

‘Grassroots Conservatism in Post-War Britain: A View from the Bottom-Up’

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Abstract

It is well known the membership of British Conservative Party in the 1950s dwarfed that of other parties but there has been very little examination of the grassroots of the Conservative Party in this crucial period when membership peaked. What literature there is on local Conservatives comes predominantly from the top-down focus of national politics and revolves around four disputed images of the local party. First, high-levels of membership are associated with commendable engagement with formal politics. Second, local associations are presented as inconsequential but autonomous. Third local activists are presented as uninterested in ideology and solely focused on campaigning and social activity. Finally, associations are presented as dominated by women precisely because of their primarily social nature. This article examines the debates about these conventional images through an analysis of the rival Conservative factions in two Newcastle-upon-Tyne Associations, the location of probably the most divisive splits in Twentieth Century Conservatism. It suggests that debates about a ‘golden age’ of activism are unhelpful in understanding mass participation, that the conventional conception of autonomy obscures informal relationships, that attention to the ideological dimension is central to understanding and that the nature of female participation can only be understood by challenging the false dichotomy of social and political motivations. Taken together it argues that the study of grassroots Conservatism needs to grapple with the meanings,

motivations and practices as seen from below as well as the consequences of such activity for those above. In this way the study of politics from the bottom-up can have significant consequences for our understanding of the Conservative Party.

Introduction

The vast grassroots political organizations of 1950s Britain can appear to be from a different world when compared with those of today. Taken together the major parties reached a membership peak of over four million, more than three million of them Conservative. This period of mass participation was central to the activity of the parties themselves and has fascinated political scientists. Furthermore, recent trends in political history have stressed the general importance of local politics and activism. Viewing past politics from a grassroots perspective does more than simply add detail to existing national accounts: it can both challenge conventional stereotypes and lead to revisions of the categories on which traditional top-down accounts rest.¹ The intensive interest in bottom-up studies of politics in other organizations is not, however, found in the study of the Conservative Party.

¹ See for examples E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire" in *Essays in Labour History* ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1960); David Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906* (Manchester, 1983); Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990).

This article provides an account of the nature of political activity in the post-1945 Conservative Party from the bottom-up through the lens of Newcastle, the location of the most fractious of constituency Conservative Associations in this period. The analysis of conflict in the study of grassroots politics is important because in day-to-day activity, particularly in a Conservative Party that emphasised pragmatism, values are often not discussed. During disputes, however, assumptions (both shared and contested), are explicitly articulated. The rivalry that exists during dispute also generates considerable evidence about the day-to-day life of political parties, where the paucity of sources is otherwise a considerable problem.

The article begins by identifying four top-down images of grassroots Conservatism relating to levels of engagement; the formal autonomy of Associations; the apolitical nature of activity and the central but passive place of women within Conservative organizations. It then describes the context of Newcastle Conservative politics and the linked disputes in two Newcastle Conservative Associations. The first, in North Newcastle, is a prime candidate for the most divisive Association split in the twentieth century.² The second, related, split in Newcastle West saw the most prominent Conservative women

² This dispute is often mentioned, frequently with considerable inaccuracies see for examples Robert McKenzie, *British Political Parties: The distribution of power within Conservative and Labour parties* (London, 1964 [1955]), 242 and Austin Ranney, *Pathways to Parliament* (London, 1965), 48–49. Stuart Ball provides a much better main account of the conflict in providing a context for the Cuthbert Headlam diaries although naturally the focus is firmly on Headlam rather than the Association, see Stuart Ball (ed), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries, 1935–1951* (Cambridge, 1999), 30–37. (All subsequent references to the Headlam diaries are taken from this volume).

break from the rest of the Association over their right to organize themselves.

The article then analyses these disputes using insights from them disputes to test the adequacy of the conventional images of grassroots Conservatism, concluding that revisions are necessary to each of the components that constitute the top-down view of the constituency Conservative Association.

