Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the British 'Winter of Discontent'

Recent excitement surrounding the return to performance of Kate Bush, arguably Britain’s greatest female sing-songwriter (and unquestionably its oddest), has resulted in some limited reflection on the Britain of early 1979, when she last performed a full concert, and its contrasts to modern UK. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the usual degree of historical knowledge of music journalists, there has been little consideration of the political context in which the revered Ms Bush performed her ‘Tour of Life’ across Britain and Europe that spring. It has certainly been forgotten by all that, for the only time in her tightly controlled career, she allowed herself to be photographed alongside a political leader, the then-besieged Prime Minister, James Callaghan, at her hotel in Manchester on 10 April. One can imagine that Ms Bush, a doctor’s daughter with humanist sympathies, felt a greater affinity with the Labour Prime Minister than with the leader of the opposition, Margaret Thatcher. One must assume that Callaghan posed for the journalists of the Manchester Evening News in a desperate attempt to appeal to younger voters, who were increasingly disenchanted with the tiring older generation of post-war politicians and the seemingly never-ending industrial disputes that had recently swept the country. However, one completely fails to imagine what Callaghan, a hardened politician, former trade unionist, and Labour’s elder statesman, made of the eccentric theatricality of Ms Bush’s early career, but, as John Shepherd frequently demonstrates in his excellent new study of the political crisis of October 1978 – May 1979, James Callaghan could often surprise everyone.

It is also surprising that there have been so few academic analyses of this central event of late 20th-century British political history, apart from its appearance in the political biographies of the participants, such as Callaghan, Foot and Healey, and in studies of trade unionism and industrial relations. In their recent edited collection, Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton commented that the 1970s as a whole has suffered from a ‘relative neglect of the decade’. The first academic study of the decade only appeared in 2008 in a text with a similar title to the book under review, Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s by Alwyn Turner, which, although attempting to engage with the popular mood of Britain in the period, failed to provide much in the way of detailed analysis of the politics of the crisis, preferring instead to recount details of the television programmes and pop music of the era. This was followed four years later by Dominic Sandbrook’s lightweight Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974–79. The conclusion of both of these histories was that the so-called Winter of Discontent was the result of ground-swell of frustration with
the failed politics of the 1970s, with Keynesian economics, the industrial social contract and ultimately the social democracy of the post-war years being abandoned by politicians, trade unionists and finally the public themselves. They uncritically accept Margaret Thatcher’s famous assertion that the winter of discontent finally and decisively proved that the ‘socialists everywhere had run out of steam’. (2)

Colin Hay has offered a robust critique of what he terms the neoliberal ‘popular mythology to which the Winter of Discontent has given rise’ but even he has tended to regard the events of those crucial months as a single entity, a connected sequence which finally proved the failure of the Keynesian ‘social contract’. (3) A journalist on the Guardian, Andy Becket, attempting to dig a little deeper into the attitudes of the period, produced an excellent piece of historical journalism, 2009’s *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (4), which features a series of compelling interviews with some of the central figures in the period, including Edward Heath’s final interview. The text, although offering a left-wing perspective, presents a seemingly predetermined narrative of the coming of Margaret Thatcher, similar to those of Turner and Sandbrook, albeit one which culminates in an impressive micro-study of Hull, a city cut off from the rest of Britain by pickets during the TGWU strike of January 1979, earning it the title of Britain’s Stalingrad.

John Shepherd takes a far less elegiac approach than Beckett, as befits the first serious work of detailed political history of the event that ushered in the Thatcher government. He carefully uses the memoirs of those involved, Cabinet records and contemporary newspaper reports to create an in-depth study that starts in September 1978 with Callaghan’s famous announcement that ‘I shall not be calling for a General Election at this time’ and culminates with the election of 3 May 1979. In this way, he avoids the ahistoric, determinist approach favoured by all previous writers, which presupposes that the post-war social democratic consensus was already fatally wounded by events such as the 1976 IMF crisis and would inevitably be put out its misery by some crisis or other by the end of decade. His conclusion, far more compelling than Colin Hay’s, is that there were in fact a series of crises, not all inter-connected, which the Labour Party handed particularly badly, starting with the unrealistic insistence on a ceiling of 5 per cent for wage increases, through to the loss of the vote of non-confidence by one vote on 28 March. Central to the victory of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party in 1979’s election, argues Shepherd, was the damage to Labour’s credibility, already weakened by its handling of the strike at Ford UK in autumn 1978, when Callaghan failed to offer a better response to the mounting social and industrial problems of January 1979 and which led to the Sun’s famous ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ headline.

