

⁹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1972, p.1.

By September 1973 Edward Heath was taking the Shopping Clock seriously. In a speech describing himself as 'an enthusiastic reader' of the *Mirror* he asked for a Wages Clock on the same page as the Shopping Clock. Unfortunately, this appeared on the very Saturday the Clock broke the £7 barrier which made the front page alongside it.⁹⁶ On page three the less visually striking wages table showed the Prime Minister was technically right, as average wages had gone up by 37.6 per cent since the Clock started, compared with a 33.7 per cent rise in food prices. Grudgingly the *Mirror* admitted it bore out Mr Heath's claim 'but only just.'⁹⁷ The *Mirror* reporters gave detailed context on how average wages were calculated to include overtime, bonuses and before stoppages. Readers' letters were not convinced by Mr Heath's table. Mr J Smith suggested the *Mirror* print a profits clock to go alongside the wages clock and B Moulden of Sudbury advocating a wages clock that excluded the highly paid who distorted the average and include the low paid on £20 or less and include pensioners.⁹⁸

The impression that Heath was out of touch with ordinary voters continued. An optimistic speech in a prosperous Hertfordshire constituency reminded voters, that according to official statistics, they were more affluent than in 1970, with higher ownership of colour TVs, washing machines and cars⁹⁹. The echo of MacMillan's 'never had it so good' speech of 1957 was there and the *Mirror* headline 'IT LOOKS SO GOOD' was contrasted with the gloomy prediction by Lord Rothschild, head of the government's economic think tank 'IT LOOKS SO BAD.'¹⁰⁰ The Conservative *Daily Mail* went further only featuring Lord Rothschild's

⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 22 September 1973, p.1 'WHAT MR HEATH SAID YESTERDAY ABOUT THE PAPER THAT MATTERS: 'I expect that many of you like myself, are enthusiastic readers of the Daily Mirror.'

⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 22 September 1973, p.3.

⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1973, p.12 and 26 November 1973, p.12.

⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 25 September 1973, p.1. See Campbell on Heath's view of this rising prosperity influenced by his time as Chief Whip for Macmillan, Campbell, p.106.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.1

comment on its front page.¹⁰¹ Geoffrey Goodman explained why 'Mr Britain' was not so well off, using government figures for 1971-72. 'The truth about the affluence...More money is being spent on food, but the extra cash is buying less food.'¹⁰²

Edward Heath's one nation Toryism re-emerged as inflation rose and he attempted to control the economy by methods he had once decried, but he could not resist the fine print explanation. In his interview with Jonathan Dimbleby or his call for a wages clock he did not get a clear message across. Heath had more direct involvement in economic policy, along with Europe, than other areas of government, but communication was a particular hurdle. '*Mirror* Language' had done much to highlight inflation in the early 1970s.¹⁰³ Despite his abilities as a linguist he was not initially fluent in the '*Mirror* Language' used to explain the economic situation. His confidence did seem to grow by the autumn of 1973 and voters' own attitudes according to Alt's research suggest they accepted some of his arguments about inflation and did not blame his government primarily.

If *Mirror* readers were in line with Alt's survey group it seems that reading the Shopping Clock had not made them blame Mr Heath's government. Certainly, the policies of the government in October 1973 seem to be very much about cushioning the population from the worst effects of inflation with the announcement of a Phase III policy.¹⁰⁴ This featured on the front page of the *Mirror* and a double page centre spread. The *Mirror* predicted 'as long as Britain does not suffer from another surge in world commodity prices next year, we

¹⁰¹ *Daily Mail*, 25 September 1973, p.1.

¹⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 26 September 1973, p.4.

¹⁰³ John Campbell, 'Edward Heath' *Contemporary Record*, Vol 2, No 2 (1988), pp. 27-28.

¹⁰⁴ This provided an automatic 40p a week cost of living increases when the RPI rose to 7per cent and another 40p for every one per cent rise above RPI as well as price controls on the price of milk and school meals.

should see a lower rate of price rises and a rise in living standards.¹⁰⁵ Both Lancaster as Political Editor and Goodman the Industrial Editor praised the policy although Goodman felt it had loopholes without full scale price control.¹⁰⁶

In the long relentless climb of the *Mirror's* first Shopping Clock from November 1970 to May 1975 its steepest climb was from September 1973 from January 1974, rising by a pound in four months. The oil crisis from mid-October 1973 had no immediate impact on inflation or food prices in Britain. Its initial impact was on motorists. However, by mid-November fuel rises were beginning to hit distribution and on 17 November the *Mirror* front page featured 'SOARING PRICES SHOCK', followed a week later by government's direct intervention in the Miners' pay talks, 'HEATH CALLS CRUNCH TALKS.'¹⁰⁷ The story linked miners' pay claims in 1972 to an increase in inflation but there was no specific mention of rising food or commodity prices but the question of 'who governs Britain?' The emphasis shifted by December, with the issuing of petrol coupons and compulsory speed limits. The mini budget on 17 December 1973, including tax cuts and credit controls, was dismissed by the *Mirror* as not good enough.¹⁰⁸ Mr Heath had been elected in a shopping basket election in 1970 but prices did not dominate the paper until the election was called. Instead January coverage focused on imminent industrial action by miners and rail workers, followed by the possible two day week and election speculation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 9 October 1973, p.2 Geoffrey Goodman. Goodman and Lancaster's verdicts both appeared under the byline EXPERT OPINION...IN THE PAPER THAT MATTERS.

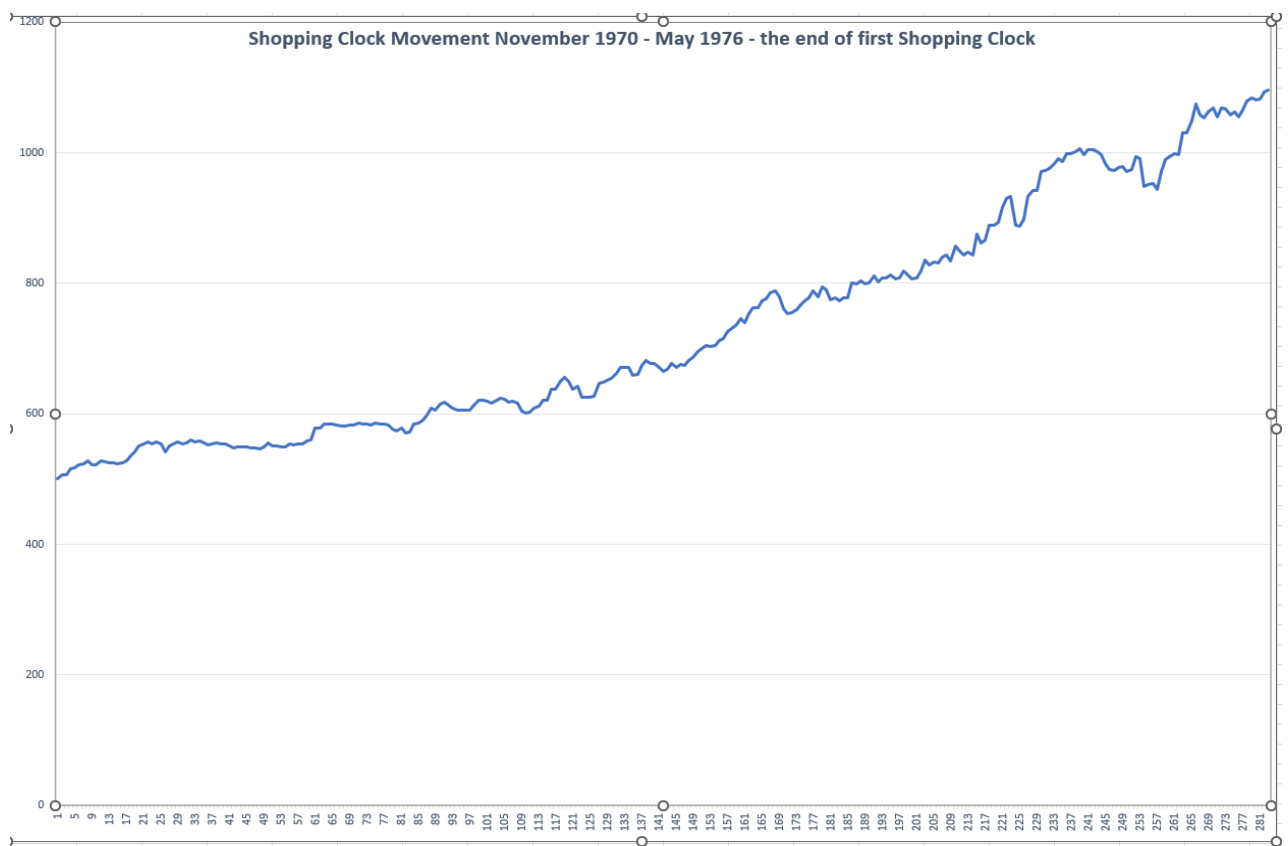
¹⁰⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 9 October 1973, p.2 Terence Lancaster, 'Heath's plan will help him through the Tory Conference.'

¹⁰⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1973, p.1., 24 November 1973, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 18 December 1973, p.2.

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 2 January 1974, p.1 'Great Coal Row', *Daily Mirror*, 3 January 1974, p.1 'SORRY BRITAIN deadlock in the coal crisis Deadlock in the rail crisis', *Daily Mirror*, 4 January 1974, p.1 'PIT PAY HOPES DASHED', *Daily Mirror*, 9 January 1974, p.1, 'WAR OVER RAIL PAY', *Daily Mirror*, 12 January 1974, p.1, 'RETURN TO TICKET MISERY' 1, *Daily Mirror*, 14 January 1974, p.1, 'IT'S NO DEAL.'

Figure 2.2 Shopping Clock 1970-76 Movement week by week



Conservative Ministers and the Shopping Clock – the blame game

While Edward Heath focused on Europe and adopted his ‘Sit tight strategy’ on prices it fell to Jim Prior as Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to make statements on food prices. Therefore, he frequently featured on the Shopping Clock pages. In 1971 he appeared in forty *Mirror* issues alone. Prior, despite his lack of ministerial experience, with a first class degree in Estate Management was well qualified to manage the agricultural part of his department. He later described it as his most fulfilling government job.¹¹⁰ He was less enthusiastic about the food ministry part of his brief. His responses on food prices were initially inaccurate,

¹¹⁰ <https://www.pem.cam.ac.uk/college/news/lord-prior-pc-1927-2016> (Accessed 9 August 2024)

defensive, and sometimes wrong-footed appearing to lack empathy for struggling shoppers.¹¹¹

Between November 1970 and June 1971, he appeared at the despatch box and in the *Mirror* announcing price rises both overall monthly rises in the Food Index and rises in prices of specific 'essentials' like Christmas turkeys and toffees.¹¹² His first appearance was a written correction in October 1970 to his claim that prices had gone down. In June 1971 *the Mirror* headlined 'PRICES; WAS TED PULLING YOUR LEG?' after Prior's claim housewives had not really expected Heath to reduce 'prices at a stroke.'

From April 1972 Prior reappeared regularly in the pages of the *Mirror* starting with a Commons clash with a Labour MP when Prior blamed rising food price rises on the railwaymen's pay rise.¹¹³ On 27 April his speech at the Food Manufacturer's annual lunch 'Nothing causes me more concern on Saturday morning than the *Mirror* Shopping Clock' appeared under the headline 'Shopping Clock gives me a headache.' Although he claimed to take the Shopping Clock seriously his motivation seemed to spring more from the desire for a quiet life rather than the needs of housewives 'if only...it would concentrate more on detergents than food...my department and officials would be left alone'¹¹⁴ This was a patronising and inaccurate dismissal of the Shopping Clock and its readers, since it did feature the price of detergent among its 33 items. It was made worse by the fact his audience were those whose profits came from rising food prices. Two days later the quote

¹¹¹ For further details on why Prior was promoted see Timothy Heppell & Michael Hill Prime Ministerial Powers of Patronage: Ministerial Appointments and Dismissals Under Edward Heath, *Contemporary British History*, Vol.29, No 4 (2015), p.471.

¹¹² *Daily Mirror*, 9 December 1970, p 3, 'Xmas Turkeys to cost more', *Daily Mirror*, 18 December 1970, p.2, 'Toffee Price Protest is banned.'

¹¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 19 April 1972, p.4, 'Unions blamed in Food Price storm.'

¹¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 27 April 1972, p.2 'Shopping Clock gives me a headache – Prior.'

resurfaced at the top of very large Shopping Clock feature under the headline 'EVERYONE'S A CLOCKWATCHER.'¹¹⁵

In May 1972 the *Mirror* reported a Commons debate under the headline 'FOOD IS DEARER – OFFICIAL' in which Prior reported ½ per cent rise in food prices in April and an overall rise of 17.2 per cent since the election. One Labour MP advised Prior to 'Read the *Daily Mirror*' when he claimed price rises were slowing down.¹¹⁶ In June when the *Mirror* produced its inflation special it included a statement from Prior expressing sympathy for housewives alongside a soaring Shopping Clock.¹¹⁷ At the end of the month, he was more sceptical accusing the press of inaccurate and sensational coverage of price rises whilst not paying as much attention when prices went down¹¹⁸. Although he did not name the *Mirror* Sally Moore pointed out that only the *Mirror* was running a shopping basket or clock as a regular item that year.¹¹⁹ Prior's speech pointed out the discrepancy between government's figures weighted for seasonal variations and special offers.¹²⁰ While he gave credit to politicians and the media for making shoppers aware of getting value for money, he attacked consumer features like the Shopping Clock as 'sensational' and 'not always very accurate.' He suggested the 'Press should put its own clocks next to the food price index clock.' The fact he used the term 'clock' rather than shopping basket made it clear he had the *Mirror* in mind. He again argued that price rises were highlighted but not falls in prices. His comments on

¹¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1972, p.3.

¹¹⁶ *Hansard*, Vol 837: debated on Tuesday 16 May 1972. This was not reported in the *Mirror*.

¹¹⁷ Refer to Chapter 1, p.60.

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 27 June 1972, p.4 'Shopping Clock Minister hits out.' Paul Mosley, "Popularity Functions" and the Role of the Media: A Pilot Study of the Popular Press' *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol 14, No 1 (1984), p. 123 selective way economic data presented by popular press.

¹¹⁹ The *Observer* 1967-74 and the *Guardian* and *Mail* ran them at various times in the 1970s but not on a weekly basis as they usually used government statistics which only came out monthly.

¹²⁰ The original Shopping Clock on 7 November 1970 had made it clear to readers that this was a reason why they had not included so many fresh foods in their 33 items.

seasonally adjusted figures were accurate but the overall trend spotting value of the Shopping Clock was ignored. It had gone up 43 times since it started compared with 27 weeks when it had fallen, and on the day of his speech it stood at £6.14½p. The other issue for shoppers was that the figures Prior and his officials quoted arrived weeks after the price rises in the shops.

In October's *Mirror* he reappeared under the headline 'Prior is Mr 20 Per Cent on food' a report of a 'savage' Commons exchange with his shadow Norman Buchan who labelled him 'the first man to make a plate of mince cost more than roast chicken.' Prior defended himself by citing official figures 'Food Price Index had risen by only 3.6 per cent between May 16 and August 22 this year'.¹²¹ The *Mirror* countered by using the Shopping Clock which 'showed a rise of more than 6 per cent over a similar period'.¹²² On the 23 October, he was called to Chequers for emergency prices talks.¹²³ On 6 November a government reshuffle and prices freeze signalled that the Prime Minister has pushed the issue up the agenda. At MAFF Jim Prior had produced good copy for the *Mirror* showing himself to be a lively politician who took the flack on food inflation while the Prime Minister rose above it despite his 'shopping basket' election. Prior was rewarded with a Cabinet position as Leader of the House.

With Prior's promotion Joseph Godber became Minister for Agriculture, Geoffrey Howe took over responsibility for Trade and Consumer Affairs, with Peggy Fenner as Parliamentary Under-Secretary taking on the role of 'housewives' watchdog.' The *Mirror* presented this reshuffle and ninety day prices and wages freeze as what the paper had asked for and put in

¹²¹ *Daily Mirror*, 18 October 1972, p.2.

¹²² *Ibid*, p.2

¹²³ *Ibid*, p.2

an extra Crisis Shopping Clock next day to see if the freeze was having an effect. How did the new team at MAFF perform in the *Mirror's* view up to the February 1974 election?

Joseph Godber as minister was never held responsible by the *Mirror's* reporters for the failure of the price freeze policy. The technicalities of his long EEC negotiations were not criticised or even commented on. His wife was featured as an example of a sensible MP's wife shopping around, growing her own vegetables and making pies to save money.¹²⁴ The *Mirror* underlined Godber's farming credentials compared to his EEC opposite numbers. Where Prior had questioned the Clock's reliability but learnt to take its political impact seriously, Godber never seemed to get to grips with food inflation. His messages varied from 'forces outside our control' to 'shop around' to suggestions that statistics showed people were better off. During his time in office the Clock went from £6.04p to £7.88p.

Godber shared Prior's background in agriculture and shadowed the Ministry in opposition. His previous range of ministerial posts made him a safe pair of hands.¹²⁵ His main concerns were the Common Agricultural Policy and the worsening Cod Wars. He featured sixty five times in the *Daily Mirror* while minister but only nine on the Shopping Clock page or in stories related to food prices.¹²⁶ He made far less impact than Prior or Geoffrey Howe.

Godber quoted statistics and details which made little impact on reporters or readers. As Heath took centre stage on food inflation and wages this may have been the technocrat he wanted.

¹²⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 22 February 1973, p.21.

¹²⁵ Joseph Godber worked for the NFU in 1930s. His government posts included Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State 1960-61 and Minister for Foreign Affairs 1961-63. He replaced John Profumo as Minister 1963-64 and was Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from 1970-72.

¹²⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 7 December 1972, p.14, *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 20 January 1973, p.9, *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1973, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1973, p.4, *Daily Mirror* 26 February 1973, p.2, *Daily Mirror* 21 March 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 13 April 1973, p.3, *Daily Mirror*, 20 September 1973, p.3. *Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1973, p.19 and *Daily Mirror*, 20 October 1973 p.1.

Like Prior, Godber had to announce rises in the Food Price Index and so was often the bearer of bad news on the Shopping Clock page.¹²⁷ In 1973 the *Mirror* was mocked him for suggesting housewives boycott beef to bring down the price.¹²⁸ More supportively in early 1973, although the Clock has risen two per cent during the prices freeze, Mary Griffiths suggested prices had steadied because of the price freeze he oversaw. He featured alongside Lord Carrington and Maurice Macmillan arguing consumers were better off countering Wilson's attack on the government's inflation record.¹²⁹ Godber's use of statistics seemed to blame consumers by emphasising the greatest increase in spending was on alcohol and television sets.¹³⁰ These already out of date statistics for 1971-2 covered the whole population, not specifically working-class *Mirror* readers. Sometimes Godber's tone as Minister was dogmatic and in line with the Toryism of 1970 rejecting the control of beef prices because 'the Government could not interfere in a free market.'¹³¹ At other times he appeared less confident and even bewildered. The *Mirror* reported a radio interview in which he predicted rises in bread prices, despite good harvests, but concluded 'one begins to wonder where all this is going to end. I don't quite understand it.'¹³² At the end 1973 when he had good news about cheaper feed prices from the EEC, he thought housewives would 'not believe it...she still blames the Common market for all her ills.'¹³³ In a debate about the MAFF food survey Godber argued it 'did not give a picture of a housewife

¹²⁷ Anthony Stodart the junior minister for Agriculture 1970-74 only answered one question concerning food prices, during the three day week on *Daily Mirror* 20 February 1974 p.1.

¹²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 8 January 1973, p.10.

¹²⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1973, p.2 'Wilson's Fury.'

¹³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 1973, pp.2-3 'spending on alcohol up ...29 per cent...40 per cent...on TVs sets and furniture...19 per cent ...on food.'

¹³¹ *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1973, p.1.

¹³² *Daily Mirror*, 9 August 1973, p.1.