Images of Local Conservatism

There has been a longstanding interest in the relationship between the post-war Conservative Party and the public. Much of this literature, aiming to understand the party's electoral success, presents popular support as a passive reflection of social structure although a minority does engage with the activity which created and constituted the Conservative vote.³ Recently, this interest has been extended to the cultural aspects of party organization, most notably in Lawrence Black's recent reconstruction of the 'party political' but only 'partly political' post-war Young Conservatives.⁴ The project of recovering the culture and ideology of popular Conservatism has not, however, addressed the core of the party's organization, its associations and membership in the post-war period.

³ For an example of the later in the argument electoral recovery post-1945 was actively forged the connection of policy positions with popular disaffection with austerity and rationing see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945', *Historical Journal*, 37:1 (1994): 173-97. For an overview see Martin Pugh, 'Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and Change 1880-1987', *Journal of British Studies*, 27:3 (1988): 254-82.

⁴ Lawrence Black, 'The Lost World of Young Conservatism', *Historical Journal*, 51:4 (2008): 993; Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: culture, consumption and participation, 1954-70* (2010), 75-104.

The relative academic neglect of Conservative grassroots organizations is explained by a confluence in the different traditions that might have taken an interest. The Conservative Party's own concern was short-lived. The sheer scale of the post-war membership boom deeply impressed the party leadership. Its masses were pictured on Conservative publicity as a symbol of popular legitimacy, usually as the kind of vast but very orderly queue described in one MPs' boast that 'standing three abreast' Conservative members would stretch the 500 miles 'from Lands End through Birmingham to Berwick-on-Tweed'.⁵ However, after the relative failure of their 1958 recruitment drive mass membership largely disappeared from Conservative propaganda. By the early 1960s the party's central office declared that they had no real information about the grassroots.⁶ Subsequent scholars appear to have believed the party's claims that it never had much interest in, or a clear idea about, its own local organizations. They have consequently supposed that there are limited resources available for such a study.⁷ This compounded the pre-existing tendency of historians of the Conservative Party to focus more on its high politics.⁸ It also fed into a political science literature where mass membership was seen as a

⁵ Bodleian Library Oxford [hereafter BLO], CCO 500/11/5 Statement by Rt. Hon Malcolm McCorquodale MP, 19 March 1953; For the image see for example Conservative Party, *The Personal Touch* (London, 1948).

⁶ BLO CCO 4/8/257 Organisation Officer to Alan Jupp, 1 November 1958; Personnel Officer to Ruth Dvorkin 10 August 1961.

⁷ See for example Paul Whiteley, Patrick Seyd and Jeremy Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (Oxford, 1994), 20–1.

⁸ See for example Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (London, 1985). John Ramsden's work provides a partial exception but even here grassroots activity is frequently is not fully developed. See for example John Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940–1957* (Harlow, 1995).

distinctive characteristic of the left; as Maurice Duverger argued, Conservatives might ‘make a show of recruiting’ but this was ‘not to be taken seriously’.⁹

Those taking grassroots and local political history as their starting point offered little correction, not least because this tradition emerged from the political left and had a specific interest in the study of radical movements.¹⁰ Taken together then the preoccupations of political scientists, historians of the Conservative Party and those advocating a grassroots approach combined with problems of sources and the declining focus on its membership by the Party itself have militated against the kind of serious consideration of Conservative grassroots organizations in their own terms found in the analysis of other political parties.

What literature there is on the party’s associations and membership in the early post-1945 years then comes predominantly from the top-down perspectives of national politics and the party centre. Perhaps most obviously, Conservative associations feature in debates about increasing apathy. On one side of these discussions the appearance is usually a simple presentation of peaking and then declining party membership figures which are taken to establish a decreasing participation in the formal aspects of British politics.¹¹ Opponents of this view

⁹ Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London, 1954), 64–6.

