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**The Labour Party
and the
Organization of
Secondary
Education 1918-65**

Michael Parkinson



The Labour Party and the Organization of Secondary Education, 1918-65

Originally published in 1970, Michael Parkinson examines the Labour Party's attitude towards secondary education in general and comprehensive schooling in particular and shows the effect of the party's philosophy on the question of education and its social importance. The Labour Party is seen both as a policy-maker with the power to implement policies and as a pressure group with power only to influence. The case study provides valuable background reading to the controversies over comprehensive education at the time.



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The Labour Party and the Organization of Secondary Education 1918-65

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General editor's introduction

This series is designed primarily to meet the needs of students of government, politics, or political science in universities and other institutions providing courses leading to degrees. Each volume aims to provide a brief general introduction indicating the significance of its topic, e.g. executives, parties, pressure-groups, etc., and then a longer 'case study' relevant to the general topic. First-year students will thus be introduced to the kind of detailed work on which all generalizations must be based, while more mature students will have an opportunity to become acquainted with recent original research in a variety of fields. The series will eventually provide a comprehensive coverage of most aspects of political science in a more interesting manner than in the large volume which often fails to compensate by breadth what it inevitably lacks in depth.

Many studies of political parties have been published, but, as Mr. Parkinson points out, very few of them have been concerned with parties as policy-makers. Interest has been focused on parties as organizations, and the current belief in 'the end of ideology' has tended to divert interest from the ideas and purposes of political parties. In this case study Mr. Parkinson examines the attitude of the Labour Party towards the organization of secondary education, and in particular to comprehensive schools. He

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shows that the general philosophy of the Labour Party necessarily implies a profound belief in the social importance of education, although there has been by no means a uniformity of thought as to the implications of this for secondary education. The story he tells covers the period from 1918 to 1965, and is an essential background to the current controversies about comprehensive education. He makes the useful point that political parties may be influential, not only when they are in office and able to implement their policies, but that they may also exercise an indirect influence over the course of events. This was, of course, a point which Lord Attlee made in correspondence with Professor Laski, and Mr. Parkinson's case study will illustrate how such 'pressure-group' activities may be significant. The monograph will undoubtedly be regarded as an important contribution to one aspect of the study of political parties in the United Kingdom.

H.V.W.

(Professor Wiseman had written this introduction before his death in November, 1969.)

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Introduction

This book is primarily a case study which examines the education policies of a single political party in a limited historical context. For this reason, its conclusions cannot be generalized far beyond this particular study. Any claim to significance it may have rests solely on the importance of the issues examined. Nevertheless, one general conclusion may be drawn from it. It relates to the way in which political parties are studied.

Parties can play a variety of roles within the political system. They represent social groups, manage political conflict, recruit political leaders, socialize political activists and mobilize public opinion. The precise functions they fulfil clearly differ between political systems and at different periods within the same system. However, one of the most crucial and enduring functions of parties, of vital concern to the political scientist, is the role they play in aggregating public demands and interests, more simply in developing public policies for governing the community in which they exist. Yet it can be argued that this important aspect of party activity has to some extent been neglected by much contemporary research. One can illustrate this point by citing some of the more prominent recent studies of political parties.

Duverger's work on political parties, for example, which probably did most to reawaken academic interest in the

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area, does not deal with the policy-making process in parties. It had two major concerns. First, it examined some of the organizational characteristics of modern parties, and, second, it looked at ways in which the study of different types of party systems could be used as a starting-point for the analysis of the total political system, thus treating party as an important explanatory phenomenon rather than as an object of enquiry for itself. This latter approach has been widely employed in the study of American parties, with parties and the party system treated as the best introduction to the understanding of American government and politics rather than as a source of interest for their own sake. The leading work on British political parties by Robert McKenzie, which is more like a case study, is rather different in style, but this too does not directly deal with problems of policy-making. It concentrates primarily on the organizational features of British parties, and while these do obviously impinge on aspects of the policy process, its essential concern is for the internal distribution of power within the respective parties. Similarly, one could make the point that the most coherent study of British local parties by Bulpitt primarily concerns itself with the conditions under which local parties operate, but rarely with their policy characteristics. Finally, one can see that the expanding number of studies devoted to the analysis of the internal sociology of political parties, which are probably best characterized by the work of Eldersveld, despite their individual merits, often neglect direct consideration of the policy-making processes.

These brief comments are not intended to question the value of either these individual pieces of research or the general approaches they reveal to the study of political parties. Rather they are meant to indicate the rather surprising absence of studies dealing with the dynamics

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of the policy-making processes in political parties, and to suggest that there is a great deal of scope for case studies or more general studies on this topic to complement our knowledge of party activity in other areas. It is in this context that this present study may prove useful.

This argument does, of course, presuppose that parties do develop policies, with which they can be associated and to which they are committed over a period of time. It is therefore slightly different from Downs's view of parties which sees their prime function as merely to gain office by seeking the combination of policies which will ensure the maximum electoral support. It also differs from that more recently outlined by Leon Epstein, which treats parties simply as a collection of leaders who, once in office, will attempt to resolve the issues which arise as efficiently as possible, but entirely on a pragmatic, *ad hoc* basis. Our view would stress that political parties, because of the role they have to play, can, at least at certain stages in their career, be characterized by general policy orientations which will predispose them to act in relatively predictable ways and which will allow them to be differentiated from their political opponents. Obviously the stability consistency and coherence of policies will differ between different parties, and this case study of the Labour Party policies for secondary education should throw light on some of these issues at least in an important policy area.

Before entering into the detailed analysis of party policies, however, it may be appropriate to make a few general comments on the way in which the Labour Party has traditionally regarded the issue of education. In fact, it is clear that the Party has always claimed to have recognized the value and importance of education and to have had a special concern for its interest. Indeed, G. D. H. Cole has written: 'There can be no practical socialist

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educational policy except in conjunction with a general policy making for social equality in every part of the structure of the communal life. That is why socialist educational ideas are so difficult to entangle from general socialist conceptions of human relations in other fields.' And in similar vein Brian Simon has stressed that the whole Labour movement's attempt to change the working classes' conception of themselves and their role in society has made it essentially 'educative in its widest sense'. Given the nature of the Labour Party and of the educational process, this alleged concern for education is not difficult to understand for a number of reasons.

For example, the process of education can be directly related to the Party's principal ethical goal of equality in at least two important ways. In the first case the Party has always emphasized that education should be seen as a moral good in itself, crucial to the development of the individual personality, and as such ought to be made equally available to all children by right, regardless of such extraneous factors as social class, and, with certain reservations, regardless of intellectual ability. At the same time the Party has been concerned that educational opportunities be equally available to all not only because of their moral worth, but also because of the direct social and economic importance of education in contemporary society. At least in this century, the English educational structure has played a crucial role in occupational and hence social selection, and has thus exercised an enormous effect on the life chances of individuals and groups in society. Naturally, the Labour Party has recognized this fact, and has been anxious that the principle of equality of opportunity for all individuals and social groups should operate in this area of social arrangements which so directly affects the distribution of social and economic rewards.