¹³³ *Daily Mirror*, 17 August 1973, p.11.

struggling to make ends meet' Labour MP David Clark countered that it showed the population 'eating

less beef, lamb and pork than we were during rationing.'¹³⁴

Prices Watchdog Peggy Fenner made even less impression on the *Mirror* than her boss. She appeared only ten times in its pages while in post. She admitted the Price Commission had little power and rarely put down prices after consumer complaints and the *Mirror* characterised her Prices Watchdog as 'DIAL-A-DIDDLE HQ' swamped with calls it could not handle. She was characterised as watching prices but doing nothing about it.¹³⁵ The *Mirror* gave more attention to the issue of her alleged rivalry with another female Conservative MP, Sally Oppenheim, and whether Mrs Fenner was a 'shoparound girl.' On appointment she had claimed the title of 'shoparound girl' but seven months later to make a debating point regarding the price of bananas she described herself as someone who did not have 'time to shop around.' The *Mirror* told readers this 'comes after months of the Tories urging wives to shop around in the battle against rising prices.'¹³⁶ Like Godber her use of statistics seemed to blame the public 'spending on food increased by only 23.9 per cent, but spending on alcohol, mainly by men, went up by 37.8 per cent.' From this she inferred that men were withholding their pay rises from their wives.¹³⁷

In November 1972 Attorney General Sir Geoffrey Howe was moved to create a ministry for consumer affairs within the DTI. Heath now saw consumer rights and prices as central to the success of Phase II.¹³⁸ The *Mirror* headline writers dubbed Howe 'Sir Prices' and 'St Geoffrey

¹³⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 21 December 1973, p.11.

¹³⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 23 November 1972, p.17, *Daily Mirror*, 29 November 1972, p.5, *Daily Mirror*, 20 December 1972, p.1.

¹³⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 1973, p.7.

¹³⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 1 February 1973, p.2.

¹³⁸ Campbell, *Edward Heath: a biography* p.536.

of the High Street' and he was more visible than Godber or Fenner. In December 1972 he appeared in the *Mirror* to announce the introduction of Consumer Advice Centres. He featured in reports about price and wage rises and on the front page with advice to housewives on VAT.¹³⁹ He was as prominent a target for the *Mirror* as Prior. 'Sir Prices' was reported doing a walkabout in Birmingham in June 1973 when he was faced by 'angry housewives' including a mother of six who struggled to feed her family. The reporter did not quote Howe's response to her, only his generalised comments about world prices and the limits of government control.¹⁴⁰

By the autumn of 1973 Howe rejected calls for meat price subsidies and defended the government's decision not to announce Price Commission approvals of price rises.¹⁴¹ A November editorial when the first Consumer Advice Centre was opened by 'ST GEOFFREY OF THE HIGH STREET' dismissed CACs as 'window dressing' unlikely to protect housewives. Despite this rough treatment 'St Geoffrey' gave an interview to the *Mirror* explaining how the local authority funded centres would work.¹⁴² By December 1973 the oil crisis meant petrol prices were his main preoccupation. The early election in February may have come as something of a relief.

¹³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 8 December 1972, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, 8 January 1973, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 18 January 1973, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 23 January 1973, p.1, *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1973, p.4.

¹⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 September 1973 p.3 'WIVES HIT OUT AT 'SIR PRICES' by William Daniels.

¹⁴¹ *Daily Mirror*, 10 September 1973 p.5, *Daily Mirror*, 18 October 1973 p.2.

¹⁴² *Daily Mirror*, 3 November 1973, p.2, 'If it is only window dressing, the housewife's verdict on Sir Geoffrey will be terse: He's no angel' *Daily Mirror*, 7 November 1973, p.10 'How the shops for browned off shoppers will work', *Daily Mirror*, 15 December 1973, p.1.

The February 1974 Election

The Changing Economic language of Manifestos in the 1970s

The 1970s is identified as the decade of inflation by many commentators and politicians but judging by the language used in the manifestos of political parties their understanding of inflation was a developing picture. Political parties at the beginning of their campaigns put forward the key issues using manifestos.¹⁴³ According to David Thackeray and Richard Toye's survey of twentieth century manifestos they were increasingly used to brief candidates, party workers and journalists rather than read directly by voters.¹⁴⁴ It was not until the middle of the 1970s that the term 'inflation' overtook 'prices' in manifestos as an election issue. How does this help to understand the success of the Conservatives in 1970 and the unexpected swing to Labour in the 'Crisis' election of February 1974?

Tomlinson argued that the Labour Party's approach to inflation in the first election of 1974 was more 'muted' than the Conservatives 'while the issue was mentioned... it was only in *October 1974*, when the annual rate was approaching 20 per cent, that inflation was focused upon.' In contrast the Conservatives stressed it as a problem in 1970 'soaring prices...inflation is not only damaging the economy it is the cause of social injustice'¹⁴⁵. However, closer examination of manifestos showed how often the terms Inflation, food prices and prices were used between 1970 and 1979 by the two main parties. Neither main party stressed inflation as much as prices until October 1974 when inflation overtook prices as the main term used by both parties.

¹⁴³ This survey of manifestos is a comparison of the two largest parties.

¹⁴⁴ David Thackeray and Richard Toye, 'An Age of Promises: British Election Manifestos and Addresses 1900-97' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.31, No 1 (2020), pp.1-26.

¹⁴⁵ Jim Tomlinson *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* p.189-90.

Politicians may have agreed with Behrend's mid-1960s research that the term inflation was not widely understood but rising prices were known to be connected to it. A simple word survey of manifestos shows that the Conservatives discussed rising prices more often in 1970 and inflation was treated comparatively briefly by both parties.

In its February 1974 Election Manifesto Labour mentioned prices nineteen times compared with only two direct references to inflation. It put prices first in its list of the 'interlocking crises' facing Britain. The manifesto claims 'This election is not about the miners. They are in the firing line today. The housewife has been in the firing line ever since Mr Heath was elected.'¹⁴⁶ In the February election Labour appeared to get that message across to the *Mirror's* journalists.¹⁴⁷ Tomlinson questioned the premise of Behrend's research that there was widespread ignorance among the electorate of inflation. He suggested that respondents' lack of 'expert knowledge' did not mean they lacked all understanding. By conflating partial responses, he concluded 47.6 per cent of those surveyed had some accurate knowledge of what inflation's effects were even in the relatively low inflation of the 1960s.¹⁴⁸ By 1973 Behrend's field work research showed 70 per cent of the population had a more confident explanation of what inflation was, though not in Tomlinson's view necessarily a more accurate one.¹⁴⁹ Labour's emphasis on prices rather than inflation may well have been more appropriate at this point. It both sought to combat Labour's problem

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1974/feb/1974-feb-labour-manifesto.shtml>.

¹⁴⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974, p.2, Comment column manifesto promises of food subsidies and price controls appear under the headline 'Tell Us More Mr Wilson.'

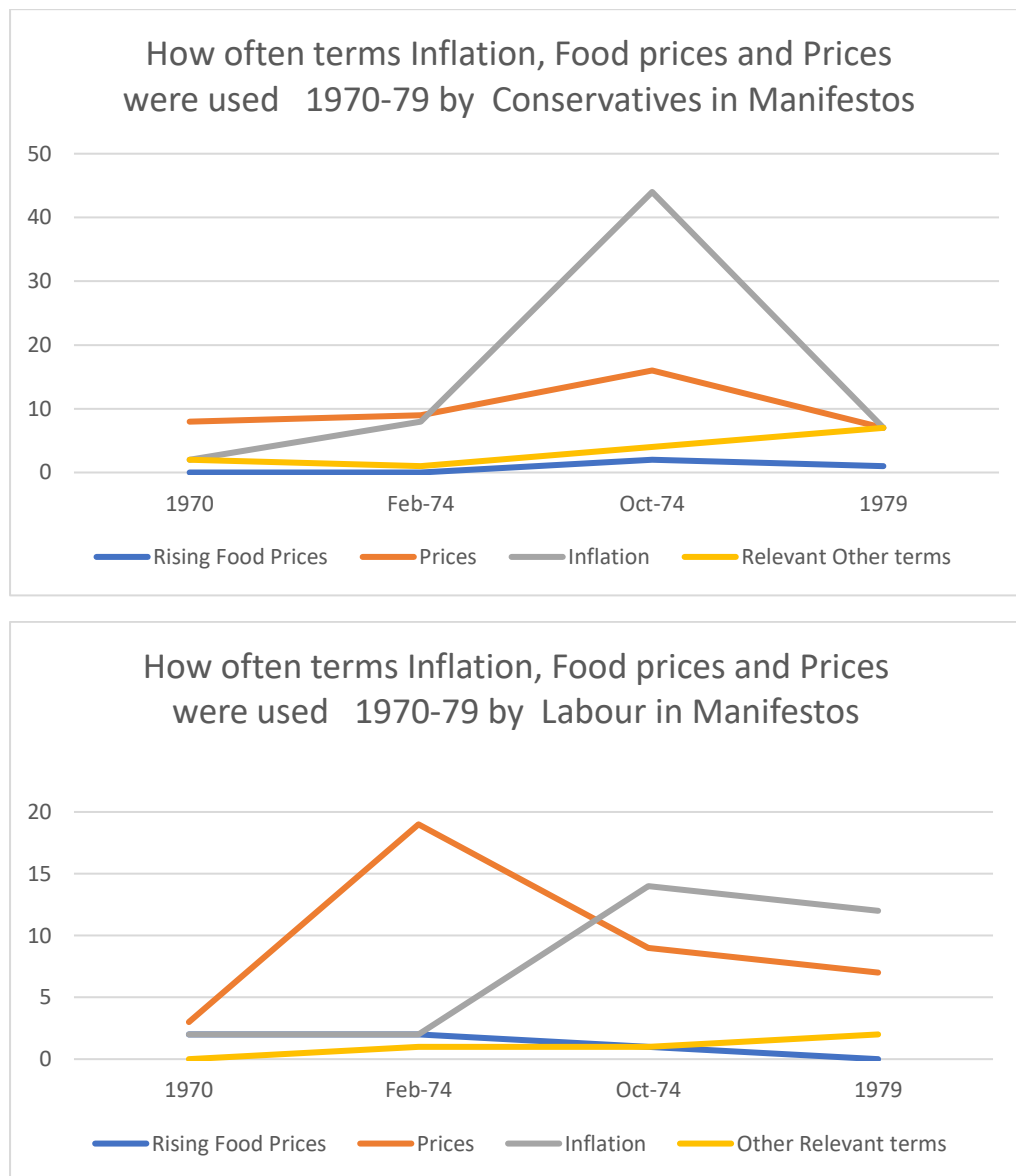
¹⁴⁸ These included 'Rising Prices' (21.9 per cent), 'Something to do the value of money' (9.6 per cent), 'Something to do with money or prices' (9 per cent) and 'Money losing value' (7.1 per cent)

¹⁴⁹ Tomlinson p.198.

with the gender gap by emphasising rising prices and explained inflation in ‘*Mirror Language*’ simplifying economics as Mrs Thatcher would successfully do in 1979.¹⁵⁰

Figure 2.3 Frequency of key economic terms used in Manifestos by Conservatives and Labour

1970-79



¹⁵⁰ A term used by Harold Wilson to Geoffrey Goodson on the setting up of CIPU Goodman *From Bevan to Blair* p.173 as cited by Tomlinson p.193; Jessica Prestidge, ‘Housewives having a go: Margaret Thatcher, Mary Whitehouse and the appeal of the Right Wing Woman in late twentieth-century Britain’ *Women’s History Review*, Vol 28, No2 (2019), p.285.

Crisis v Prices Inflation as the key issue in the February Election of 1974

The *Mirror* and the rest of the press were full of talk of 'crisis' from October 1973 until the calling of an election for February 1974; the oil crisis, fuel crisis, energy crisis, Crisis Britain and finally crisis election. Some members of the cabinet urged Edward Heath to call an election in early 1974. They expected the electorate would rally to the government in a national crisis. Although the election was held on 28 February the rumours of an election began in the middle of January. However, what had begun as a 'Crisis Election' to give the Conservatives a mandate to govern in a national crisis, became effectively another Shopping Basket election as the campaign wore on. Campbell explained the late swing to Labour as the decline of 'Tory issues' and the 'rise of Labour ones' during the campaign.¹⁵¹ This election also had the highest turnout since 1959, one that has not been exceeded since. However, both main political parties saw a decreased share of the vote from 1970; Conservatives by 8.5 per cent and Labour by 5.9 per cent. The Liberals increased their share significantly by 11.8 per cent and despite the high turnout numerically no more voters voted Labour or Conservative than in 1970.¹⁵²

There were many factors linked to the eventual result, some undoubtedly own goals. The election timing at the end of February meant the new boundary changes which favoured Labour were in place and economic statistics that would embarrass the government were released during the campaign. By contrast the situation in Ulster meant the Sunningdale Agreement was not embedded and since 1972 none of the Unionist MPs could be relied on to be automatically allied to the Conservative Party. Enoch Powell's interventions and advice

¹⁵¹ Campbell p 613.

¹⁵² Goodman p.128.

to vote Labour received much attention. Neither the 'Pay Blunder Story' on 25 February about how the miners' pay claim was calculated, or the vagueness of the 'Firm but Fair' Conservative Manifesto written by Nigel Lawson did the Conservative campaign any favours. The mild weather, the NUM decision to avoid mass picketing and the ASLEF decision to delay their action, plus the end of a 10.30pm TV curfew all reduced the impression of a chaotic crisis for the public. Many of these factors fall outside the remit of this study. No election is won or lost for a single reason but this election was called on the premise of strong government, by a government which already had a majority, to gain a stronger mandate. During the campaign the 'crises was increasingly less reported than the issue of inflation and prices leading to a last minute swing to Labour.'¹⁵³ The post-election surveys of the February 1974 campaign showed that more voters switched in the three weeks of the campaign than in any previous election.¹⁵⁴ So, the way the election was fought and reported by the media probably had a significant effect on the outcome. The campaigning of both parties and how it was reported is the focus of this analysis.

These surveys show that the Conservative government that called the election received most front page coverage from two papers, with different political loyalties, in the first week of the election and that industrial relations was the dominant issue. In the second and third week of the campaign this changed. Where the Conservatives did continue to receive attention, it was likely to have an adverse effect as in the case of the so-called 'Pay Blunder'

¹⁵³ Campbell p.613.

¹⁵⁴ Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* p.613 citing Butler and Kavanagh *General Election of February 1974* p.112

about how the miners' pay was calculated. Of course, inside each paper there was more coverage but the impact of the front page has clear importance.¹⁵⁵

Figure 2.4 Main front page stories in *Mirror* during election weeks February 1974

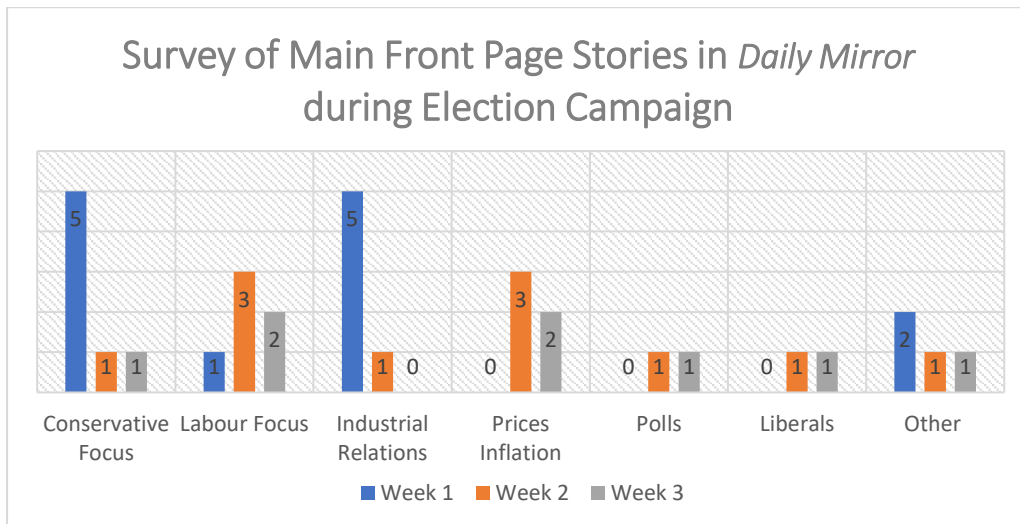
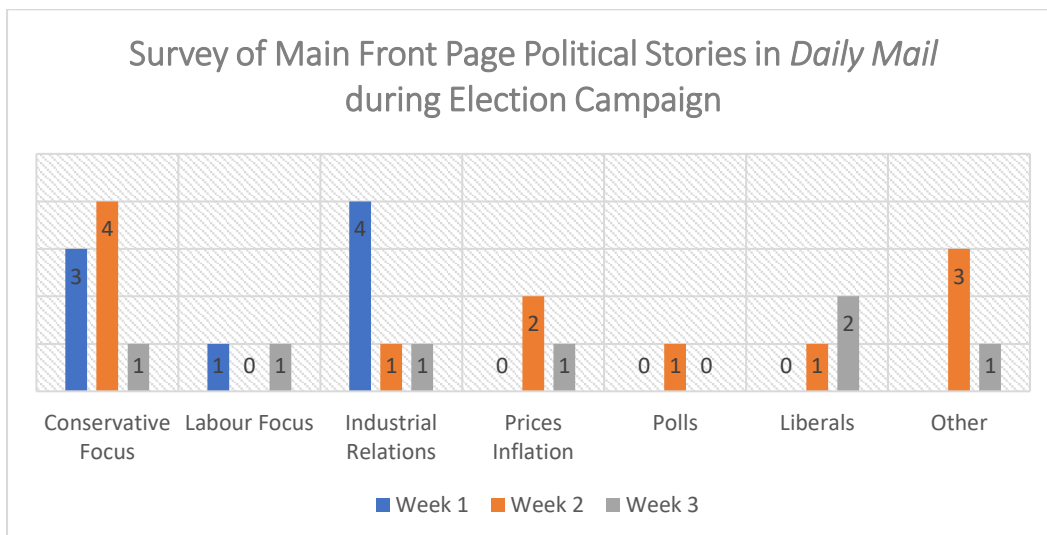


Figure 2.5 Main front page stories in *Mail* during election weeks February 1974



There were several major differences between Labour's version of a Shopping Basket Election in February 1974 and that of the Conservatives in 1970. The rate of inflation itself

¹⁵⁵ *Daily Mail*, 22 February 1974 p.1, The Great Pit Pay Blunder and *Daily Mail*, 23 February 1974 p.1 NO BLUNDER INSISTS HEATH. *Daily Mirror*, 23 February 1974 p.1 THAT PAY FARCE.

was much higher than in 1970, 20 per cent RPI in 1974 compared with 6.1 per cent in 1970.¹⁵⁶ The *Mirror's* own Shopping Clock had been running for over three years so readers of this Labour supporting paper were used to the regular citing of individual price rises. Harold Wilson and his front bench team supplied these throughout the campaign. This was reported not only by the *Mirror* but by journalists in Conservative supporting papers like the *Daily Mail*. Harold Wilson had now developed specific short-term solutions to the impact of food price rises, particularly food subsidies. Labour began the campaign with prices very much at the top of their agenda rather than as a mid- campaign tactic. There was one striking similarity to the 1970 campaign: the release of damaging government economic statistics. On 15 February an official report for January showed RPI at 20.1 per cent, the highest ever recorded and on the 26 February a £385,000,000 gap in trade figures was published. This was over ten times the gap which was thought to have damaged Labour's chances in 1970.¹⁵⁷ Labour consistently made prices a key plank of its campaign and the press began to stress this as the campaign progressed rather than the crises that had dominated January.¹⁵⁸

The January papers had been full of drama concerning the various crises, by the end of the month calls for national unity by the Prime Minister and speculation about a general election. The main difference between the *Mail* and *Mirror* coverage was their attitude to the TUC and the prominence given to Labour's policy on food subsidies. By the first week of February as the main Labour supporting paper it was to be expected that the *Mirror* would draw attention to the issues that Labour had made central to the election. What is striking

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/285203/percentage-change-of-the-retail-price-index-rpi-in-the-uk/>

¹⁵⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/globalinflation/1970to2022>

(Accessed August 2023 '£31 million' *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 1970 p.1.