¹⁰ For recent examples see Matthew Worley (ed.) *Labour’s Grass Roots Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918–1945* (London, 2005); We thus know more about the grassroots not just of the Labour Party but also of minor parties than we do we about the Conservatives see for example Thomas Linehan, *East London For Mosley* (London, 1996); Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991* (London, 2007); Andrew Thorpe, “The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain”, *Historical Journal*, 43:3 (2000): 777–800.

¹¹ For a high profile recent example see Power Inquiry, *Power to the People* (York, 2006).

complain that this establishes a mythic ‘golden age’ of participation based on national membership figures when not only were figures often exaggerated but also larger memberships reflected the organizational imperatives of the parties more than a genuine outpouring of popular enthusiasm.¹² Alongside these debates run three more images that have appeared respectively in discussions about the distribution of power within British political parties, electoral organization and the place of women in politics.

In the first of these, about the location of power within parties, the analysis has focused on constituency association ‘autonomy’. Autonomy here relates to the formal rights of Associations to select their own election candidates and officers and employ their own Agents and staff. In his seminal study of British political parties, Robert McKenzie implied that autonomy was of limited importance post-1945. Arguing that Associations were subservient to the will of the party centre, McKenzie claimed that it would ‘be difficult to imagine a more tight-knit system of oligarchical control of the affairs of a political party’.¹³ The central point, reiterated by other authors, is that freedom only matters if exercised. Consequently, where there is fundamental agreement on values and widespread loyalty to the centre, formal autonomy is of very limited importance.¹⁴ Conversely, those arguing for the importance of constituency autonomy have

¹² Susan Scarrow, *Parties and their Members* (Oxford, 1996) 186–7; cf. Steven Fielding, ‘Activists against “Affluence”: Labour Party Culture during the “Golden Age,” circa 1950–1970’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40:2 (2001), pp. 241–67 for this argument with respect to Labour Party membership.

¹³ McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, 291, 241–259.

¹⁴ Zig Layton-Henry, “Constituency Autonomy in the Conservative Party”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 29:4 (1976): 401–402.

stressed the absence of mechanisms of direct control from the party's central and regional offices to the Associations.¹⁵ Furthermore, they have pointed out that local activists did not generally desire the jobs that Central Office could offer, and that funding flowed more from the constituencies to the centre than the other way round.¹⁶ They have also identified specific cases, particularly the deployment of working-class candidates in winnable seats, where constituency autonomy thwarted central office plans.¹⁷ Much of historians' work on Conservative Associations has tended to agree with those emphasizing the importance of constituencies' independence to their conduct.¹⁸ Overall, both sides in fact agree that there is autonomy in the sense that each Association possesses a set of formal rights. They disagree about whether this autonomy had any significant impact on the distribution of power. For the argument of this article, the definition of autonomy is as important as the disagreement about its significance for the distribution of power.

A further related characterization concerns the place of political thought, or rather the absence of it, in the study of local Conservatism. In contrast to Constituency Labour Parties, the local Conservative Association is often depicted as a simple social club, bound together more by personal ties than

¹⁵ David Wilson, "Constituency Party Autonomy and Central Control", *Political Studies*, 21:2 (1973): 10.

¹⁶ Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, "Central Office and 'Power' in the Conservative Party", *Political Studies*, 20:1 (1972): 8.

¹⁷ John Greenwood, "Promoting Working-Class Candidature in the Conservative Party: The Limits of Central Office Power", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 41:4 (1988): 456–468.

¹⁸ See for example Stuart Ball, "Local Conservatism and the Evolution of the Party Organisation" in *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900* ed. Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (Oxford, 1994), 261–311.

ideas, whose only significant act is to get out the vote.¹⁹ Balfour's famous comment that he would sooner take advice from his valet, or to put the point more generally, the formal separation of the policy-making functions from the constituency associations, is often presented as a straightforward explanation of why ideological debate plays almost no role in their affairs.²⁰ This image has been frequently questioned in the study of the Conservative Party's ideological trajectory. The importance of the ideological dimension of local Associations has been stressed in studies across the twentieth century from the tariff reform policy of the early part of the century, through the clash between leadership pragmatism and grassroots idealism over protectionism in the interwar period to post-war debates surrounding immigration, Europe and economic policy.²¹ Nevertheless, the apolitical image persists and recent scholarship of historians and political scientists has approached grassroots Conservatism only asking how much difference did campaigning make to getting out the vote.²² This focus is