At times, however, one wishes that Shepherd would give less credence to the memoirs of the Labour figures involved. That the ‘Winter of Discontent’ is now a synonym for the failure of post-war social democracy is largely thanks to the repeated simplifications of Labour ministers subsequently seeking to shift the blame, Tory ministers seeking to keep the memory of the events of 1978–9 alive and their witting and unwitting allies in the media and creative industries. The historical reputation of the event is perhaps unique in that there are almost no prominent dissenting voices to this orthodoxy outside the historical academy. And any ex-ministers who do question the myth of the dead lying unburied, empty shops and hordes of rats in Leicester Square, demonstrate an unwitting nostalgia for the left-wing politics of the 1970s in their approach – they are too busy attacking each other’s interpretations to rebut the right-wing version which has such a trenchant hold on the popular imagination.

The weakest chapter is that on the election campaign of 1979. Shepherd discusses at great length the Conservative election broadcast of 17 January 1979, claiming that it ‘put the Labour government on the back foot’, despite the fact that there was no indication at this stage that the SNP might act like ‘turkeys voting for Christmas’ (to quote Callaghan) and turn against the government in a vote of no-confidence. Yet, the ur-text of the myth of the winter of discontent was surely the Saatchi and Saatchi produced Conservative party political broadcast of 23 April 1979. The broadcast begins with an image of snow falling on the rubbish piled in Leicester Square during the GMWU’s strike and swiftly proceeds to show footage of TGWU pickets, intercut with images from the 1972 miners’ strike, to create the misleading impression of a total breakdown in order, while the voice of male authority figure intones ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ in increasingly hysterical tones. From three decades of watching British political television (and more recently
contemporary history programmes) it has struck this reviewer how it is completely unnoticed that most of
the archive footage used to illustrate the failures of the British political system of the 1970s by journalists
and contemporary history programmes is lifted directly from this one party political broadcast. Shepherd is
an expert on the allegiances of the British print media and the damage they did to Labour during the crisis,
but this chapter also needs to focus on the radio and television reporting of January and February 1979. The
picture they presented, in their choice of images of near-empty shop shelves and pickets outside graveyards,
was, in many ways, far more wounding for Labour, especially as the broadcasters were supposedly impartial
in their political coverage.

Shepherd also fails to explain more thoroughly how the stereotype of small-minded trade unionists, largely
concerned with their own self-interests and unwilling to face up to the consequences of their actions for both
company and nation, gradually took hold in popular culture. He cites the example of Fred Kite, played by
Peter Sellers in 1959’s I’m Alright Jack, but this depiction had been superseded by the mid-1970s by the
character of Vic Spanner in 1971’s Carry On at Your Convenience. More importantly, in a golden age of
television and radio comedy, he fails to identify how trade unionist bloody mindedness became a comedy
trope throughout the period. From Are you Being Served?’s ‘Mr Mash’ to the members of the ‘Amalgamated
Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries and other Professional Thinking Persons’ in 1978’s Hitch-hikers’
Guide to the Galaxy, the incessantly negative depiction of shop stewards, reinforced by the media’s
depiction of their real-life counterparts such as Derek ‘Red Robbo’ Robinson and Jamie Morris of NUPE,
softened the resistance of the young and the apolitical to the new agenda of Margaret Thatcher, and the
Saatchi and Saatchi broadcast exploited such comic traditions with great skill.

Nonetheless, as a concisely written, forensic political analysis of the defining historical myth by which all
British political parties still live, Shepherd’s book might, finally, open the gates to a more nuanced views of
the crisis. One hopes that future historians will treat the period as dispassionately as Shepherd has done, and
one can sure that It will certainly no longer be possible to claim, as Callaghan did as he faced defeat, that the
1979 election was simply ‘a sea change in politics’. It was a moment when a Labour leader found himself
the victim of circumstances he had helped to bring about in his rise to the top of politics, it was not the
inevitable end of an unworkable social democratic pipe-dream. As Shepherd mentions towards the end of his
conclusion, Scandinavia and Germany both still have very effective social contracts and enjoy enviable
standards of living. It is very refreshing to see a political historian, with no polemical axe to grind turn on the
neo-liberal myth-makers and say with authority, much as Stefan Collini once called upon us to do, ‘no, it
wasn’t like that’. (5)

Notes

3. C. Hay, ‘“The Winter of Discontent” thirty years on’, Political Quarterly, 80, 4 (2009), 547; C. Hay,
   ‘Chronicles of a death foretold: the Winter of Discontent and construction of the crisis of British
   Keynesianism’, Parliamentary Affairs, 63, 3 (2010), 446–70. The otherwise excellent collection
   (edited by Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane) Reassessing 1970s Britain similarly
   treats the events of the winter of 1978–9 in a generalised manner, seeing them as merely the inevitable
   consequence of a series of missed opportunities by both right and left. See also M. Garnett, From
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