¹⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974 p.3 'In a TV broadcast ...Mr. Wilson went on ...the problem for example is the fastest ever price rises in our history. Of runaway inflation....'

about this campaign was the lack of enthusiasm of other papers for the Conservative government's campaign and how much inflation became the focus after the release of the RPI figures for January on the 15 February. When the election was announced the *Express* asserted 'this election is different. It is concerned with the primacy of Parliament' but the *Times* was already doubtful 'the Government are risking their whole future on one strike: it is the future of the whole country.'¹⁵⁹

The *Mail* began the campaign with a logo showing a pithead and a ballot box and initially ran with the headline 'TED STORMS INTO BATTLE.'¹⁶⁰ A week later the *Mail's* Andrew Alexander told readers that Mr Wilson's anecdotes about peeling off price labels and predictions of a six shilling loaf by 1977, because of speculators, were 'economic illiteracy.'¹⁶¹ The Official Statistics Report with the RPI at 20 per cent changed the sceptical tone of Alexander. Next day the headline was 'Wilson bounces back in good form' for a Manchester meeting in which Wilson's attack on prices was backed up by a local MP bringing out a packet of sausages which had doubled in price under a Tory government. Alexander recalled Mr Heath doing a similar stunt in Leicester in 1970 with a basket of groceries.¹⁶² The *Mail's* front page reported 'Prices shock report pushes cost of living to election front line, WIVES BECOME PRIME TARGET.'¹⁶³ The emphasis had moved from crisis to prices. By 16 February the *Economist* could only manage the half-hearted endorsement

¹⁵⁹ *Daily Express*, 8 February 1974 and *The Times*, 8 February 1974 as cited by Campbell p.595.

¹⁶⁰ *Daily Mail*, 8 February 1974, p.1.

¹⁶¹ *Daily Mail*, 15 February 1974, p.8-9.

¹⁶² *Daily Mail*, 16 February 1974, p. 8-9.

¹⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 16 February 1974, p.1.

‘it may be difficult for many people to believe that the right solutions will be found by a second-term Conservative government with a greatly increased majority. But it is even more difficult to see how any other result would not be more disastrous.’¹⁶⁴

Mirror readers had read the same crisis stories as *Mail* readers in January. The *Mirror* had already covered in January an NEC policy document very similar to the final Labour manifesto. This included food subsidies, alongside promises of bigger pensions, rent controls and aid to home buyers among the Labour priorities, with higher taxes on the well off to pay for it.¹⁶⁵ However, the *Mirror* was not yet stressing prices over crisis, it also produced a centre page predicting soaring food bills due to industrial unrest. The Shopping Clock rose three weeks in a row during January 1974 but tumbled at the end of the month back to £7.80. During the election campaign month, the Shopping Clock fell a further 20½ p. However, Paul Mosley’s research suggests that bad news about the economy lingered with readers of the popular press for 1-2 months so that the Shopping Clock figures before Christmas when it went up by 20p in a month may have had a greater influence than more recent falls during the election campaign.¹⁶⁶

The First Half of the Campaign: 7- 14 February 1974

Although Labour’s campaign concentrated heavily on prices from the start the *Mirror*’s initial focus was wider. It questioned the need for an election. It portrayed the government as ‘union bashers’ and reminded readers of the government’s record on inflation. The front page that announced the election was a concise dismissal of Heath. It was a twelve word

¹⁶⁴ *Economist*, 16 February 1974 p. 12.

¹⁶⁵ These other policies were all listed before food subsidies *Daily Mirror*, 14 January 1974 p.2, Labour, and the Snap Election.

¹⁶⁶ Mosley, p.122.

question accompanied by a photograph of the Premier edged in funereal black. 'And now he has the nerve to ask for a vote of confidence!' and inside described him as 'THE GREAT DIVIDER.'¹⁶⁷ At the end of two columns which attacked the Prime Minister's One Nation message and listed his failures, its editorial declared inflation was the real issue, but concluded with the message that unions were an essential part of the nation. John Beavan's political analysis 'The election nobody wants' warned of the danger of an election that gave room for political extremism.¹⁶⁸ How much did these editorials and analysis influence or represent the views of readers? There was a sizeable minority of working-class Conservative voters and millions of families whose members did not belong to a union and others who might switch their vote as the campaign went on. The *Mirror's* original target readership in the 1930's had been the ununionized working class.¹⁶⁹

For the first week of the campaign the *Mirror* continued with the Crisis Election narrative. The first four pages of the Saturday 9 February appeared under the tag line 'Crisis Britain.'¹⁷⁰ Wilson's speeches from the start of the campaign focused on price inflation rather than wage inflation. The first Saturday the *Mirror* reported his television broadcast that reminded voters of 'runaway inflation' and a government 'holding down WAGES' while the public were faced with 'relentless rise in prices.'¹⁷¹ However, the paper's editorial started by blaming the miners for stubbornness. The front page's second headline 'Coal strike 'Who's to blame?' and page four 'Pits Plea for Strike Peace' all focused on the strike, and the front page story told readers 'there is no doubt the strike will be the dominant issue right through to polling

¹⁶⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1974 pp.1-2.

¹⁶⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1974 p.2, p.16-17.

¹⁶⁹ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics* (Oxford, forthcoming) p.31.

¹⁷⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974, pp.1-4.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.1.

day.¹⁷² As the campaign played out, the emphasis on inflation and prices would increase and the need to defend unions decline. On a page with a smiling Harold Wilson the Mirror declared that it was inflation that was the real issue 'Rocketing prices...Soaring Rents...Astronomical House Prices' were top of the *Mirror's* hit list.¹⁷³ However, it held back from throwing its full weight behind Labour. Butler and Kavanagh found many undecided voters in their study of the February 1974 election with only 27 per cent very attached to one party compared with 44 per cent in 1964.¹⁷⁴ In addition, there was the gender gap which had worked for the Conservatives in the previous election. Readers' letters suggested some felt sympathy for Mr Heath in first week of the campaign.¹⁷⁵

Labour was first to get their manifesto out which featured on page two under the headline 'LABOUR'S CALL TO BATTLE' on 9 February. The policies emphasised 'working together' and included ending the Industrial Relations Act, introducing food subsidies and pension reforms. Labour avoided any statements about how they would deal with the Miners' Dispute apart from saying they would negotiate.¹⁷⁶ The Conservative manifesto which came out on 11 February regarded inflation as both 'the danger from outside' and the 'danger from within' however, Campbell assessed it as 'astonishingly unspecific' and lacking in the firmness Conservative voters wanted.¹⁷⁷ The proposal, which the *Mirror* described as 'TORY BASH AT UNIONS', to withdraw welfare benefits from strikers' families had support from 75

¹⁷² *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974 p.1 and p.4.

¹⁷³ *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974 p.3.

¹⁷⁴ Butler, David and Kavanagh, Dennis, *General Election of February 1974* (London, 1974) p.112.

¹⁷⁵ Union membership figures for 1974 11,044,000 <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/can-uk-trade-unions-recover-their-post-war-power> *Daily Mirror*, 5 February p.14 Public Opinion Two letters 'The constant action for higher wages sickens me' said one reader who owned his own house and managed to support his family on £30 a week while another letter asked 'When are people going to realise that dearer goods was not the government's fault...Mr. Heath has done exceedingly well.'

¹⁷⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1974, p.2.

¹⁷⁷ Campbell, John, *Edward Heath, a biography*. (London, 1993) p.603.

per cent of the party's members polled but much of the rest of the manifesto was One Nation Toryism.¹⁷⁸ The *Mirror's* Victor Knight dismissed the manifesto as a continuation of the government's statutory prices and incomes policies. Next day the letters page printed four letters blaming the Prime Minister for rising prices, one hoped 'housewives will not be taken in again.'¹⁷⁹

On 13 February *the Mirror's* front page continued its portrayal of the election as a government exercise in 'union bashing' with an open letter from Jack Jones, defending the unions and accusing the government of 'playing politics with our industrial problems.' Inside the coverage combined the government's anti-union message and prices crisis on the same page. It featured Mr Heath chastising the ASLEF rail workers leader on behalf of his constituents. Under the headline 'THREE-BOB LOAF IS JUST A STEP AWAY' the Shopping Clock's compiler's, Penny Burton, reminded readers of Mr Heath's 1970 election forecast of a three-bob loaf under Labour and its current price of 14 ½p.¹⁸⁰ Her article, two days before the dramatic news on RPI, was more than the usual Shopping Clock price list as it attempted to explain to readers the inflationary spiral caused by the prices and incomes policy of the Government.

By the end of the first week *the Mirror's* coverage of the campaign was beginning to flag. On two days the election got only one page of coverage.¹⁸¹ 'Mr Barber's blunder' in which the Chancellor was forced to retract his inaccurate estimate of the cost of Labour's proposed policies made for a good headline, but only featured on page five. Alongside it Geoffrey

¹⁷⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 11 February 1974 p.1 and appears in the Comment column p.2.

¹⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 12 February 1974 p.11.

¹⁸⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 13 February 1974 p.5.

¹⁸¹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn's exile and Raymond Bigg the train robber appeared on the front page on Thursday 14 February and Friday 15 February 1974.

Goodman's column analysed Heath's new moderate approach to the miners' pay claim a week into the campaign, but pointed out this solution had been rejected in January when it would have prevented the need for an election. Just how many readers actually read this erudite column is hard to assess. The following day John Bevan's political analysis returned to the theme of union bashing and the number of U-turns the government had made.¹⁸²

The Second Half: 15 – 28 February 1974 Prices and Personalities

When the government statistics for January's RPI were published on 15 February it was clear Labour were ready. Their pre-recorded Political Party Broadcast that night included Denis Healey and Shirley Williams with comparative shopping baskets for 1970 and 1974 costing £5.37 and £8 respectively.¹⁸³ The following day 16 February the first of four front pages devoted to Labour and Prices appeared, followed up on 18, 19 and 25 February. The 16 February front page featured a Shopping Clock Logo transformed into an election rosette and Wilson's Manchester speech with Healey and Williams' broadcast quoted in the article¹⁸⁴. The Parliamentary editor hoped that for the morale of Labour supporters 'Mr Wilson and other front benchers will build up sufficient momentum on the prices issue to win decisively.'

On 18 February's front page Wilson argued inflation could only be controlled by an agreement with the unions, dependent on government help for families to cope with rising prices, this was Labour's solution, the 'Social Contract'. The *Mirror's* editorial was cautious about whether Wilson's solution would work but certain the solution of wage control would

¹⁸² *Daily Mirror*, 14 February 1974, p.5, Geoffrey Goodman, 'It's the Name of the Game', *Daily Mirror* 15 February 1974, p.5 John Bevan, 'Heath's turning point?'

¹⁸³This basket included a 15p loaf, 40p for dozen eggs and 3lb roast beef joint which had risen from £1.20p to £2.10p see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mghq22wRV0> (Accessed 2 December 2023).

¹⁸⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1974, p.1. See Chapter 1 p.60 and p.97 for further discussion of this front page.

not. The following day another whole front page was devoted to speeches about prices under the headline 'WIVES BETRAYED ON PRICE RISES.' The *Mirror* reported Wilson's speeches with overtones of Weimar Germany which claimed housewives would 'feel that it is cheaper for her to do the shopping in the morning than leave it until the afternoon.'¹⁸⁵ The Conservative speeches the *Mirror* quoted explained price rises were due to world prices and dismissed subsidies as wasteful because they were also given to those who did not need them. They predicted rises in heating costs and goods because of the miners' impending pay rise. However, the emphasis on food prices and appeal to women voters were the dominant element in the story.

The *Mail's* Andrew Alexander had dismissed Labour anecdotes about prices as a familiar tactic in the first week of the campaign.¹⁸⁶ The *Mirror* increasingly reported them after the government's RPI statistics were published. On 21 February Wilson's campaign trail featured a story with the headline 'THE WAGES OF FEAR' from a meeting in Preston. Wilson recalled that shopping list behind the clock from his 1970 party political broadcast. He told his audience of a housewife's letter with the punchline 'What a prophecy we have had to sell the blooming clock to pay our council house rent.'¹⁸⁷ Whatever the truth of the anecdote the Shopping Clock story resonated with his audience and the *Mirror's* reporter. Wilson also took a team approach with his shadow front benchers Shirley Williams, Denis Healey, Peter Shore, and Barbara Castle all being featured giving examples of price inflation between 15 and 23 February. Even Jim Callaghan managed a tour of a shopping precinct on 26 February.

¹⁸⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 19 February 1974 p. 1.

¹⁸⁶ *Daily Mail*, 15 February 1974, pp.8-9.

¹⁸⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 21 February 1974 p.5.

In the final four days of campaigning the *Mirror's* front pages focused even more on prices. The editorial headlined 'The high price of Tory rule' on 25 February asked 'if inflation goes on like this, if prices rise like this what is going to happen to us?'¹⁸⁸ The editorial stressed the effect on the poorest and went back to 1970. 'ALL prices, food included, is UP 37p in £ ... wages have gone up too but according to the latest figures not as much as food prices and the rise in the last year was 20p in the pound.'¹⁸⁹ Although the editorial had to share the front page with a celebrity story about George Best and the Liberal surge, it continued over the page and concluded 'the shopper's choice should be Labour.' The issue also included a centrespread with a photograph of each Shopping Clock item, their original 1970 price and their current price. At the top of the page was the previous week's shopping clock and a yearly graph of increases in the bottom corner of the page. There was also the reminder, 'The Clock last weekend up 51.9 per cent on November 1970.'¹⁹⁰ This may be linked to Alt's research on perceptions rates of about inflation rates among voters in February and October 1974.¹⁹¹

Tuesday's front page was dominated by the £380,000,000 Trade gap figure released on the Monday, under the headline 'THE BIG TORY GAP with Labour's reminder these figures were ten times bigger than those when Labour lost the election in 1970. Inside an embattled Mr Heath argued the figures only 'confirm what I have said all along...[about] the gravity of the

¹⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1974 p. 1.

¹⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1974 p.1.

¹⁹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1974 p.16-17.

¹⁹¹ Tomlinson p.199 citing Alt, Politics pp.66-7 and p.69. Refer to James Bowden, Andrzej Kwiatkowskib and Dooruj Rambaccussing 'Economy through a lens: Distortions of policy coverage in UK national newspapers' *Journal of Comparative Economics* (2019) Vol 47, pp. 881-906. This paper surveys the period 1990-2016 looking at the more negative tone and impact of tabloid coverage of the economy

situation' and dismissed the 'irrelevance of the Liberal's programme or the destructiveness of Labour's'.¹⁹²

On the eve of election day *Mirror's* front page included its editorial Comment which reminded readers of the economic issues, listing inflation and the economy above the coal strike and the three-day week. The main story featured a Labour poll that revealed a swing to Labour, enough to give it a 'small working majority' and for good measure a story of Enoch Powell 's postal vote for Labour.¹⁹³ The final inside centrespread let party leaders address the voters. Wilson's message was firmly fixed on the 'economic crisis,' the need to get the country back to work, with strict price controls and other remedies to deal with inflation. Labour's ability to work with the unions was stressed 'co-operation is the key to putting Britain back to recovery.'¹⁹⁴ Finally on the election day a very simple seven word message 'FOR ALL OUR TOMORROW'S VOTE LABOUR TODAY' is all that appears on the front page of Europe's best selling newspaper.¹⁹⁵

The *Mirror* coverage of the Conservatives in the second half of the campaign showed a party on the defensive and the personalities of the two leaders contrasted in Labour's favour. There was emphasis on Heath's personal style and communication skills with a Sunday walkabout to his 'local' The Plough near Chequers, where he stressed his firm but fair message.¹⁹⁶ This Monday story shared the page with four polls showing the Tories ahead. Pilger's account the following day supported Campbell's assessment that Heath's

¹⁹² *Daily Mirror*, 26 February 1974, pp.1 and 4.

¹⁹³ The other front page stories were a Labour poll enough to give it a 'small working majority' and Enoch Powell saying he will vote for Labour.

¹⁹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 27 February 1974 p.16-17.

¹⁹⁵ Goodman, p. 160-1 argues that this front page was reminiscent of front page of the *Mirror* on 5 July 1945 and acted as a poster for Labour committee rooms.

¹⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 February 1974, p.15.

decision to do more walkabouts got in the way of his message.¹⁹⁷ Pilger portrayed Heath as unable to relate to a crowd. 'Relentlessly seeking a pensioner who has never had it so good or please God a Tory miner.'¹⁹⁸ On Wednesday the focus was back to prices but his walkabout is headlined 'DISGUSTING!' quoting a shop assistant on the price of tomatoes at 'six shillings a pound'. Mr Heath's patronising response 'you expect to pay more for tomatoes in winter', revealed his failure to take into account that he had spoken to a shop assistant not a shopper.¹⁹⁹ A report of his Manchester speech in which he claimed that his party represented the poorest – slum dwellers, those not in a union – and accused the unions of 'wages leapfrogging' was featured alongside Wilson's anecdote about the lady who had sold her clock to pay the rent.

The paper reported Heath's Party Political Broadcast's message about firm government 'which is carrying through the incomes policy' and his previous press conference assertion that Labour would 'let wages rip'. Both Wilson and Thorpe by contrast, concentrated on prices including the 'three bob loaf' the *Mirror* had featured two days earlier. The Presidential style of the Prime Minister's use of statistics compared to Wilson's down to earth shop visit was striking, though the leader of the opposition was the professional economist by training. The *Mirror* reported Wilson's visit to Liverpool stores where he asked customers about specific prices including a chicken and a packet of bacon.²⁰⁰ This was juxtaposed with Mr Heath's morning press conference where he attributed food price rises to

¹⁹⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 19 February 1974, p.11. John Pilger's election commentary on all three leaders was particularly critical of Heath. *Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1974, p.4, 'Jehovah Harold is on his way', depicted Wilson as a consummate television and public speaking politician. *Daily Mirror*, 12 February 1974 p.4 portrayed Thorpe as a combination of Lloyd George and Harry Worth the comedian.

¹⁹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 19 February 1974, p.15 Pilger and Bevan's analysis on p.5 'Ted Knows it's not in the bag' reporting a flagging Heath and Wilson whose adrenaline was rising.

¹⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 20 February 1974, p.5.

²⁰⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1974, p.5. 'Heath the prices cheat'.

world commodity prices and asked 'What can the Labour party do about world prices? The answer is absolutely nothing.'²⁰¹

In the final seven days before the election the *Mirror's* stories focused on Conservative weaknesses, a Liberal surge and prices. 'COMING TO THE BOIL' the front page on 21 February featured Enoch Powell's advice to vote Labour to escape the EEC and Labour's protest against the Conservatives' message of 'Reds Under the Bed' in their party political broadcast by Anthony Barber.²⁰² Inside the *Mirror* had one story that could have helped the Conservative campaign. It quoted a government report on basic wages for 1973 which showed them ahead of prices despite large rises in both since 1970. The story on page two, written by an anonymous reporter, made no link to the policies of any party and had no quote from a government minister.²⁰³ By contrast two stories that week showed an embattled Mr Heath. 'Edward Heath's nightmare' by John Bevan with a photograph of Mr Heath and a picket outside Thames Television after 'he had been interviewed without make-up because of a 'powder puff' girls' strike.'²⁰⁴ Another blunder style front page story 'PAY FARCE' claimed a statistical error over the miners' pay claim had created an 'unnecessary coal strike ...unnecessary three day week...unnecessary General Election.' This undermined the claim by government of financial competence although it was rebutted 24 hours later.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.5.

²⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 21 February 1974, p.1.

²⁰³ Department of Employment report *Daily Mirror*, 21 February 1974 p.2, average wage rises at 12.9per cent compared with prices at 12per cent . Price of food had risen by 53 per cent since 1970 average earning had risen by 51.7per cent and for manual workers by 56 per cent.

²⁰⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 2 February 1974 p 5 Picket on Premier, see also *Daily Mirror*, 20 February 1974 p 2, *Daily Mirror*, 23 February 1974 p 11.

²⁰⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 23 February 1974, p.1 The Pay Board has discovered an apparent error in NCB figures overstating miners' pay by 8 per cent. The story dominated not only the *Mirror's* front page but most of the previous evening news and most other front pages see Campbell p.607-8.

By Saturday 23 February the threat from increases in Liberal support now at 21 per cent according to the polls caused a different emphasis in Mr Heath's campaigning. There were calls for a 'substantial majority' at Heath's daily press conference. The following Monday however the *Mirror* front page featured another Liberal surge in the polls to a possible 28 per cent.²⁰⁶ The Liberal surge caused many Conservative MPs to urge for the campaign to focus on 'the need for a strong Government to carry through a fair prices and incomes policy.'²⁰⁷

Monday's front page also featured damaging statistics on food prices but these were really the statistics covered on 16 February reiterated. According to the polls voters' attention was turning to prices and inflation. The editorial which gave the overall rise in prices as 37p in the £ since 1970s election was followed by even gloomier news on page two. 'Food and materials from abroad. Oil. Wheat. Meat. Fertilisers. They all cost more. On average 50p in the £'.²⁰⁸ Again, this may have contributed to exaggerated perceptions of the rate of inflation.