¹⁹ Duverger, *Political Parties*, 90–1; There is an extensive literature on political ideas and Constituency Labour Parties see for example Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977), 111–140; Sue Goss, *Local Labour and Local Government: A Study of Changing Interests, Politics and Policy in Southwark from 1919 to 1982* (Edinburgh, 1988).

²⁰ McKenzie, *British Political Parties*, 241–259.

²¹ E.H.H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The politics, economics and ideology of the British Conservative party, 1880-1914* (London, 1995); Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The crisis of 1929-1931* (New Haven, 1988); Nick Crowson, *The Conservative Party and European Integration since 1945* (Abingdon, 2007) and “Conservative Party Activists and Immigration Policy from the Late 1940s to the Mid-1970s”, *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* in ed. Stuart Ball and Ian Holliday (London, 2002); E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative politics ideas in the twentieth century* (Oxford, 2002).

²² This approach underpins the discussions of constituency campaigning in the Nuffield General Election studies. For a recent example from the historical literature, see Janet Johnson, “Did

bolstered by the idea that the value of loyalty to the centre overrides other considerations, making independent ideological assessment of grassroots politics both unnecessary and unimportant.²³ The result is a literature on Conservative Associations that is primarily concerned with their mundane, routine and hence depoliticized functions as a vote-mobilizing machine. This perspective seems validated by the top-down approach of many amongst the party leadership who regard this as the only significance of the party's grassroots.

Indeed, the absence of concern with policy and politics in Conservative Associations has been deployed to explain perhaps the most commented on feature of grassroots Conservative life, its gender composition.²⁴ The 'gender gap' famously involved not just greater female than male electoral support for the Conservatives but also the numerical predominance of women amongst party members. The conventional explanation of why there were so many female Conservative Party members rests precisely on the absence of politics from associational life in general and women's activity in particular, stressing the dominance of men in decision-making, and suggest that the party largely ignored women except in so far as they were expected to do all of the menial

Organisation Really Matter? Party Organisation and Conservative Electoral Recovery, 1945-59", *Twentieth Century British History*, 14:4 (2003): 391-412.

²³ David Wilson, "Constituency Party Autonomy and Central Control", *Political Studies*, 21:2 (1973): 10.

²⁴ Joni Lovenduski, Pippa Norris and Catriona Burness, "The Party and Women", in *Conservative Century*, ed. Seldon and Ball, 617-25.

work with scant reward.²⁵ However, the resulting social focus of female activism in the Conservative Party can be contrasted to the more political and macho environment of the Labour Party resulting in the suggestion that depoliticisation itself made the Conservative Party conducive to women's participation; the Party was 'more feminine' and hence more attractive to women than the Labour Party.²⁶ Again this image has been challenged. Some recent work has stressed the distinctive values of female Conservative membership rooted in middle-class ideas of local social leadership, suggesting that sustaining a perception of a right to rule involved taking personal responsibility and delivering public services.²⁷ Further, commenting on the interwar period scholars have suggested that the contrast between the macho-political Labour Party and the apolitical Conservative Association has been overblown. Indeed, David Jarvis has suggested that female political involvement was precisely one such area of contention, pointing to the extensive and widely voiced concerns within the Conservative Party about the 'feminization' of politics, with women invading male spaces and removing the 'masculine' emphasis on sharp conflict and argument from party politics.²⁸ Following on from these critiques an alternative political explanation of the gender gap has been proposed to the conventional social explanation. This argues that female

²⁵ G.E. Maguire, *Conservative Women: A History of Women and the Conservative Party, 1874–1997* (Basingstoke, 1998), 140–144.