On Election Day Edward Heath's last opportunity to get his message across to *Mirror* readers, was as part of centre page address by all three leaders. He appeared stoic about the *Mirror's* support for Labour in the campaign but continued the theme of his Manchester speech, 'do we return to a free for all...do we let a small minority of extremists abuse their power?' The majority of his column was dominated by industrial disputes and looking after the most disadvantaged. Although he referred to inflation it was not seen as affecting

²⁰⁶ LIBERAL SHOCKER Thorpe's men will clobber Tories most says Labour.

²⁰⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 25 February 1974 p.5 Heath aims attack at the new threat John Desborough.

²⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, Monday 25 February 1974 p.1-2 While these figures were not necessarily wrong it is easy to see how Alt's research which Tomlinson cited would show voters thinking RPI was running at 50 per cent rather than 10-20per cent.

everyone.²⁰⁹ By 1 March the results show that Edward Heath's election had not produced the result he needed. The campaign showed a decline in the importance of 'Tory' issues and the rise of 'Labour' ones and a high turnout of 79 per cent.²¹⁰

The Conservatives' aim in the February election was a mandate for stronger government since they already had a clear majority. The *Mirror* were not able to ensure a Labour outright victory but they did help to make sure the Conservatives lost by getting across Labour's message on prices. James Alt found that the proportion of the electorate who found 'the economy most important doubles from 40 per cent to 80 per cent in the 1970s'²¹¹ Kavanagh and Butler concluded many voted for the lesser of two evils and the result surprised Wilson, who had expected to lose.²¹² The *Mirror's* overall treatment of the Conservative campaign may not have converted Conservative voters, but it set the agenda for Labour voters that inflation and high prices were the main problem rather than industrial disputes. Although average wages had kept up with inflation, benefits had not. The appeal of Harold Wilson to the public should not be underestimated.

Both James Thomas and Geoffrey Goodman argue that the *Mirror* under Sydney Jacobson's editorship had grown much closer to the Labour Party by 1974. ACH Smith saw the 1960s as a period when the *Mirror* was losing its identity as a left of centre newspaper. Geoffrey Goodman the *Mirror's* Industrial editor and a member of its editorial team recalled Jacobson

²⁰⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 27 February 1974, p.16 'My Final Word before you vote – Why the *Mirror* is wrong'

²¹⁰ Campbell, p.613.

²¹¹ James Alt, 'The politics of economic decline' p. 29 Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton & Pat Thane, Pat (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013).

²¹² Butler, David and Kavanagh, Dennis, *General Election of February 1974* (London, 1974) p.112. Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, (London, 2016) p.648.

putting ‘everything he had into the campaign to back Harold Wilson and the Labour Party.’²¹³

However, in the first days of the campaign the *Mirror* reflected the government’s ‘Crisis agenda’ and the real turning point was probably the 16 February Saturday front page that featured the Shopping Clock rosette when the election shifted to Labour’s prices agenda rather than the crisis agenda. The Shopping Clock was the long established feature that had set the agenda on inflation and prices for over three years and helped educate readers about inflation. This long term agenda rather than last minute items by the *Mirror*’s Editorial team during the campaign probably improved Labour’s performance more. However, the major change was the publication of official figures for January’s RPI at 20 per cent on 15 February. On the previous two days the *Mirror* had only devoted one page to the election. The crisis was no longer about industrial unrest and strong government but prices. The *Mirror* did use the Crisis Election Report logo throughout the campaign but use of it in headlines decreased, the 19 and 21 February were its last appearances. Goodman’s claims for the power of the *Mirror*’s front page and comparison with the famous 1945 *Mirror* front page are not convincing. What had looked radical and original in 1945 was less effective twenty nine years later and certainly did not yield the same results. It might have resonated with those readers old enough to have voted in 1945, but the effect may also have made both the *Mirror* and Labour look dated. However, the visual element of the Zec cartoon on that 1945 front page and the election Shopping Clock rosette on 16 February 1974 while appealing to different emotions had more in common.²¹⁴

²¹³ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers and the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005) pp.61-76, Geoffrey Goodman, p.160, ACH Smith *Paper Voices*, p.201 ‘Socialist policies as an alternative were not more than passingly considered...’.

²¹⁴ See James Whitworth, ‘Case Study: The Daily Mirror and the Role of the Visual in the 1945 General Election in Britain’ in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017* (Edinburgh, 2020).

October 1974 and May 1979 Election Campaigns who is holding the Shopping Basket?

The October 1974 election for the Conservatives was very much a re-run of their February campaign with one notable exception, Margaret Thatcher had effectively promoted the 'right to buy' housing policy for long term council tenants. Otherwise, the manifesto contained few more specific policies than in February and their full page adverts which appeared in the *Mirror* reiterated the National Crisis message. There was no return to the shopping baskets and price comparisons of 1970 for the Conservatives. They were also hampered by headline grabbing blunders by Shadow Ministers, particularly Francis Pym who miscalculated the rate of inflation.²¹⁵ Harold Wilson continued to play the Team Labour strategy. The *Mirror* ran a daily column on individual front benchers, including Shirley Williams whose achievements as Prices and Consumer Affairs Minister were highlighted.²¹⁶ A basket of groceries appeared in one of Labour's adverts highlighting the food subsidies they had already put in place. Their manifesto emphasised calmness and carrying on rather than national crisis. Food prices, schools and pensions were three of their most prominent policies. Despite all this the gender gap widened to eight per cent and they only achieved a tiny majority which kept them in power until 1979.²¹⁷

After being in power for five years and enduring record levels of inflation the 1979 election saw both leaders concentrating on inflation. A survey of *Mirror* stories from the campaign and their manifestos shows how prominent inflation had now become for both parties. In

²¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 28 September 1974, p.2 'THE BIG STORM ON FOOD PRICES' Francis Pym, Shadow Agriculture Secretary claimed that food prices were rising at 28% based on 1% rise in a single week. The claim was rejected Harold Wilson defended Denis Healey's use of statistics and the editor of the *Grocer* magazine dismissed Mr Pym's claims as 'mathematically absurd.'

²¹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1974, p.9.

²¹⁷ Gallup Polls, 1945–59; British Election Study, 1964–2019 cited by Rosie Campbell, and Rosalind Shorrocks, 'Women Voters Taking the Wheel' *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (October–December 2021) p.653.

fact, Labour talked more about inflation than the Conservatives and Jim Callaghan's priority was to keep inflation below 5 per cent.²¹⁸ It was now Labour who stressed wage inflation while Mrs Thatcher, whose campaigning style was built around photo opportunities, was happy to be photographed with two shopping bags one with 1974's groceries and a much smaller bag of groceries which could be bought for the same money in 1979.²¹⁹ Mrs Thatcher presented herself as the working mum who viewed the country's economic problems as equivalent to managing a home. 'Inflation' became 'prices and the budget became what 'every housewife knew.' The 'appalling' state of 'national housekeeping' had to be addressed, and who better than a housewife to do this?'²²⁰ Other things had also changed, the *Mirror* was no longer the most popular paper on Fleet Street having been overtaken by the *Sun* in 1978.²²¹ The *Mirror* and the Labour Party now directly addressed wider women's issues appealing to women voters beyond 'shopping basket' issues. The 1970s had seen some shift in social attitudes towards women although the *Mirror* only suspended its topless glamour page for the duration of the 1979 campaign.²²²

So, was the 1979 Election no longer a shopping basket election, after all the Shopping Clock had been scrapped by the *Mirror* as 'history' in 1978?²²³ Jim Callaghan thought his party had been successful in bringing inflation under control and must keep applying those

²¹⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1979, p 1. 'Inflation its joy for Jim.'

²¹⁹ Refer Chapter 1, p.36. The *Mirror* chose to clip Mrs Thatcher's photograph so the bags of shopping were not included in the *Mirror* photograph but the string bags were identical to those used by Sally Moore in the 1972 photographs *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, p.2-3.

²²⁰ Prestridge, p.283 'Thatcher was not the first party leader to speak of 'household economics, but as a woman she did so with novel authority.'

²²¹ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers* p.18.

²²² April 1979 The *Mirror* suspended its feature of topless models to make room for more election coverage 'GOODBYE GIRLS Until May 4.' They covered issues like 'MUM'S THE WORD ON PRICES,' 'TODAY THE POUND IN YOUR POCKET', 'Tax cuts FOR RICHER OR POORER' but each was headed with a small glamour shot and a promise the feature would be back. On 4 May when Mrs. Thatcher adorned p.1 a topless Lorraine Paul appeared on p 5.

²²³ *Daily Mirror*, 16 February 1978, p.21 'Why the Clock stopped...over the years it has been a fascinating piece of social history. But a **real** newspaper like the *Mirror* does not deal in History.' Penny Burton

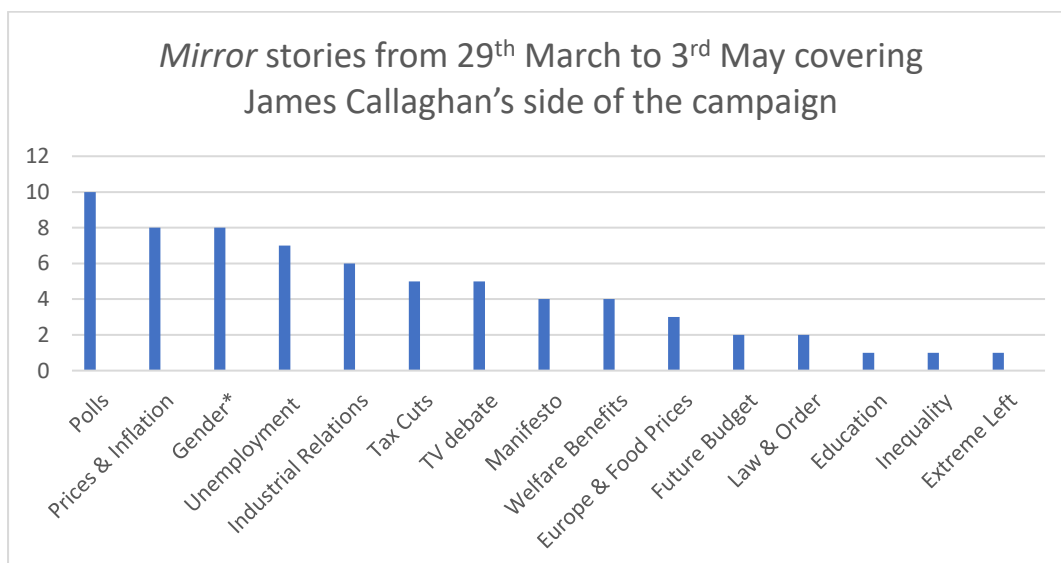
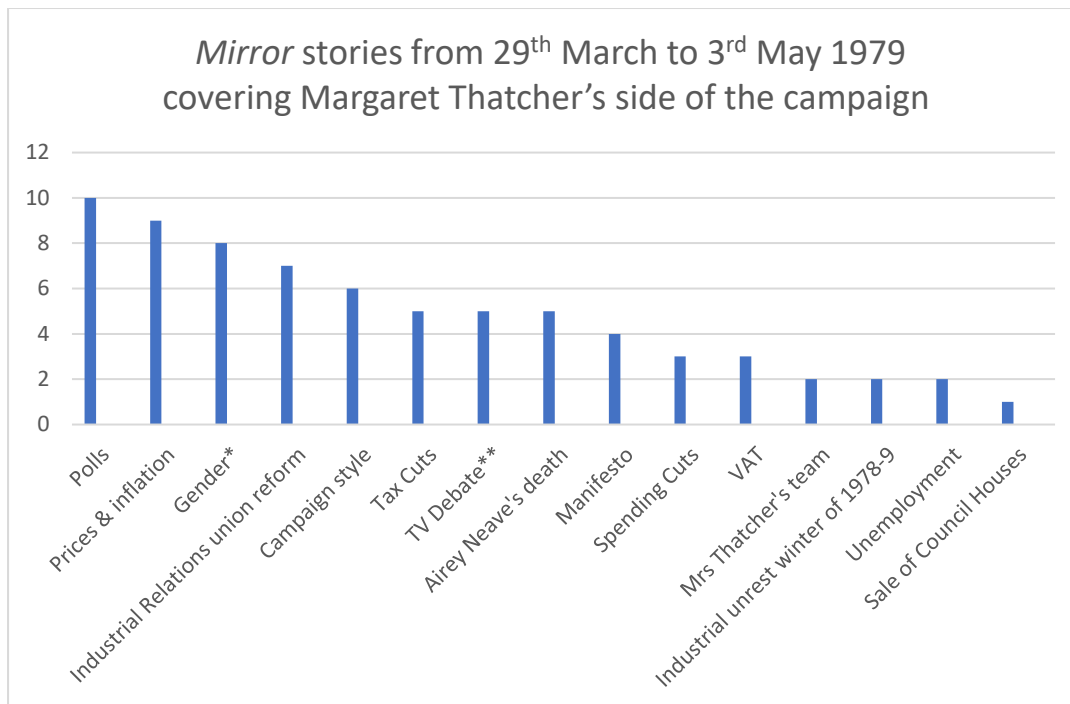
strategies to reduce it to five per cent within three years. Thatcher discussed strategies that the *Mirror* and Labour saw as a threat to their constituents. Inflation and prices still seemed high up on both parties' agendas and that of the *Mirror* in what it chose to report on. Both Alt and Mosley argue that economic issues remained central throughout the decade.²²⁴ The rate of inflation was still higher than when the Shopping Clock began and it returned to high levels in 1981. Did inflation matter as significantly to women readers of the *Mirror* as it had in 1974 and 1970? The stressing of other women's issues suggested a change. Inflation was not over by 1979 but fast rising prices were part of everyday life for consumers. In 1974 many voters were not sure government was responsible for the increase in inflation. By 1979 they were probably even less sure government could manage inflation.²²⁵ It may however, be that the *Mirror* and Labour had not got it wrong either about reducing inflation or concentrating on wider issues that directly affected women. These were relevant to *Mirror* readers, but the loss of some younger *Mirror* readers over the decade to its rivals suggested the paper itself was not as relevant as the Shopping Clock had once been to its female readership. What is clear is the 1979 election result showed a narrowing of gender gap compared with October 1974. It now stood at only three per cent a small enough variation in Rosie Campbell's analysis to be produced by 'random error.'²²⁶ The wide gaps of Shopping Basket elections were never to return in the twentieth century.

²²⁴ James Alt, 'The politics of economic decline' p. 29 Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton & Pat Thane, Pat (eds), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013). Mosely, p.127.

²²⁵ Refer here to Tomlinson p 198 which included Table 8.2 from Alt *The Politics of Economic Decline since 1964* (Cambridge,2009) p.162.

²²⁶ See Gallup Poll cited by Rosie Campbell and Rosalind Shorrocks, p.653.

Figure 2.6 *Mirror* stories covering Thatcher and Callaghan's sides of campaign 1979



*Gender** issues were usually articles focused on Margaret Thatcher's own gender.

*TV Debate*** were a week of stories about whether Thatcher and Callaghan would appear in a TV debate – they did not.

How was the work of Shirley Williams and Roy Hattersley Prices and Consumer Affairs Ministers 1974-1979 reported by the Daily Mirror

Harold Wilson's first Cabinet in 1974 contained a Prices and Consumer Affairs Minister showing his continuing support for Shopping Clock issues by appointing a rising star, Shirley Williams.²²⁷ Jim Prior dubbed her the 'Mary Poppins' of the Labour Government. The 'most attractive of new Ministers ... with the least attractive job...[without] the money to do anything really effective.'²²⁸ She later described her time as Minister as an impossible job 'in Canute's chair trying to hold back the tide of inflation' while being held personally responsible for inflation by the Opposition. Healey's biographer dismissed her job as 'an illusion wrapped in public office.'²²⁹ Her successor, Roy Hattersley was dubbed Mr Fixit by the *Mirror* in October 1976.²³⁰ He appeared to be more in touch with the growing reality of women working outside the home, welcoming letters from housewives 'buying the weekly groceries on the way home from work who do not have the time to shop around.'²³¹ This fits very well with Anna Pollert's research in Bristol of factory wives who went shopping in their lunch hour to buy food or thought about how to fit shopping in on their way to the bus.²³² During Williams' time as minister, inflation reached a peace time high of 25 per cent RPI and in Hattersley's time it returned to 21 per cent in March 1977. Both ministers saw it rise and

²²⁷ Shirley Williams had been come joint first in the NEC poll of Shadow Ministers in 1972 and was Shadow Home Secretary 1971-73. She already served as Shadow Prices and Consumer Affairs Minister since November 1973.

²²⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 15 March 1974, p 4. *Hansard* 14 March 1974 Vol. 870, Column 502 Her retaliation, was less widely reported. 'He will recall that he was the Marie Antoinette of the last one. He will further recall that the fate of Mary Poppins was rather less serious than the fate of Marie Antoinette.'

²²⁹ Shirley Williams *Climbing the Bookshelves* (2009) pp.217-218 and 225. Edward Pearce, *Denis Healey A life in our times* p.423.

²³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 29 October 1976, p.7.

²³¹ *Daily Mirror*, 9 October 1976, p.7.

²³² Anna Pollert *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London, 1981) p.112 'Lunch ...some stayed in the canteen, but many went over to Bedminster to do some shopping.' Study of Churchman's Tobacco Factory in 1972. p. 132 'some daydreaming ...about home...whether they could catch the usual bus and fit in the shopping.'

in Hattersley's case rise and fall and rise again. It never went away as a political problem.²³³

Were their appearances in the *Mirror* likely to affect how *Mirror* readers saw inflation being tackled by government?

The three main aspects of Williams' role as minister were to cushion the effects of food inflation by using subsidies, to educate consumers and to control prices as part of the negotiations with union leaders to maintain the Social Contract to keep wage demands down. Food subsidies were the most prominent part of her role in the first half of her ministry but when RPI reached 25 per cent there was a turning point in government policy. Her department's role as consumer educators, included clearer labelling and comparative price information using Consumer Advice Centres. This was intended to help shoppers manage their spending by making them informed consumers since Williams regarded 'Ignorance as the Achilles heel of consumers'²³⁴ This was in many ways a continuation of the individualist shop around message of the early 1970s much criticised by some on the left, including Harold Wilson. After subsidies were wound down her ministry devised a red triangle voluntary price check system on a range of basic food stuffs. As part of a 'triumvirate' with Chancellor Denis Healey and Employment Secretary, Michael Foot she negotiated with union leaders and employers on price controls as part of the strategy to keep down wage claims to combat inflation.

The *Mirror* sometimes focused, like her Parliamentary opponents, on her gender, writing specifically about her appearance, her divorce, and other aspects of her personal life in

²³³ Retail Price Index for May, *Hansard* Volume 894: debated on Tuesday 1 July 1975 *Daily Mirror*, 14 June 1975, p.1 'NOW THE BAD NEWS 25 per cent INFLATION.'

²³⁴ Her handpicked civil servants later mocked her respect for the National Consumer Council's importance according to Roy Hattersley *Who Goes Home* (London, 1995) p.167, Shirley Williams *Climbing the Bookshelves* p.219.

1974-5.²³⁵ Much of their early coverage was very positive as in a report of her inclusion in *Time's* list of top 150 top women world-wide and the regular references to of her as a possible future leader.²³⁶ The paper later reported her significant contributions to the referendum campaign which made up half the stories about her between March and June 1975.²³⁷ Shirley Williams appeared frequently in the pages of the *Mirror* between 6 March 1974 and the run up to the October General Election. Her Conservative opposite numbers Francis Pym and Paul Channon received little coverage. The *Mirror* stories referred to her as a 'Price Supremo.' In March 1974 she featured almost daily, sometimes twice. By July she was mentioned only five times, unlike her Cabinet colleagues whose presence was more frequent and consistent.²³⁸

Initially the *Mirror* reported her negotiations with the bread companies to keep the cost of a loaf below 15p and government subsidies on sugar, cheese, and butter.²³⁹ By April and May 1974, the emphasis shifted to the practical problems of implementing subsidies including which cheeses to subsidise; was Stilton one of the everyday cheeses or a luxury cheese?²⁴⁰ Similarly, the butter subsidy that meant margarine cost more than butter and small loaves, which had not been included in the initial negotiations. In April the *Mirror* reported the likely £700 million cost of subsidies. The *Mirror's* tone was positive. In April the Shopping Clock page reported that the government was considering its own shopping basket scheme

²³⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 4 May 1974, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, 27 June 1974, p 11, *Daily Mirror*, 2 October 1974, p.1 and *Daily Mirror*, 12 December 1974 p 11

²³⁶*Daily Mirror*, 8 July 1974, p 5, 'Shirley the world beater' headline over Time magazine list of top 150 future leaders.

²³⁷ *Daily Mirror* 1 March 1975, 11 March 1975, 11 April 1975, 23 April 1975, 26 April 1975, 29 April 1975, 21 May 1975, 28 May 1975, 29 May 1975, and 6 June 1975.

²³⁸ Tony Benn was referred to 29 times in July, James Callaghan, and Denis Healey 49 and 38 times respectively.

²³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 11 March 1974, p.6.

²⁴⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1974, p.7 John Desborough, *Daily Mirror*, 4 May 1974, p.7 and *Daily Mirror*, 14 May p.9.

covering 50 items.²⁴¹ A list of sixteen items with voluntary retailers made the front page in June, including not just basic foods but ‘essentials like soap and toothpaste.’²⁴² More subsidies were announced in July and August, a front-page story ‘Shirley’s cup that cheers’ reported a subsidy costing £15 Million a year for tea, although the *Mirror* pointed out customers were faced with a shortage of sugar.²⁴³

From the start of her time as ‘Prices Supremo’ Williams worked on the other aspects of her ministry. She promised clear food labelling and a stronger body to cut the profits of food companies. This was intended to control prices to enable union leaders to persuade their members to go for voluntary moderate wage claims. As part of consumer protection, the *Mirror* reported her proposals for reviving lost Conservative legislation on credit.²⁴⁴ In May the individualist ‘shop around’ approach resurfaced. Some policies from Geoffrey Howe’s time continued. The publication of comparative prices between retailers was a new development and in June she outlined a scheme to recruit housewives to become ‘price spies’ to put ‘real muscle behind consumer protection.’²⁴⁵ This was followed by her voluntary scheme involving chains of small grocery shops, ‘to regulate by law the price of food and other items vital to low-income families.’ The agreement in the end was ‘to concentrate the

²⁴¹ *Daily Mirror*, 19 April 1974, p.3, Shopping Clock.

²⁴² The sixteen items were Bread; a low-price hard cheese; butter; powdered baby milk: white self-raising and plain flour; low-priced packet of biscuits; apples, bananas, and oranges; main-crop potatoes or a basic vegetable.: One cut of beef; one cut of lamb or one weight range of chicken or chicken portions, plus essential-items: electric bulbs; matches; toilet soap toothpaste and denture powder

²⁴³ *Daily Mirror*, 1 August 1974, p.1.

²⁴⁴ Including fixed interest rates, the banning of unsolicited credit cards and tighter Hire Purchase regulation. *Daily Mirror* 13 March 1974 p 5 ON THE SHOPPING FRONT Opening of Parliament Speech by Mary Griffiths and Robert Head. On Working Class and Hire Purchase refer to Selina Todd, ‘Affluence, Class, and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class,’ *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22 No 4 (2008) pp. 501-518.

²⁴⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 10 June 1974, p.5.

10 per cent profit cut on a list of sixteen essential items.’ which would be on offer in the shops continuously although not always the same particular brands.²⁴⁶

Shirley Williams described her sixteen items as ‘a range of nutritious if unexciting foods [subsidised] by the Treasury.’²⁴⁷ This list and the *Mirror’s* Shopping Clock of 1970 shared only six items in common. Her Prices and Consumer Protection Department were working with a more up to date view of consumer behaviour in 1974. The inclusion of baby milk, biscuits, and denture powder back up the claim they were aiming the subsidies at young families and pensioners to protect them from the worst effects of inflation. In a Thames Television’s Good Afternoon interview, she explained they had put no subsidy on coffee as OAPs were more likely to drink tea.²⁴⁸ The *Mirror’s* journalists and readers viewed her first eight months in the job as active and well-focused while her Conservative Shadows made little impression.²⁴⁹ In October 1974 the annual rate of inflation was running at 16.1 per cent and the Shopping Clock had risen from £7.74 ½p to £8.35p during her time as Minister. Despite James Prior’s ‘Mary Poppin’s’ tag the main opposition objection to Shirley Williams’ prices policy was that some would benefit who were not in need and ‘this is an inefficient way of helping the poor’ according to Channon. However, since inflation was seen as affecting all but the very rich this was probably not the worst criticism, he could have made for *Mirror* readers.²⁵⁰ On the eve of the October election, the suggestion that Channon with his vast personal wealth as a member of the Guinness family take over as a prices minister

²⁴⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 13 June 1974, p 1.

²⁴⁷ Williams, p.223

²⁴⁸ Good Afternoon Thames Television interview with Joan Shenton and Tony Bastable summer of 1974 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1lxRqbEx-o> (Accessed 23 February 2024)

²⁴⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 24 September 1974, p.17 and 8 October 1974, p.17.

²⁵⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 10 May 1974, p.11.

was put forward to *Mirror* readers as one of the many reasons to trust the experienced Labour Team.²⁵¹

Not enough sugar? From November 1974 to September 1976 Shirley Williams Minister for Prices and Consumer Affairs

During the most dramatic period of inflation and rising prices Shirley Williams moved from the priority of price subsidies, to the consumer affairs aspect of her ministry and wider political issues outside her own ministry. When the *Mirror* front page headlined with 'The bad news 25 per cent inflation' on 14 June 1975 the Labour Cabinet had begun as dramatic a U-turn as those of Ted Heath but Shirley Williams took more time than Denis Healey to accept this. The attitude of the *Mirror* was also changing. The turning point in June 1975 affected subsidies which were already being taken for granted by journalists and were no longer news. Before Christmas there had been short fillers on pegging bread and butter prices but a bread strike had much more coverage in the *Mirror*.²⁵² Early in the new year of 1975 another £1,000 million in food subsidies had been introduced which saved 85p a week on a typical family shop, but the *Mirror* reporter pointed out this might be worth less in real terms if inflation continued to rise. The opposition's criticisms of this were also reported in uncharacteristic detail for the *Mirror*.²⁵³ Her appointment of 'Mrs Wise Buy,' Louise Davies

²⁵¹ *Daily Mirror*, 17 October 1974, p.17 'Anybody who votes Tory must take the responsibility for seeing Paul Channon succeed Shirley Williams as Prices Secretary. Channon became an MP at the age of twenty-three.'

²⁵² *Daily Mirror*, 23 October 1974, p. 9, 'Shopping Clock page', 'Bread Prices could go up' and *Daily Mirror*, 2 December 1974 p. 1 'Britain on the breadline' There were 43 mentions of the bread strike in first week of December.

²⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, 23 January 1975, p.4 'Tory prices spokesman Timothy Raison last night demanded a 'gradual but steady rundown of food subsidies ... As we have always argued, they are not the best way of bringing help to those in need. 'They are liable to distort the market and create artificial shortages and they conceal, rather than deal with, inflation.'

on a part-time salary of £1,500 was treated with scepticism when the nutritionist gave advice on buying sprouts in wet weather.²⁵⁴

Throughout March and April 1975 there was no mention of subsidies in the *Mirror*. The third increase in twelve months in bread prices was reported in May. Shirley Williams prominence as part of the Yes campaign for the EEC referendum caused her to appear in five articles between April and May.²⁵⁵ Only one of these appearances related to her ministerial brief, when she and Tony Benn got into what the *Mirror* described as a 'shouting match' on the effect of EEC membership on food prices. Harold Wilson was quoted as doubting 'if there is tuppence ha'penny difference in it either way.'²⁵⁶

When the Shopping Clock broke the £10 barrier in May 1975 the Clock's regular compiler Penny Burton took a much more critical view of Shirley Williams and the effectiveness of food price subsidies. In an article headed 'Half Rations' she argued that food subsidies 'did not stop the Clock reaching £8 last May... in the last twelve months they have rocketed another 25 per cent.'²⁵⁷ While she acknowledged that shoppers benefitted by 34 ½ p a week in subsidies she pointed out that clock prices had risen by 100 per cent over the past four and half years but wages had only risen by 87 per cent. This seemed to miss the point that food subsidies have never been a policy to stop inflation but as Williams had said in her Thames TV interview to take the edge off it and cushion people from its worst effects.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1975, p.2.

²⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1975, p. 4, *Daily Mirror*, 26 April 1975, p.6, *Daily Mirror*, 21 May 1975, p. 2, *Daily Mirror*, 28 May 1975, p.17, *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1975, p.4.

²⁵⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 29 May 1975, p.4.

²⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 15 May 1975, p.5.

²⁵⁸ Shirley Williams interview with Joan Shenton and Tony Bastable summer of 1974 Good Afternoon Thames Television interview (accessed 23rd May 2022). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1lxRqbEx-o>

At this half-way point in her time as Minister subsidy stories were now about phasing them out by July 1976 and articles were increasingly about the voluntary price code. Like the *Mirror's* own Shopping Clock compilers, her emphasis switched to consumer issues including labelling of food and lists of prices being displayed to help consumers. One was the issue of displaying prices in pubs which the *Mirror* had reported on several times.²⁵⁹ As Prices Minister she questioned the prices charged by nationalised industries and recommended more power for consumer councils. Other articles featured Shirley Williams reacting rather than being proactive. Labour MPs John Evans, Gwilym Roberts, Douglas Hoyle and Maureen Colquhoun's questions on various consumer issues were reported by the Shopping Clock. She also received reports from consumer organisations, government bodies and unions.²⁶⁰

Where she did appear as a consumer's champion were in the investigations of breaches of the Monopolies laws, as in the case of fabric manufacturers Courtaulds, the ownership of many petrol stations by large oil companies and safeguarding the rights of customers of the state run Post Office.²⁶¹ Many of the issues raised by fellow MPs and unions were relatively small fry. By contrast the monopolies investigations into Courtaulds, the oil companies and the Post Office were likely to have far greater impact. In the case of Courtaulds, Britain was still a major textiles producer. Car ownership was growing in the 1970s with 75 per cent of journeys made in private vehicles. The management of the state-owned Post Office proposed closing branches on Saturday afternoons and limiting Sunday and rural deliveries. The public relied on Post Offices for far more than stamps and next day postal deliveries had

²⁵⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 8 October 1975 p. 14 and *Daily Mirror*, 29 July 1977 p.13.

²⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 11 June 1975, p.6, *Daily Mirror*, 28 July 1975, p 13, *Daily Mirror*, 2 December 1975, p.13, *Daily Mirror*, 9 December 1975, p.3, *Daily Mirror*, 13 March 1976, p.9, *Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1976, p.5 and *Daily Mirror*, 28 April 1976, p.1 John Evans price and gravity of beers. Roberts raised three issues; funeral costs, ticket touts at the FA Cup final and potatoes prices. Hoyle fiddles in pubs with soft drinks and Maureen Colquhoun about overcharging for refreshments at Woburn Abbey.

²⁶¹ *Daily Mirror*, 30 July 1975, p.5, 'Cut in stake of Courtaulds' and *Daily Mirror*, 22 October 1975, p.23.

been promised with the introduction of first class stamps in 1968 so these were all issues where she took firm action.

As subsidies were being phased out, in July 1975 the TGWU annual conference appealed to Harold Wilson directly for an attack on prices in a 'crusade for the housewife'.²⁶² They wanted price lists and price inspection, accusing shopkeepers of overcharging. These demands were a trade-off for curbing pay claims. They proposed £1M being spent on a campaign for better price controls in shops. They also wanted 'Mrs. Williams to draw up a basic shopping list 'of thirty key goods which every shop would have to display complete with prices.'²⁶³ Two days later she appeared as part of the 'triumvirate' with Denis Healey and Michael Foot at a TUC economic committee to discuss possible tight price controls 'to prevent employers from paying excessive pay rises'²⁶⁴ As a defender of the Social Contract she argued for a £6 limit on pay rises. Between August 1975 and June 1976, she developed a series of red triangle foods on which prices must be displayed in the shop. This featured on the front page of *the Mirror* in February 1976 under the headline 'SAVE WITH SHIRLEY' which agreed to restrict rises on 49 items and services to five per cent.²⁶⁵ This was meant to guarantee consumers low prices and in exchange help trade union leaders control their members' wage demands. The lists of foods and comparisons of prices were displayed in the Consumer Advice Centres which had now grown in number. These would carry out a local price survey and most would be funded by local authorities with £1.4M worth of central government support. The *Mirror's* report suggested the CAC lists would be 'useless and confusing.' When Denis Healey made massive spending cuts in July 1976 CACs were on

²⁶² *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1975, p.2.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, p.2.

²⁶⁴ 'I was a junior member of the triumvirate charged with implementing the social contract' Williams, p.217, *Daily Mirror*, 3 July 1975, p.2.

²⁶⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 12 February 1976, p.1.

the list for closure but already by February 1976 it was clear the price code scheme was running out of steam. The Shopping Clock page reported how the CBI team walked out of the final meeting with Shirley Williams before the code was published and their president's declaration that the code was 'unworkable.'²⁶⁶ Shirley Williams found CBI leaders arrogant and later accused them of a charm offensive that today might be called sexual harassment.²⁶⁷ The more straightforward union leaders' threatened non-cooperation. Like many of her Labour colleagues she was concerned about undue union influence as the price of the Social Contract.²⁶⁸ Her main aim to cushion the poorest consumers from some of the impact of food inflation did succeed in the short-term. This was supported by the union leaders selling voluntary wage restraint to their members but this were not going to cure inflation or work long-term, as shop stewards were becoming disillusioned with the national leaders.

Shirley Williams moved on from Prices and Consumer Affairs in September 1976 and despite her initial popularity with *Mirror* readers she was no longer seen as a Minister who could work miracles, though the *Mirror* still thought her in line for a leadership bid 'when the time comes.'²⁶⁹ Her time as minister was a play with three acts. In the first months especially between the two elections of 1974 the *Mirror* portrayed 'Our Shirl' as an effective minister who delivered on the promises of food subsidies to cover essential foods, viewed as one of Harold Wilson's best cabinet ministers both by him and the *Mirror*. During the second act

²⁶⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1976, p. 6. 'Prices code runs HOPES of a smooth run-up to the new prices code took a knock yesterday' The Director General of the CBI at this time was Sir John Campbell Adamson but it is the President of the CBI Lord Watkinson who was quoted saying the code was 'unworkable'

²⁶⁷ Williams, p.220, 'On more than one occasion, the chief executive of a major company tried to embrace me in a lift; others invited me out to dinner...tactics reserved for women ministers.'

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 220.

²⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 11 September 1976, p.1.

from mid-1975 she was portrayed as distracted by the referendum campaign. As RPI hit 25 per cent and the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock burst through the £10 barrier she campaigned on Europe and threatened to resign alongside Roy Jenkins if there was a No vote.²⁷⁰ Her subsidies and the use of CACs to educate shoppers were victims of spending cuts despite her efforts. She believed in the role of government in educating consumers and protecting their rights and was comfortable working with the National Consumer Council but was less effective working with the Trade Unions and the CBI.²⁷¹ In act three of her time as minister after the referendum result, she put enormous effort into a voluntary price code to protect the price of basic foods. Increasingly she appeared in the pages of the *Mirror* as undermined by union leaders who went over her head, appealing directly to Wilson. Meanwhile the CBI rejected her price code as 'unworkable' in a February Shopping Clock article. Throughout her time as Minister her gender was an obstacle even in her early popular months and at least one reader wondered if she should be concentrating more on her ministerial brief.²⁷² When she was moved, following the death of Richard Crossman, it was a sideways move to another department associated with female politicians, Education.²⁷³

Roy Hattersley Prices Supremo 1976-79: Mr Fix-it Steps in

During Roy Hattersley's tenure inflation fell significantly and he claimed inflation was 'licked' in February 1978 when RPI fell below 10 per cent for the first time since 1973. Harold

²⁷⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1975, p.5.

²⁷¹ According to Hattersley civil servants thought she overestimated the NCC's importance compared with TUC and CBI. Hattersley, p.168-9.

²⁷² *Daily Mirror*, 6 December 1974, p. 3 'love Dilemma of Shirley Williams' *Daily Mirror*, 11 December 1974, p. 8 Public Opinion, 'I am not very interested in the, religious dilemma facing Prices Minister Shirley Williams over her romance with Professor Anthony King. But I am concerned that, in these trying times, she's left her ministerial duties to do a lecture tour of North America.'

²⁷³ Since Ellen Wilkinson was appointed in the 1920s nine female politicians have held this post Margret Thatcher, Shirley Williams, Estelle Morris, Ruth Kelly, Nicky Morris, Justine Greening, Gillian Keegan and currently, Bridget Phillipson. (August 2024).

Wilson had done much to associate Labour with caring about the housewives' struggles with food price inflation from 1970-74, including the creation of a separate Prices and Consumer Protection Ministry. Shirley Williams's strategy to 'take the edge off inflation' for the those hit hardest by rises in basic food prices differed significantly from the main emphasis of Roy Hattersley's. However, while one used subsidy, both used price controls. Williams with a voluntary code and Hattersley with price freezes. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher would hit the campaign trail with a shopping bag claiming her party cared about rising prices and by implication the housewife's vote. Why with both price freezes and reduced inflation under Labour was Mrs Thatcher able to do this?

Despite Roy Hattersley's recognition that many 1970s housewives did not have time to shop around, he was also associated with unsuccessful negotiations about the price of bread and a campaign against high beer prices irrelevant to most women. His stronger Price Commission and lower rates of inflation in early 1978 were presented by him as evidence that inflation was under control. However, many of the *Mirror's* own journalists, including Geoffrey Goodman and Terence Lancaster, while sympathetic to Labour policies warned Hattersley of the dangers of another 'shopping basket explosion.' In their view this would result in Labour losing the next election 'where it lost before, 'at the supermarket check-out.' Even the moderate Penny Burton wrote a whole page headed 'WHY WHAT GOES UP DOESN'T COME DOWN.'²⁷⁴

Paul Mosley argues that despite politicians like Hattersley's association with the falling rate of inflation Mrs Thatcher was still able to campaign effectively with a shopping basket in

²⁷⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 17 September 1977, p.1, Terence Lancaster, *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1978, p.14 Geoffrey Goodman, *Daily Mirror*, 5 August 1977, p.22, Penny Burton.

1979 because information on inflation in the *Mirror* was presented 'asymmetrically when at its worst.'²⁷⁵ As a result readers retained this negative view of the economy for longer. The *Mirror's* Shopping clock features as a prime example in Mosley's analysis compared with the official figures given by Hattersley as the rate of inflation slowed. The inaccuracies and over simplifications of the Shopping Clock may have damaged Labour's economic record in 1979. Mosley argued that the reporting of inflation and politicians' explanations would only be accepted by readers if it fitted with their own experience, or they were undecided. So, if the former regular readers of the Shopping Clock were looking at the prices of foods compared with those in very recent memory, they may not accept the Prices Minister's explanation that inflation was 'licked.'²⁷⁶ Nevertheless CIPU surveys showed that many had a 'don't panic' attitude to inflation in the mid-1970s and did not regard it as a major crisis. Tomlinson concludes that to an extent attitudes had changed by the late 1970s, in part because of Labour's own representation of inflation as a great danger.²⁷⁷ While Hattersley was reporting on the declining rate of inflation each month, female shoppers and low paid public sector workers still experienced high prices alongside year on year pay restraint. In fact, the speed they were going was slower had little meaning for those on low pay whose incomes were not rising in line with inflation.²⁷⁸

Roy Hattersley received almost identical coverage from the *Mirror* in his role as Minister as Williams but he was covered more consistently. A breakdown of the main Hattersley stories between October 1976 and the end of the Shopping Clock in early 1978, show more

²⁷⁵ Paul Mosley 'Popularity Functions and the Role of the Media: A Pilot Study of the Popular Press' *British Journal of Political Science* (1984) Vol. 14, No 1 Jan pp. 117-129

²⁷⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1978, p.1.

²⁷⁷ Refer to Tomlinson conclusion p 205.

²⁷⁸ Since the relaunch of the Shopping Clock in 1976 the price of the 44 items had risen from £15 to £20.05 by January 1978.

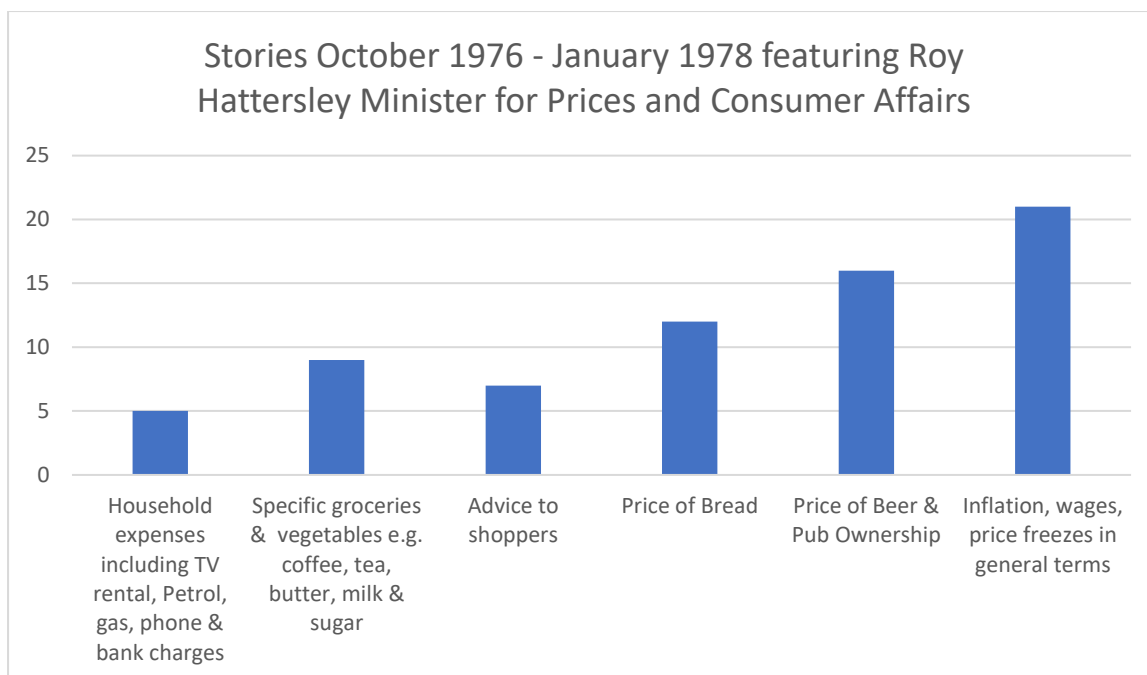
emphasis on generalised inflation issues, wages, and price freezes and much less on specific food prices, except for bread. This Price Supremo seemed more active on issues that would appeal to male voters and readers but were also in line with the *Mirror's* own focus and agenda.²⁷⁹ In 1977 *The Mirror* contained hundreds of references to beer. This included speculation on rises in duty on beer in the budget, advertising of beer prices in supermarkets, homebrewing kits and statistics on how much Britons were spending on alcohol weekly. The paper also covered the activities of CAMRA and the big breweries.

The *Mirror's* coverage of Hattersley's interventions in the bread prices dispute were less than positive and he came across as inept and slow to act. His involvement in the unsuccessful Cod Wars negotiations in 1975-76 made him an easy target.²⁸⁰ Both the *Mirror's* Robert Head and Sir Jack Cohen of Tesco's could not resist references to loaves and fishes in short supply. The *Mirror's* Comment labelled it an 'almighty cock up' and the union leader Sam Maddox described Hattersley as 'not having a clue about the industry's problems.' The dispute between bread delivery drivers, whose pay was linked to the price of the bread they

Figure 2.7 Different types of stories featuring Roy Hattersley while Minister for Prices and Consumer Affairs

²⁷⁹ Refer to Chapter 1, p.105 'Is British Beer as Good as it used to be?' Square Deal article feature by Richard Sear in 1972 brought the issue to the *Mirror's* millions of readers but at this stage the Campaign for Real Ale had only 5,000 members.

²⁸⁰ Roy Hattersley, *Who Goes Home* (1995) pp.141-46, As a junior minister at the Foreign Office Roy Hattersley represented Britain in the protracted 'Cod Wars' 1975-76 which resulted in victory for Iceland.



delivered, and supermarket chains anxious to sell cheaper bread lasted a year. In Hattersley's view he spent that year in 'fraught negotiations to repeal minimum bread price legislation' attempting to lower the price of bread to 17p in supermarkets but by November 1977 the price had risen to 27p for a standard loaf, higher than the rate of inflation.²⁸¹ Three months into the dispute *The Guardian* quoted the National Consumer Council's criticism that the parties involved had not been brought together and another two weeks passed before 'Minister bows to pressure for talks on bread.'²⁸² All the *Mirror's* stories on the dispute appeared prominently on page two. The issue of how bread delivery drivers' wages were linked to the price of a loaf was explained to both the *Mirror* and *Guardian* readers but not in Hattersley's memoirs.²⁸³

Both Williams and Hattersley ventured into the world of the pub. It was the strength of beer and displaying of pub prices which was raised in William's time as Minister. Hattersley

²⁸¹ Hattersley p.169. The price of bread was now almost double the 'three bob loaf' that Labour had predicted in the 1974 February election.

²⁸² *The Guardian*, 13 January 1977, p.8, *The Guardian*, 26 January 1977, p.5.

²⁸³ Drivers' wages were linked to the price of the bread they delivered to lower price to supermarkets would have lowered their wages.

introduced a measure on glasses to ensure customers received a pint as well as proposals for labelling the alcohol content of beer.²⁸⁴ During Hattersley's time criticisms of large breweries were featured more. The *Mirror* refers to the minister and beer sixteen times in a year, mostly connected to the price of a pint. What is disingenuous about Hattersley's criticisms of previous rising beer prices were that in part this was due to changes in duty made by the Chancellor between 1974 and 1976 which added 5p to the price of a pint.²⁸⁵ The Chancellor did not raise the duty on beer during Hattersley's beer campaign.

The items in the paper have a particular jokey, 'blokey' tone with references to 'pint tipping MPs,' customers being 'taken for mugs' and one staged set of photographs of the Prices Minister downing a pint and lots of eye catching headlines²⁸⁶. Hattersley stated beer prices were being complained about more than any other price rise. The result was a price freeze on beer until August 1977 when the new Prices Bill became law and in the short term a price probe into possible overcharging. This probe concluded big breweries were not overcharging and made less profits than their smaller competitors. Some were sceptical about the motives behind these interventions. The *Mirror's* City Editor, Robert Head noted the damage done to the share prices of big breweries and described the campaign as 'vote catching.' Beer itself was not one of the Shopping Clock's 44 items nor one of Shirley Williams essential foods subsidised against inflation in 1974.²⁸⁷ The Prices Minister's campaign may not have been the cynical vote catching Head observed. The price of beer was included in calculating the RPI, and freezing this would have reduced RPI considerably.

²⁸⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1975, p.3, *Daily Mirror*, 5 August 1975, p 13 and *Daily Mirror*, 9 October 1975, p 9.

²⁸⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 27 March 1974, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 16 April 1975, pp.16-17, *Daily Mirror*, 7 April 1976, pp16-17 and *Daily Mirror*, 16 December 1976 pp.16-17.

²⁸⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 26 July 1977, p. 2, 'Cheers Peg on the Beer', *Daily Mirror*, 4 August 1977, p.1 'POWER TO YOUR ELBOW', *Daily Mirror*, 3 January 1978, p. 2, 'No cheer for beer', *Daily Mirror*, 14 July 1977, p.2 'DRINK UP!' *Daily Mirror*, 19 January 1978, p.5 'TIME, PLEASE ON BEER RISES.'

²⁸⁷ Although it had featured on the male shopping list December 1970–October 1972 when a pint was 15p.

At the start of the campaign some readers questioned the government's priorities in the Public Opinion letters page, asking why the government was not doing something about the 'ludicrous price of a pound of potatoes' and worried about the price of beer when families were 'unable to afford shoes and clothes for their children' and were struggling how 'to make ends meet.'²⁸⁸ To many female shoppers who did not visit pubs very often, if at all, it must have felt an irrelevant and even excluding campaign.

The different attitudes to bread prices and beer prices demonstrate why Hattersley's time as Prices Supremo did not leave a positive impression on some who shopped for families. The dispute over an essential food was left to drift. Powerful supermarkets' attempts to undercut the prices of smaller shops and depress the wages of delivery men did not seem to be understood by the minister. This contrasts with Shirley Williams' quick realisation that she had not subsidised the smaller loaves eaten by pensioners. The two 'price wars' overlapped but it did not seem that price of a loaf had the same priority as the price of a pint.

Shirley Williams' aim in her first year as Minister had been to cushion the least well off from the effects of inflation by introducing subsidies. This did no harm to producers and retailers and even perhaps encouraged consumption. Price freezing however, which she attempted to introduce voluntarily and Hattersley legislated for in 1977 would touch the profits of companies by preventing them from raising prices, even if their costs increased. The winter of 1976-77 did not bring encouraging news for shoppers. In November the head of Sainsbury's warning of a 20 per cent rise in food prices in the New Year was reported in the

²⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1977, p.9 Public Opinion 'I'm ready to drink a 26p pint', *Daily Mirror* 14 February 1977, p. 22 Public Opinion and *Daily Mirror*, 9 March 1977, p.4 Public Opinion 'WHY FROTH OVER BEER?'

Mirror.²⁸⁹ The final food subsidies disappeared in December 1976 in the aftermath of the IMF loan and cuts featured in a centre spread in the *Mirror* under the headline 'Food Bills set to rise' with the claim 'the changes in butter and cheese subsidies will add less than 0.1 per cent to the Retail Price Index' and shoppers would not feel them until the early spring.²⁹⁰

The first price freeze on TV rental charges was introduced in October 1976 because of a report commissioned by Shirley Williams but the bill to give the Price Commission greater powers did not become law until the end of August 1977. Apart from the bread and beer prices, Hattersley's department only looked specifically at four foods and non-alcoholic drink prices in 1977: fresh and tinned vegetables, coffee, bacon, and sugar. The Price Commission's investigation into sugar and coffee focused on cartels and price fixing.

Hattersley later stated his Prices Act 'did not hold down prices...It was really an instrument...best used to prevent monopolists from exploiting a market they controlled.'²⁹¹

Where he was more active was in lowering petrol prices, and getting the GPO, Gas Corporations and Electricity Generating Board to give refunds to their customers. These were easier to achieve since they were nationalised industries. In Hattersley's view nationalised industries should not make profits at a time of hardship for customers but some unions felt those profits should be used to give fairer wage rises, or to modernise the industries. Food shoppers may not have seen as much direct evidence of his effectiveness compared with Shirley Williams' first year as Minister. However, he had helped family budgets and Harold Wilson's original shopping list behind the clock speech had included basic services not just food shopping. Gas and electricity prices benefitted the budgets of all

²⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 11 November 1976, p.11.

²⁹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 16 December 1976, p 17.

²⁹¹ Hattersley, p.184.

families like Williams' food subsidies but petrol prices were likely to be felt by the better off who more often owned a car and by male drivers, who outnumbered female drivers, although many of them would be driving a family car.²⁹²

Initially in October 1976 Roy Hattersley was presented by the *Mirror* as a 'Mr Fixit', welcoming consumers to share their problems with his department but how far did this work? There were only five reports about this Minister and consumer issues not connected to beer or bread or the appointment of a Consumer Champion. One was a belated article about dangerous Christmas lights published on 28 December 1977 asking for action from Mr Hattersley by Christmas 1978. Three articles were reacting to MPs' queries rather than original ideas, regarding petrol prices and selling underweight vegetables. The final one was a £12,000 grant for the Open University to run a £10 correspondence course for shoppers to learn how to save money on cars and homes and other items. This seemed less practical than Shirley Williams sponsorship of CACs and more of a gesture than a policy.²⁹³

Early in 1977 the controversial Consumer Advice Centres opened by Geoffrey Howe and expanded by Shirley Williams were closed. In some areas these had been sparsely provided and unpopular with the local authorities who had to fund them. Some had been government funded but now these were all going to be replaced by a single 'Consumer Champion.' In February 1977 the *Mirror* even suggested this champion could be chosen from their readers but it took another five months to appoint housewife, Mollie Bray.²⁹⁴ The *Mirror's* report on her progress in October 1977 was not encouraging. While she claimed to

²⁹² In 1975-6 69 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women had a driving licence and 48 per cent of the population had a licence overall <https://www.statista.com/statistics/314886/percentage-of-adults-holding-driving-licences-england> (accessed October 2023).

²⁹³ *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1978, p.9 'BE A SWOT ON HOW TO SHOP.'

²⁹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 24 October 1977 p.6, according to the *Mirror* 'over 2,000 *Mirror* readers applied'.

oppose every price rise in theory, she was also convinced by companies' warnings 'that workers will be sacked if prices are not allowed to rise.'²⁹⁵ This champion of course would not be able to provide the price lists for the shop around approach that CACs and Williams had encouraged. The low footfall at some CACs had made them a Tory target in 1976's local elections and the current Minister did nothing to save them.²⁹⁶ Roy Hattersley was certainly no consumers' champion apart from the issue of beer.

Overall Hattersley's price freezes made little impact on *Mirror* journalists or readers and on the price of a weekly shop. Between September 1976 and August 1977 when his prices bill became law the Shopping Clock had risen from £15.70p to £19.27p and by Christmas 1977 it has burst through the £20 barrier. His creation of a consumer champion, Mollie Bray seemed a very half-hearted effort with even less impact than Peggy Fenner in the Conservative Government of the early 1970s.

Like Shirley Williams, Hattersley participated in regular joint meetings, alongside other economic ministers with the TUC leaders and the CBI. Hattersley's memoirs present a different perspective on these exchanges from his predecessor.²⁹⁷ To him the CBI were 'obstructive and tedious' since they did not believe in statutory price controls and the TUC were 'passionate but genial.' In 1979 Geoffrey Goodman described Hattersley as someone

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.6

²⁹⁶ Bristol had only one CAC in the centre of the city. Greater Manchester had 12 including two that were funded by Central Government. Labour Councils spent an average of £93 per thousand residents whereas non-Labour Councils spent an average of £22. *Guardian*, 29 April 29 1977, p.4.

²⁹⁷Hattersley p.181 While Shirley Williams had worked with CBI Director General Sir John Campbell Adamson who had supported Heath's price controls Hattersley dealt with Sir John Methven. *Daily Mirror*, 5 February 1980, p.11 Geoffrey Goodman.

who got on better with union leaders than his cabinet colleagues.²⁹⁸ He was not subjected to the charm offensive or harassment by the CBI leaders that Williams endured. The CBI had sabotaged Williams' attempt at voluntary price controls but Hattersley managed to get the TUC and CBI to accept his Prices Bill in the Spring of 1977 before it was presented to Parliament where Labour battled to get it through Parliament with 18 votes in a single all night sitting. The success of this bill was not that it kept prices down, but its use as a bargaining chip with union leaders to secure a third year of pay restraint. The *Mirror* featured stories on this from February to April 1977.²⁹⁹ However, in April when Jack Jones tried to sell this deal to his own union the *Mirror* reported he was 'snubbed' by 18 votes to 12. Jones's demand for a price freeze was only half accepted by Roy Hattersley who responded that this could not be guaranteed but 'had given the Price Commission new power to freeze some prices for up to a year.'³⁰⁰ In July the *Mirror* reported Hattersley's speech in Oxford 'that the Government was ready to discuss 'possibilities' for slowing down price rises. But he said that this must depend on a pay agreement...with...the unions.'³⁰¹ Hattersley was again using price control as a bargaining chip with the unions together with a promise that all would be well when North Sea Oil transformed Britain's prospects. His speech to the Food Manufacturing Conference appealed to the common sense of union

²⁹⁸ Hattersley p. 181, *Daily Mirror*, 21 March 1979, p.23, Geoffrey Goodman 'Hell to Pay for Hattersley.'

²⁹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 22 February 1977, p.2, *Daily Mirror*, 23 February 1977, p. 2, *Daily Mirror*, 10 March 1977, p. 2 and *Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1977, p.2.

³⁰⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 19 April 1977, p.1.

³⁰¹ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1977, p. 11.

members and the undoubted responsibility of those who lead them, 'which would result in a higher standard of living and avoid a formal Phase Three pay policy' was also reported in the *Mirror* in detail.³⁰² Up to early 1978 Hattersley had been more successful than Williams in working with the unions and handling the CBI. Working with the unions on pay restraint in exchange for prices control had been effective but how long could this strategy hold out?

'Inflation – we have licked it' 1977-79?

As with Prior and Williams, Roy Hattersley reported the rate of RPI to the Commons. This often meant being the sitting target for the opposition, as in March 1977 when RPI had risen to 21 per cent but he was forever the optimist telling MPs 'Inflation would begin to ease once the effects of the Governments economic package worked through.'³⁰³ In his first year as Minister his priority was getting a Prices Bill passed but he increasingly took on the role of Labour's economic cheerleader. He issued the confident Commons prediction in June 1977 'Inflation will be down to single figures by this time next year...' before an all-night session to get the Prices Bill through passed. The *Mirror's* 'us and them' tone reminded their readers that his Conservative shadow Sally Oppenheim, who determinedly opposed the bill, was the daughter of rich Sheffield cutler 'born with a whole canteen of silver spoons available for her pretty mouth' and thus lacked any creditability as a critic of price control.³⁰⁴

Many of the Hattersley headlines reflected upbeat messages 'Brakes to go on inflation says Roy,' but some of Hattersley's confident predictions were treated with scepticism by *Mirror*

³⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 14 July 1977, p.2.

³⁰³ *Daily Mirror*, 15 March 1977, p.2.

³⁰⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 24 June 1977, p.11 'Sally's Slip is showing' by Terence Lancaster. Roy Hattersley gives the credit for Sally Oppenheimer's skilful opposition to her deputy Cecil Parkinson and records Parkinson's disparaging remarks about his colleague, Hattersley p.182.

journalists.³⁰⁵ A column headed 'Promises don't cut prices' appeared with the warning that pay deals based on promises of keeping prices low had not been met, 'promises of good times next year won't fill shopping baskets this year.'³⁰⁶ From September 1977 to May 1978, Hattersley was able to be the bearer of good news beginning with a front page about the slowdown in Britain's soaring cost of living with a 1.1 per cent drop in the rate of price increases. At the end of the month, he started to predict single figure inflation. However, these predictions were qualified with the proviso that unions would have to go for 'sensible settlements.' Between October 1977 and January 1978 Hattersley's monthly statements on prices showed a regular drop from 14 per cent to 10 per cent and finally to 9.9 per cent.³⁰⁷ The *Mirror* reported his prediction 'Single figure inflation will certainly be achieved within the next few months.'³⁰⁸ However, on the same page reporter Terry Pattinson questioned his optimism. Pattinson reminded readers, whose wages had not kept pace with prices, of impending beer, milk, rail fare and tobacco price rises and, 'Thirteen minutes hard slog will buy a pint of bitter again, a minute more than in 1976.' This was two weeks after the last ever Shopping Clock appeared. The *Mirror* also showed an outline of three Minis with 1959, 1975 and 1978 prices. Strikingly the price had taken sixteen years to double between 1959 and 1975 but doubled again between 1975 and 1978. The *Mirror* was no longer the optimistic echo of the Labour government but they were also focusing not on food prices but the price of a car when at least half their readership probably could not drive.

³⁰⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1977, p.2.

³⁰⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1977, p.10.

³⁰⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 15 October 1977, p.2 'Jubilant Prices Minister Roy Hattersley said yesterday: We are well on the way to reducing inflation to 13 per cent' and *Daily Mirror*, 19 November 1977, p. 2 'commenting on the inflation figures which showed a drop of 1.5 per cent to 14.1 for October.' Mr Hattersley said '*we are making faster progress toward our goal than we anticipated when our plans were made.*' In December the rate is down to 13 per cent.

³⁰⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 21 January 1978, p.2 12 per cent SINGLE FIGURES IN SIGHT Terry Pattinson, Industrial Reporter.

The most positive Hattersley story on the economy so far appeared on 8 February 1978 with a front page showing Hattersley, not the Chancellor, under the banner headline '10 per cent We've licked it!' reporting on his announcement in the Commons the previous day and predicting an imminent drop to single figures inflation.³⁰⁹ Ten days later when '9.9 per cent' featured in the *Mirror*, single figures for the first time since October 1973. The message from Hattersley was this 'spectacular' achievement was due to 'real people' and their sacrifice over pay restraint. The message from the Prices Secretary continued to be relentlessly optimistic in March 1978 'LIVING standards are going up . . . and they'll stay up.'³¹⁰ 5.9 per cent was predicted as possible 'if the August-January price rise rate continued throughout 1978'. By the end of May inflation had fallen to 7.9 per cent and Hattersley predicted it would remain there for 1978. Some, like NUPE leader Alan Fisher, questioned his predictions as 'kite flying before the election.'³¹¹ These figures of course were monthly rates of inflation showing inflation slowing down but not prices coming down or even remaining the same.

Throughout the early summer of 1978 Roy Hattersley kept up his positive message, with the *Mirror* reporting inflation as 'tumbling' to 7.9 per cent and in June Hattersley criticised 'gloom merchants' who predicted a return to double figure inflation. These positive reports were seen as helpful to Labour particularly if they went for an autumn 1978 election but Geoffrey Goodman warned that external factors might guarantee greater stability but future pay policy put this in danger. Later Goodman returned to the issue of pay and defended Hattersley who he suggested was being criticised unfairly as 'this year's ogre now that Jack

³⁰⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1978, p.1.

³¹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 7 March 1978, p.2.

³¹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 12 June 1978, p.2

Jones is retired and Tony Benn is covered in oil.' According to Goodman, Hattersley had to try to convince people that the 'Shopping Basket price explosion is at last under control.'³¹² Although the Shopping Clock had been scrapped the *Mirror's* journalists were still using the Shopping Basket as the measure of inflation. Goodman wrote of Hattersley's strategy of price control being ridiculed but saw the real problem as Callaghan 'personal crusade' on inflation. Goodman was optimistic for Labour's chances, provided the government set a figure of seven to eight per cent for public sector pay deals and updated the Social Contract.³¹³ Hattersley later wrote this was the initial figure many Cabinet members wanted after four successive years of pay deals. In the end Callaghan's government presented a five per cent pay deal which Denis Healey acknowledged as a mistake.³¹⁴

Another example of Hattersley's wider role in 1978 was as one the junior trio, who initially heard the arguments Ford boss Sir Terence Beckett put forward for the 17 per cent pay deal agreed with their workers, which the government accepted.³¹⁵ This appeared to contradict everything Hattersley had claimed in the first half of 1978. In the *Mirror's* view part of the motive of the Prime Minister was to safeguard Ford's plans for a new car plant in South Wales where he was an MP.³¹⁶ As inflation rose and industrial relations overtook inflation as the main news story Roy Hattersley made fewer appearances in the *Mirror*, featuring in only three small stories between 17 December and 8 February 1979 on its new briefing page. The Prices Minister seemed to have lost his optimistic voice.

³¹² *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1978, p.14 by Geoffrey Goodman.

³¹³ *Ibid*, p.14.

³¹⁴ Hattersley p.197, Denis Healey, *The Time of my life* (London,1989) pp 462-463.

³¹⁵ Hattersley, Albert Booth, and Eric Varley deputized for senior cabinet members away on their summer break

³¹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 18 September 1978, pp. 1-2 'Mr. Callaghan himself is taking charge of moves behind the scenes. Sanctions would hit Ford's plans to open a new engine plant at Bridgend, South Wales.'

By spring of 1979 Roy Hattersley was still trying to sing a positive song when February's inflation figures was published and pointed to inflation heading for double figures again.³¹⁷

In the last few months of the government's time in office Hattersley was given the responsibility for co-ordinating policy on public sector pay 'i.e. holding down wages.'³¹⁸

Goodman sympathised with Hattersley put in charge of a policy 'shot months ago' because he got on better with union leaders than his cabinet colleagues. Just a week later the government lost a vote of confidence and announced an election.³¹⁹

Roy Hattersley's positive messages as Prices Minister about the rates of inflation falling can be seen as good news and good communication but short-termist. His proviso that there must be sensible settlements were not followed by his own prime minister. Callaghan's decision to go for settlements no higher than 5 per cent was one union leaders could not get their members to agree to. Callaghan's crusade to bring down inflation with severe wage restraint for a fourth year and a delayed election were two serious political misjudgements that Hattersley could not be blamed for. Hattersley's over optimistic predictions about inflation and unfulfilled promises to union leaders were a sad end to his time as Prices Minister.

The last Prices and Consumer Affairs Minister

According to Tomlinson Harold Wilson had framed Labour's approach to the economy and inflation in the language of fairness for voters stressing the way inflation hit housewives and pensioners hardest.³²⁰ Wilson had also responded to the perceived neglect of the housewife

³¹⁷ *Daily Mirror* 17, March 1979 p.2 'But prices supreme Roy Hattersley said he did not expect the prices index to go much beyond ten per cent.'

³¹⁸ Hattersley, p.195.

³¹⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 21 March 1979, p.23; *Daily Mirror*, 28 March 1979, p.1.

³²⁰ Tomlinson, p 194.

vote in the 1970 by a determination to close the gender gap. His speech about the shopping list behind the living room clock and the *Mirror's* response with its own Shopping Clock in the autumn of 1970 were recognitions of the importance of inflation to female voters. A further recognition was the creation of a Minister for Prices and Consumer Affairs.

Shirley Williams's application of food subsidies to cushion the worst effects of price rises on essential foods was very much a reflection of the importance of the problem caused by inflation but not a solution to it. The second consumerist strand of her role supported growing rights for consumers in 1970s but also the individualist 'shop around' approach that had been advocated as a partial solution for housewives dealing with inflation by informed shopping in the early seventies. This approach was one many in her own party including Harold Wilson questioned before they came to power as impractical for time poor working class housewives.³²¹

Roy Hattersley took a different approach to consumers; he neglected consumer issues that affected mostly women but acknowledged the impracticality of individualist solutions like shopping around for those who did their shopping on the way home from paid work, or in their lunch hour.³²² Although it coincided with one of the most effective consumer campaigns of the 1970s, by CAMRA, Hattersley's emphasis was not on the quality of beer and the need for breweries to continue to supply real ale, but on trying to freeze its price or at least maintain the same price for longer periods. Seen by some as vote catching it

³²¹ *Hansard* Wednesday 18 July 1973, Volume 860: 1973 '... 'easy advice. What about working wives? What about wives with young children? What about wives in area such as villages or underserved estates with only one shop?'

³²² Anna Pollert *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London, 1981) p.112 'Lunch ...some stayed in the canteen, but many went over to Bedminster to do some shopping.' – Pollert of study of Churchman's Tobacco Factory in 1972. p. 132 'some day dreaming ...about home...whether they could catch the usual bus and fit in the shopping.'

certainly contributed to lowering RPI by freezing beer prices for three month intervals. The third role of bargaining with the unions and employers to control prices and wages was one that both Williams and Hattersley took on to maintain Labour's Social Contract. Denis Healey described it as one of Shirley Williams's key roles 'since the unions insisted, we should keep prices as low as possible in return for their pay restraint'³²³ Neither Minister managed to do this successfully in the long term but Hattersley appeared more successful. Williams was persuaded to phase out food subsidies as part of government cuts and her attempt at price codes had petered out by early 1976 in part because of the non-co-operation of the CBI. Hattersley's prices freeze under a statutory Prices Bill had more teeth but frozen prices were a short term solution to bring down the rate of inflation and break the supposed cycle of inflation where wage settlements were seen as fuelling inflation. Some of the *Mirror's* journalists like Goodman and Lancaster recognised that four years of pay restraint had impoverished many of the lowest paid workers whose wages had not kept up with the rate of inflation even when it was in single figures in 1978 and warned of the consequences. Both ministers had found tackling the prices of essential foods like cheese and bread more difficult than expected and the speed of inflation often overtook their efforts. Neither Williams in 1976 or Hattersley by 1979 were seen as successful in tackling food prices in a way that limited wage claims or protected the least well off or the lowest paid. They were both junior Cabinet ministers in their early forties, lacking the clout of senior colleagues and to some extent there to draw fire from the Chancellor about the effects of inflation. They were also trivialised by the *Mirror's* journalists. In the *Mirror* Shirley Williams admired as an effective communicator and depicted as a possible future Labour leader was also patronised

³²³ Healey, p.397.

because of her gender, while Roy Hattersley was sometimes portrayed as a comic character a 'bulky figure,' who liked a good pint and was caricatured long before his *Spitting Image* puppet in the 1980s.³²⁴ The creation of this department had raised expectations that more could be done about prices and inflation than these ministers had the power to achieve. It was clear that Denis Healey and Jim Callaghan especially did not see housewives and pensioners as the priority Harold Wilson had done. A wider issue is how much Parliament understood about the effects of inflation at this time. Female MPs were a tiny minority and all politicians in Westminster lived in a parliamentary bubble with their food and drink prepared and subsidised and relied on the press to keep them in touch with public opinion.³²⁵ In the 1979 election when Margaret Thatcher toured the country having her picture taken with her shopping bag in hand, James Callaghan's speeches about inflation rang hollow with some voters. When Mrs Thatcher formed her first government there was no Minister for Prices and inside her cabinet the advocates for a free market abandoned price control. Within a year RPI had returned to over 20 per cent.

The Politics of the Shopping Clock – conclusion

The Shopping Clock was inspired by Harold Wilson's need as leader of the opposition to remind female voters of the 'broken promises' made in a 'shopping basket' election.

Wilson's skilful use of the Shopping Clock as a tool of opposition kept this issue alive at the

³²⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1977, p.11 Terence Lancaster, *Daily Mirror*, 2 March 1977, p.3 'Roy's Battle of the beer price bulge', 21 March 1979, p.23 Geoffrey Goodman 'Hell to pay for Hattersley'.

³²⁵ Hattersley p.191 Callaghan described by his wife as someone who 'couldn't open a tin of soup.' Barbara Castle challenged her NEC colleagues to name the price of basic foods admitting that it was two years since she had bought anything in the shops while she had been a minister. *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1976, p 17.

point when inflation was rising. The Clock became a nationally recognised measure of inflation used in Parliamentary debate but its impact was much wider. As inflation worsened, Wilson and his party challenged the unfairness of a 'shoparound' solution and argued for the rights of working people to maintain their standard of living. This marked a genuine move to the Left by some in the party, including its leader, with an emphasis on the unfairness of the economic policies of the Conservative government. The *Mirror's* campaigning journalism reflected this approach. Whilst in opposition Wilson developed policies to protect the population from the worst effects of food inflation by subsidising basic foods. He showed his commitment to this issue by creating a Shadow Prices and Consumer affairs minister. He also won the support of the trade union leaders for the Social Contract and wage restraint if the worst effects of food price rises were cushioned.

The Shopping Clock and Labour's agenda focused on prices, rather than national unity, helped them to regain power and implement their policies in the spring of 1974. In 1974 Shirley Williams' food subsidies were welcomed and Labour was seen as delivering on its election promises. By 1975 what had been a successful tool of opposition became a millstone round the neck of the Labour party. They had achieved the short-term goals of regaining power, and cushioning the poorest groups from the full impact of food inflation. However, the gender gap among voters in the second 1974 election had widened again and they had not brought down inflation. As inflation worsened in 1975 the government's priority moved away from prices to controlling the rate of inflation. Their attempt to break the wages prices spiral meant they used food price restraint as a bargaining chip with the union leaders but high food prices remained and this policy was struggling. Not only were Williams' price subsidies dismantled but her successor Roy Hattersley gave more attention to lowering RPI by dealing with beer prices than he did to the price of basic foods. This may

have worked on one level but took the government's eye off the importance of food prices to the lowest paid and poorest groups. In 1977 some of the *Mirror's* journalists warned Labour of a 'shopping basket explosion' ending at the ballot box as it had in 1970. However, the *Mirror's* editorial team cancelled its Shopping Clock in January 1978. Its regular compiler claimed prices had only risen four per cent in twelve months, although the Clock had risen by nine per cent. Labour had brought RPI down to single figures by the spring of 1978 but had not solved the problem of high food prices suffered by low paid workers. The fact prices were going up more slowly over a month was not meaningful particularly now they had no newspaper features to illustrate this. Margaret Thatcher was able to mimic the images of food inflation, once used by the *Mirror's* Sally Moore, in her 1979 campaign showing price rises over five years by holding up two string shopping bags labelled 1974 and 1979.

Conclusion

1970s British politics has long been portrayed in popular history as dominated by crisis, industrial unrest, soaring inflation, and a breakdown of political consensus. Colin Hay, along with John Shepherd and James Thomas, have challenged the myths perpetuated by inaccurate and sensational contemporary media coverage of the Winter of Discontent.³²⁶ Hay also highlighted the relative success of the Callaghan government in reducing inflation by 1978. The disappearance of the Shopping Clock in January 1978 from the *Daily Mirror's* pages in some ways strengthens this case, suggesting inflation was no longer news and had already been consigned to the back pages of the paper. However, the Shopping Clock's longevity confirms the 1970s as *the* decade of peace-time inflation, which affected the working class. It also backs up Hay's argument that the Social Contract's wage restraint had eroded the standard of living of many Labour supporters and the *Mirror's* readers. The *Mirror* decision to abandon the Shopping Clock appears to support Roy Hattersley's claim that inflation was 'licked' but the paper also ignored the warnings of some senior political and industrial *Mirror* journalists that families were being impoverished.³²⁷

Adrian Bingham has recently set forward three possible conditions from which most voters engage intermittently with politics. In his analysis popular political thinking often springs from the framing/narrative of recognisable events or aspects of everyday experience, such as a threat to voters' standard of living.³²⁸ The *Mirror's* Shopping Clock's £5 shop which is

³²⁶ John Shepherd, *Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the British 'Winter of Discontent'* (Manchester, 2013) pp.108-129. Colin Hay, 'The Winter of Discontent,' *Political Quarterly*, Vol 80, No 4 (2009) pp. 545-551, and 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism' *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol 63, No. 3 (2010), pp. 446-470, James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers and the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005) pp.61-76.

³²⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1978, p.1. *Daily Mirror*, 17 September 1977, p.1, Terence Lancaster, *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1978, p.14. Geoffrey Goodman.

³²⁸ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, (Oxford, forthcoming) pp. 15-16.

seen going up, and occasionally down, week after week framed a distinct narrative about inflation which was recognisable from readers' everyday experience of buying familiar products. According to Behrend's research in the early 1970s it was one of the few successful ways the public understood inflation.³²⁹ Tomlinson also put forward the case that post-war Labour politicians, particularly Harold Wilson, explained economics in terms of ethics and unfairness. This Labour-supporting paper used this approach in its Shopping Clock and prominently on the front page of its 1972 inflation special. Readers' letters suggest this resonated with them.³³⁰

The weekly Shopping Clock rarely reported inflation's impact in terms of the poorest in society. Instead, it was about preserving the standard of living of a post war affluent working class who had grown used to eating cheap and nourishing food. This still made up as much of 25 per cent of their weekly expenditure.³³¹ Most of those buying food had experienced rationing in their lifetimes. The *Mirror's* Shopping Clock was not in line with the image of Labour as the 'party of the underdog' presented by poll responders in Luton in 1959 cited by Bingham. The industrial action of female Plessey workers of Essex in 1971 was reported by the *Mirror* as workers battling for a fair annual pay rise in the face of inflation, armed with Shopping Clock clippings. But by the end of the decade the Shopping Clock's compilers tone, in their spinoff features, changed from campaigning for fairness to one of endurance of hard times and austerity.³³² By early 1979 the paper produced headlines about

³²⁹ Hilde Behrend, 'Price And Income Images And Inflation' *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, Scottish Economic Society, Vol 11, No 2 (1964), pp. 85-103 Cited by Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life from Beveridge to Brexit* p.196

³³⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 15 June 1972, p.1 WHO WANTS THIS FOR A FAIR DAY'S PAY?

³³¹ Shinobu Majima 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961 –2004' *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22, No 4 (2008), p. 576 Figure 1 Budget Share of Expenditure Categories, Quarterly Series, 1963 – 2002. Source: Calculated from Office for National Statistics, National Accounts, Household Final Consumption Expenditure.

³³² *Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1977, p.26.

the 'Winter of Discontent' very similar to its Fleet Street competitors.³³³ The paper's political position no longer seemed to be on the side of maintaining fair living standards or protecting the wages of the least well paid workers in the public sector.

The political impact of the Shopping Clock had not previously been examined even by James Thomas who looked at the *Mirror's* closer links to Labour in the 1970s. While he and Geoffrey Goodman credited Sydney Jacobson and the editorial team's input to the February 1974 election campaign's result, the Shopping Clock's contribution was overlooked despite its front page appearance on the 16 February 1974.³³⁴ This may be put down to the tendency of some twenty first century historians to regard a shopping feature as stereotyping women readers. Peter Sloman, in an otherwise positive examination of Harold Wilson's political comeback between 1970-74, criticised his 'highly traditional view of female voters.'³³⁵ The reality in the 1970s was that women still did more of the food shopping for the family and the Conservatives had capitalised on this since the 1950s.³³⁶ The 1970s was a time of social change and the rise of companionate marriage already meant some couples bought large consumer items together, if only because hire purchase was not available to female consumers. Nevertheless, for those under pension age it was women, including those in part-time work, who did more of the grocery shopping.³³⁷ It is essential to put inflation into the context of the social attitudes of that time rather than the indicators that

³³³ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers and the Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxford, 2005) p.81.

³³⁴ *ibid*, pp.67-69. Geoffrey Goodman, *From Bevan to Blair: Fifty Years Reporting from the Political Front Line* (London, 2003), PP.142-160).

³³⁵ Peter Sloman, 'Harold Wilson, 'Selsdon Man,' and the defence of social democracy in 1970s' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 33 No.1, (2022), p.84.

³³⁶ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics* p.188.

³³⁷ Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London, 1981) pp.111-117 on sharing of household tasks. Many of her married Churchman employees used their lunch break 'to go over to Bedminster to do some shopping.' Jonathan Gershuny and John P. Robinson, 'Historical Changes in the Household Division of Labour.' *Demography*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Nov., 1988), pp. 537-552 'In 1971 British women spent an average of 42 minutes per day on shopping compare with 20 minutes per day for men.'

attitudes were beginning to change. It was in this everyday politics of inflation that the *Mirror* and Harold Wilson framed the debate. This was also recognised by contemporary competing newspapers, party political broadcasts, television interviews and debates in Parliament. This in turn forced Conservative ministers and eventually the Prime Minister to factor in this feature from a left of centre paper, because of its part in setting the agenda on inflation.

Peter Sloman's reassessment of Harold Wilson from 1970-74 as a politician determined to tackle poverty, protect living standards, and reject individualism is supported by Wilson's relationship to the Shopping Clock. He inspired its creation with a speech in November 1970 and referred to it regularly during his time in opposition. Long before other leading politicians, he was a Clock watcher. He sometimes used it as an opposition tool to win back female voters by flagging up the 'broken promises' of the Prime Minister but there was more than short-termism to his relationship to the Shopping Clock. He recognised its value in explaining the problem of inflation to *Mirror* readers and the broader electorate. The rejection of individualism Sloman detected in Wilson was evidenced by his attacks on the 'shoparound' solution, which was increasingly followed by his own party in Commons debates. Wilson managed to take the Conservative 'shopping basket' away from the Conservatives in February 1974 and narrow the gender gap. However, his creation of the Prices and Consumer Affairs Ministry showed the limits of his approach. Shirley Williams delivered protection for families from the worst of food inflation in 1974-75 through subsidies, but when the government abandoned this, she promoted the Shoparound consumerist solution. Roy Hattersley rejected the individualism of the 'shoparound' but saw the reduction of RPI as paramount, concentrating on beer prices rather than bread.

As Adrian Bingham and Jessica Prestridge have both argued, one successful right wing female politician adapted and benefited from using plain-speaking rhetoric to present herself as an ordinary housewife.³³⁸ This enabled Margret Thatcher to launch radical economic changes as commonsense housekeeping. Research on the Shopping Clock uncovered almost identical images from the *Mirror* in 1972 to those used by Mrs Thatcher in 1979. Shopping Basket elections were not a new phenomenon, the Conservatives had been using them skilfully since the 1950s and Labour belatedly in 1974, but Mrs Thatcher was able to present them with more conviction because of her gender. However, was this any more of an oversimplification than the professional economist Harold Wilson's acceptance of the Shopping Clock?

Whereas scholars including Hay, Shepherd and Thomas have dissected the partisan coverage of the 'Winter of Discontent' the reporting of the crisis of 1974-1975 has had far less analysis. The political scientist Paul Mosely's research into tabloid coverage, including the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock, measured its effect on public opinion and concluded it sensationalised economic problems inducing anxiety in readers for whom bad news lingered.³³⁹ Alt's research from 1975 uncovered inaccurate, much higher perceptions of RPI rates. This could be linked to the way the *Mirror* totalled inflation's rise across several years rather than giving the annual rate of inflation.³⁴⁰ Close analysis of the Shopping Clock's prominence, its dramatic headlines and its strong visual impact certainly bear out the

³³⁸ Adrian Bingham, Chapter 9 'Conservatism, gender, and the politics of everyday life, 1950s–1980s' in Clarisse Berthezene, & Julie Gottlieb (eds), *Rethinking Right-Wing Women: Gender and the Conservative Party, 1880s To the Present* (Manchester, 2018); Jessica Prestridge 'Housewives having a go: Margaret Thatcher, Mary Whitehouse and the appeal of the Right Wing Woman in late twentieth-century Britain' *Women's History Review*, Vol 28, No 2 (2019), pp.277-296.

³³⁹ Paul Mosley, "'Popularity Functions'" and the Role of the Media: A Pilot Study of the Popular Press' *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol 14, No 1 (1984), pp. 117-129.

³⁴⁰ Jim Tomlinson, *Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Narratives of Economic Life in Britain from Beveridge to Brexit* (Oxford, 2017) pp. 188-205 citing James Alt's research for the CIPU.

impression of sensationalising alleged by relevant ministers. James Whitworth has made the case for the visual impact of the *Mirror's* cartoon by Zec in the 1945 election campaign which bears some comparison with the Shopping Clock.³⁴¹ A comparison between the visual style of the Shopping Clock and similar features in the broadsheets and in the 'compact' *Daily Mail* show the strengths of the *Mirror's* Clock. The influence of the Shopping Clock on voters and politicians was due not only to the high circulation of the paper but to its design and memorable headlines which caught the attention of readers.

Bingham's recent work represents British voters in the later twentieth century as better educated and with more access to information through the media. Much credit is given to television for making politicians more familiar, less distant figures. Bingham cites the eight million viewers who watched Panorama to see the debate between Roy Jenkins and Tony Benn on the European referendum in 1975.³⁴² Many believe newspapers had been replaced by television as the primary source of information for voters by the 1970s. However, the impact of the Shopping Clock newspaper feature and the *Mirror's* coverage of inflation was significant. The original intention of Cudlipp in the 1930s was to engage with 'an audience attracted initially by entertainment and titillation [who] could be tempted to try other types of material'. Thomas cites evidence that in 1979 twice as many people read British newspapers than watched television for news and the lively Shopping Clock could be absorbed much more quickly than the television news still read on the BBC by newsreaders, rather than journalists.³⁴³ Thomas O'Malley's study of readers and how they read,

³⁴¹ James Whitworth, 'Case Study: The Daily Mirror and the Role of the Visual in the 1945 General Election in Britain' in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017* (Edinburgh, 2020).

³⁴² Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, p. 281.

³⁴³ Kellner and Worcester, 'Electoral Perceptions' pp.63-5, R. Worcester, and P. Kellner, 'A rival for television', *New Statesman*, 4 May 1979 p.632; Tunstall, *Media in Britain*, all cited by James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers the Labour Party and British Politics*, ((Oxford, 2005) p.85.

‘continuously’ or ‘discontinuously’ may explain the impact of the feature for those with little time to sit down and read a paper from cover to cover.³⁴⁴

Although economic stories only made the front pages for twenty per cent of 1975’s *Mirror* issues, those sixty articles made up almost half of the hard news stories on the front pages that year. *Mirror* readers of the Shopping Clock certainly had far more economic information than in previous decades as Mosely’s comparisons with the 1960s showed. The *Mirror* may have sensationalised the bad news in tune with its tabloid style, but it did bring economics to the masses as it had brought politics to the masses after its re-invention as a working class tabloid in the 1930s.³⁴⁵ It is naïve to think that mid-1970s voters would not have noticed a rise in inflation in 1975, when that Shopping Clock went up by £1.33p in year, but RPI would not have been so clear or familiar as the ‘famous’ Shopping Clock. None of its Fleet Street rivals produced a version as memorable and distinctive as the Shopping Clock.³⁴⁶ Its regular appearances helped readers to chart events much more than an occasional front page or an in depth television interview.³⁴⁷ This research has also investigated the role the Shopping Clock played as an economic educator in the early years of inflation, making readers more familiar with key terms. The *Mirror’s* coverage was undoubtedly disjointed and sometimes contradictory even from the same reporters, advocating individualist solutions one week and responses from government the next. This is not necessarily due as Mosely suggested to the sensationalism of tabloid newspapers but to the uncertainty of the

³⁴⁴ Thomas O’Malley, Chapter 3 ‘*Readership and Readers*’ p.85 in Martin Conboy and Adrian Bingham (eds) *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press*, Volume 3 Competition and Disruption, 1900–2017 (Edinburgh, 2020).

³⁴⁵ Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, p.150.

³⁴⁶ Refer to Chapter 1 pp. 42, 51-53 and 94.

³⁴⁷ BBC 1’s documentary coverage in the two months RPI hit 25% appears to be an interview with Sir Keith Joseph on the ‘Crisis of capitalism ... or socialism’. BBC 2’s specialist ‘The Money Programme’ concentrated on business and finance with a late night slot on a Friday evening. Daily Mirror, TV pages.

1970s. Daily newspapers despite featuring well known columnists were not written by independent authors or academics, they were written by working journalists, under pressure, for a mass audience. Consistency was not always their strength but readers still relied upon for them for information.³⁴⁸

The Shopping Clock began as a women's feature written by female journalists for female readers in a tabloid newspaper that did not have a women's page. Female journalists are difficult to research from the 1970s, except for the highly paid 'agony aunts' like the *Mirror's* Marge Proops. Linda Steiner depicts female journalists of this period as trapped in a 'pink ghetto' writing female features about 'women's issues.'³⁴⁹ The initial research of Roger Smith for the 1970s and Anthony Delano's follow up research shows that although female journalist made up 23 per cent of local journalists, they made up less than ten per cent of national press journalists and the *Mirror* female staff ratio was much lower. There were also only five female subeditors on Fleet Street out of a sample of 239 surveyed by Delano for the 1970s.³⁵⁰ In some ways the Shopping Clock features conforms to these findings.

Enquiries to the *Mirror's* Pensioners website were met with surprise that anyone was interested in this feature, a request for information was never placed on the website and none of the dead female compilers appear on the website's obituaries, unlike several of the male journalists involved, Roger Strott for example. The female compilers were largely confined to writing about the effects of inflation, but the importance of the topic and success of the feature gave them access few 1970s women journalists had to the front

³⁴⁸ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers the Labour Party and British Politics* p.85.

³⁴⁹Refer to Linda Steiner, 'Failed Theories: Explaining Gender Difference in Journalism,' *Review of Communication*, Vol. 12 No.3 (2012).

³⁵⁰ Anthony Delano, 'Women Journalists: what's the difference?' *Journalism Studies*, Vol 4 No 2, (2003). Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers, Sex, Private Life, and the Popular Press 1918-1978* p.26. 'In 1982...22 female journalists worked in the paper's London office alongside 496 men.'

pages. It did not transform their careers: they were on the front pages because of the topic was so important and the feature so well known. Once it was over they were relegated back to feature writing. Male journalists increasingly wrote alongside them in the period 1973-75 when inflation was at its peak. They had access to different sources of information but in terms of impact on *Mirror* readers the prominence of this feature was ground breaking.

The term 'housewife' was used throughout the time of the Shopping Clock but readers were also addressed as 'Clockwatchers' and consumers. Anna Pollert's 1972 sociological study of Bristol female factory workers records that these women did regard themselves as 'housewives' even when they had full-time jobs. Dolly Smith Wilson's work on affluent working mothers of the post war period suggests many women presented themselves as working to enable their families to benefit from affluence, whatever their other motives.³⁵¹

The Shopping Clock feature with its emphasis up to 1975 on maintaining a good standard of living seems to support this, as do the spinoffs on consumer rights and comparative shopping in the Shoparound feature. However, even here there were contradictions.

Women's participation in the labour market continued to rise throughout the 1970s, although more men faced unemployment, the total passing the one million mark in 1975.³⁵²

Sally Moore depicted the Plessey workers as producers and consumers in 1971 with their Shopping Clock clippings. However, the *Mirror* often depicted the two groups as separate particularly in the emphasis on industrial disputes by the late 1970s.³⁵³ The *Mirror* also failed to pick up on the increasing move of female workers into relatively low paid public sector

³⁵¹ Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain' *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol 17, No 2

³⁵² Roger Mortimore and Andrew Blick, (eds), *Butler's British Political Facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 647-8. as cited by Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, p.260.

³⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, 10 January 1979, p.1 'Breakdown Britain.', *Daily Mirror*, 11 January 1979, p.1 'JOBS 2,000 face layoffs, FOOD Empty shelves in ten days.' *Daily Mirror*, 9 February 1979, p.1 'Health warning as rubbish piles mount up. RATS!'

work at the end of the 1970s. The Shopping Clock and spinoffs, including Shop IN Save, Shopping Watchdog, and the Family Food Guides, gave time consuming advice on family cooking and shopping which even part time female workers would have struggled with. The whole concept of shoparound originated in the Conservative Party's wooing of the full-time housewife vote in the 1950s, when it successfully used the gender gap particularly in the 1955 election.³⁵⁴ In 1979 Margaret Thatcher, a full-time politician, presented herself as the housewife who could cure the nation's economy with commonsense. Throughout the 1970s, time poor female *Mirror* readers were intermittently advised to shoparound. However, The *Mirror's* Shopping Clock compilers did not shoparound they bought the same foods in the same shops every week for years at a time to create a measure of inflation. Much of their advice was as unreal as Mrs Thatcher's pose as housewife of the nation's economy.

Jon Lawrence's work argued that the view of working class life presented by many sociologists and historians underestimates the individualism of working class citizens in terms of their aspirations. One striking example of this being the growing percentage who were owner occupiers by 1939, which had risen to 54 per cent by 1977.³⁵⁵ Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite maintains that many of stereotypes presented as working class were already out of date by the 1950s and were to some extent created by those nostalgic for a working class life they had already left.³⁵⁶ Adrian Bingham's recent work explores how much citizens consistently voted along the class lines for much of the twentieth century, with many voting repeatedly for the same party. The class system in post-War Britain needs to be understood

³⁵⁴ Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, p.183.

³⁵⁵ Jon Lawrence (2013) *Class, 'Affluence' and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930–64*, *Cultural and Social History*, 10:2 (2015) p.173. 39% per cent of working-class families with per capita income above 30 shillings per week in Bristol owned their own homes by 1940. 'Nationally 54% by 1977' Adrian Bingham, *Everyday Politics*, p.319.

³⁵⁶ Jon Lawrence, *'Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post War England*. (Oxford, 2019). Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference*, (Oxford, 2018) p.67.

in the context of rising affluence. Economic changes caused by the decline of the older heavy industries and the expansion of professional and service sectors meant that the middle class appeared to expand. Working class affluence was also increased for many families by the increase in part-time working by women. Avner Offer has explored how the power of the majority British class group, manual workers, declined from the 1950s to the 2000s. In his research the late 1970s and 1980s is seen as the key turning point. The affluence of the 1950s and 1960s and the decline of older industries had already begun the process but the 1970s is seen as an accelerated time of change.³⁵⁷ Some of the typical readers of the *Mirror* with no formal educational qualifications but essential skills were the group that became 'left behind' in the 1980s.

The Shopping Clock and its spinoffs like the Shoparound and the Square Deal certainly confirm the growing affluence of some sections of the paper's working class readership. Among the items covered were mortgages, advice on types of credit, package holidays, and buying high cost white goods including freezers, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and cameras. Offer contends that the working class became less prudent using credit more and increasing their personal debt. This seems to be a view shared by some *Mirror* journalists. Their advice was often very protective, notably about families buying freezers and being forced into unfair deals by door to door salesmen. However, in a time of rising inflation which diminished the value of debt it could also be argued this was a logical response to inflation although *Mirror* journalists Robert Head and George Thaw pointed out to readers this would only apply to those earning higher than average wages.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ Avner Offer 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950–2000', *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22 No 4, (2008) p.537-571.

³⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, June 1972, pp. 12 and 16. 'Why the poor stay poorer.'

The *Mirror's* consumer reporting also covered issues that affected poorer sections of the working class, like misleading food labels and how the poorer families and pensioners could get the benefits they were entitled to. Selina Todd's work on Crown Street in the 1960s maintains that poverty had persisted and that much of the so-called working class affluence was based on credit. The *Mirror's* advice on credit was not aimed exclusively at the better off sections of the working class. The contents of the Shopping Clock's 33, later 44, items compare very accurately with the basic foods that Shinobu Majima's analysis of FES shopping surveys from 1961-2004 used. The high prices by 1978 on the Shopping Clock, would most affect those on benefits and in low paid work. The increasing gap she found between those able to buy only basic foods, those left behind in the bottom 30% of incomes and the rest of the population by 1981 also helps to explain the industrial action taken by the lowest paid due to their relative poverty and lack of power.³⁵⁹ Some of the early Shopping Clock in depth articles dealt with distinct working class families with different incomes to show how inflation was affecting their standard of living.³⁶⁰ The first three Square Deal features looked at different age groups, a couple who were pensioners, a young rural mum and a newly married couple. However, the London based *Mirror* issue the BNA has digitized meant that working class people from the heavily industrial north and west were under represented. Offer points out the North and West contained the largest proportion of the manual working class with many of the industrial towns being dominated by this class. However, in the *Mirror* London cab drivers are used several times to represent typical working class experiences.³⁶¹ The *Mirror's* stance by the late 1970s of depicting

³⁵⁹Shinobu Majima 'Affluence and the Dynamics of Spending in Britain, 1961 –2004' *Contemporary British History*, Vol 22, No 4 (2008), pp.573-597.

³⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 28 July 1973, p. 11.

³⁶¹Avner Offer, p 539, 'Most long-established manufacturing and extractive industries were concentrated in and around northern and western regional urban centres.' The Northern issue of the *Daily Mirror* was printed

consumers at odds with workers on strike is in marked contrast to its treatment in 1971 of the Plessey workers or its treatment of the February 1974 election as union bashing. The class system obviously did not change that quickly, but the attitudes of the newspaper's journalists and editorial team had and this in turn would influence some of their readers. After early 1978 the absence of the Shopping Clock feature to show how much workers now had to pay for a family shop gave the poorest workers one less weapon in their struggle for a fair wage.

The *Mirror's* Shopping Clock is a rich source for historians on how a housewives' feature came to frame a narrative of the experience of inflation in the 1970s. During a decade it moved from a barometer of inflation, initially encouraging the individualism of shopping around to a feature that counselled on how to endure austerity. It also showed the influence a mass circulation, left of centre newspaper could have on political issues, whichever party was in power. Unlike the *Mirror* of the 1960s the paper grew closer to Labour for much of the 1970s. Harold Wilson's political skills inspired its creation. He used it to close the voting gender gap that was believed to have defeated him in 1970 and to develop policies to protect the public from the shocks of food inflation. The Shopping Clock was so effective it could be used against politicians like James Prior and even Edward Heath when they were in power. From a left of centre tabloid paper, with the largest circulation in Europe at the beginning of the decade, it could not be ignored. Its vivid, lively style informed readers and influenced politicians and television journalists. It was an economic educator however simplistic the lessons. In terms of gender the limited role of female journalists was clear but it also broke new ground since they were the experts on shopping

in Manchester but the BNA have only digitized the London issue. Further research might uncover copies of the Manchester version to see if there is any difference in content.

basket inflation. For women readers it informed them both as producers and consumers but the contradictions and inconsistencies in the *Mirror's* Shopping Clock reflect both how newspapers are written, from day to day, and the changing economic role of women readers. The class the *Mirror's* readers belonged to was also changing. Some would continue to prosper and would be increasingly concerned about their rights as consumers, while others would be left behind and become more impoverished. The Clock illustrated rising prices but failed in the end to appreciate that for the low paid those prices would not come down and they were poorer than at the start of the decade.

Appendix 1 New Shopping Clock 22nd May 1976 – 44 Items

Items	Initial Price in May 1976	Types of Foods – MAFF definition
1. 3lb shoulder of New Zealand Lamb	17p	Meat, Fish & Alternative Protein
2. 2 1/2lb Joint of Beef top rib on the bone	45p	
3. 1lb mince beef	44p	
4. 1lb cod fillets	65p	
5. 3lb Frozen oven ready chicken	90p	
6. 1lb Walls pork sausages	44½p	
7. ½ lb loose streaky bacon	30p	
8. 6 Findus Beefburgers	50p	
9. 10 Fish Fingers	39p	
10. 1 dozen standard white eggs	41p	
11. 15 ¾ fl. oz tin Heinz baked beans	14p	
12. Prince's sardines	21p	
Subtotal £7.00 ½ p		
13. 21 Pints silver top	78½p	Dairy
14. 1 lb New Zealand cheddar	44p	
15. Anchor Butter	19½ p	
Subtotal £ 2. 42p		
16. 1lb cheapest loose potatoes	15p	Bread, Cereal or Potatoes
17. Large Mother's Pride sliced loaf	18 p	
18. 3 lb Home Pride Flour	21½p	
19. 1lb Sea Isle long-grain rice	21p	
20. 13.2oz packet Kellogg's cornflake	21p	
21. ½ lb McVitie's digestive biscuits	12½p	
Subtotal £1.09p		
22. 1lb onions	18p	Vegetables & Fruit
23. 1 lb green cabbage or spring greens	15p	
24. 1lb cheapest tomatoes	25p	
25. Round lettuce	16p	
26. 1 lb Cheapest eating apples	15p	
27. 10 Birds Eye Frozen Peas	15½p	
28. 15 ¾ tin fl. oz Heinz Tomato Soup	14p	
29. 15 ½ fl. oz tin Del Monte Sliced Peaches	22p	
Subtotal £1.40 ½ p		
30. 2 lb Tate & Lye granulated sugar	23p	Fats & Sugars
31. Stork Margarine	12p	
32. White Cap Cooking Fat	9½p	

33. 16 fl oz Mazola corn oil	35 p	
34. 1 lb Robertson's raspberry jam	26½p	
Subtotal 1.06p		
35. 4oz Maxwell House coffee	50p	Other Food substances
36. ¼ lb Typhoo tea	9½p	
Subtotal 59 ½ p		
37. 1 lb Saxa Salt	8½p	Flavourings, Sauces
38. HP sauce	19p	
Subtotal 27 ½ p		
39. Eurosize 2 Persil washing powder	30½p	Other Household items
40. 20 fl. oz Squeezy washing-up liquid	28p	
41. Kleenex twin pack toilet rolls	19½p	
42. Palmolive toilet soap	8p	Other Household items
43. Large Close Up toothpaste	29p	
Subtotal £1.15		
Overall total £15		

Appendix 2 Toiletries List *Daily Mirror*, December 5 1970 p.5

Items	£	s.	d.
Maclean's regular toothpaste (large)		3	11
Pkt. of 8 Beecham's powders		3	0
Bottle of 25 aspirins		1	2
Bottle of TCP (large)		5	2
Box of Kleenex tissues		2	11
Quickies		3	7
Mum rollette anti-perspirant deodorant		5	11
Loxene Extra hair shampoo (lare)		5	3
Elnett Satin hair spray		11	9
Max Factor pancake make-up		7	0
Gala 'locked' in lipstick		8	5
Gala eye pencil (king size)		4	0
Ponds cold cream		4	11
Elastoplast airstrip plasters		3	2
Pink Steradent tablets		2	5
Bath-size Cidal soap		2	5
Wright's coal tar soap		2	3
Knight's Castile soap		1	9
Johnson's baby power (economy size)		6	5
Johnson's cotton buds		1	4
Johnson's baby cream		7	4
Bottle Dettolin gargle and mouthwash		3	0
200 Saxin saccharin tablets		2	11
Total	5	0	0

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