²⁶ Maguire, *Conservative Women*, 202–206.

²⁷ James Hinton, "Conservative Women and Voluntary Social Services, 1938–51", in *Mass Conservatism*, ed. Ball and Holliday.

²⁸ David Jarvis, "The Conservative Party and the Politics of Gender, 1900–1939", in *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* ed. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska.

support was rooted the contrast between the Conservative Party success, and the Labour Party's failure, to offer policies which were distinctive and attractive to women, not just the removal of rationing and other austerity measures, but also crucially the offer of workplace equality. The gender gap in this political view is thus based in the Conservative presentation of 'equality for women as workers and citizens'.²⁹

Each of these debates has at its core a disputed image of the Conservative Association. There are thus four images which the article seeks to examine. First, the vast numbers of members and activists create a picture of extensive and commendable engagement with formal politics which can be contrasted with a contemporary and lamentable disengagement. Second, the power of Associations is understood through consideration of the formal set of rights that constitute constituency autonomy. Third, Associations appear as relatively depoliticized, giving sole focus to the campaigning functions valued by the party nationally. Finally, this depoliticized nature is one of the main reasons why women have been attracted to the party. Through the prism of the disputed environments of first North and then West Newcastle constituency Conservative Associations we offer a reinterpretation of each of these images, which questions both sides in these debates, to suggest that beginning from the

²⁹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, "Explaining the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and the Women's Vote, 1945-1964", in *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990* ed. Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Cardiff, 1996), 215-6. For an explicit contrast which sets out Labour's difficulties in this regard see Amy Black and Stephen Brooke, 'The Labour Party, Women and the Problem of Gender, 1951-66', *Journal of British Studies*, 36:4 (1997): 419-52.

grassroots offers an alternative perspective with which to more fruitfully study the dynamics operating at the local level.

The Context of Conservative Politics in Newcastle

The Conservative's Northern Area was the least favourable of any in England for the party.³⁰ At parliamentary level there were remarkably few decent prospects, even in the rural boundaries of the area and Newcastle North, home not just to what the party described as 'decent wage earners' but also to most of the city's wealthy industrialists, was the only safe urban seat.³¹ This scarcity made Newcastle North particularly desirable for aspiring Conservatives, but the party had broader electoral aspirations in the city extending to two of the other three Newcastle constituencies. The Conservatives had aims to win Newcastle West, although these were admittedly damaged by the 1948 redistribution which saw the solid Conservative area of Arthur's Hill transferred to North in exchange for the marginal Kenton ward whilst the two 'slum areas' of Benwell and Scotswood remained.³² The party actually held the East Newcastle seat from 1959-64. Only Central Newcastle was an overwhelming Labour stronghold.

The city council presented another major arena of electoral opportunity. There was intense competition between the Labour Party, who briefly obtained a majority in 1945, and the Conservative dominated Progressive Party who were returned to power in 1949 and retained this until 1958. There were of course

³⁰ For a description of the changing boundaries of Conservative area organisation see David Wilson, *Power and Party Bureaucracy in Britain* (Farnborough, 1975), 17-29.

³¹ Bodleian Library Oxford [hereafter BLO], 1/7/71 Newcastle North Basic Report 1949.

³² BLO CCO/1/11/72 Newcastle West Basic Report, 13 July 1949.

important differences between the Labour and Progressive approaches to running the city centred on the nature and purpose of planning, although not perhaps on the scale later suggested after the tenure of T. Dan Smith, the (in)famous Labour council leader from 1960-5 subsequently imprisoned for corruption.³³ However, there were also important differences between Conservatives about the Progressive Party itself. In response to the 1945 election defeat the Conservative Party nationally made the decision that the party label should invariably be used in local government.³⁴ This advice, which seemed to those opposed to it to be about much more than a simple label, was divisive across the region, and nowhere more so than in Newcastle.³⁵ Supporters of the Progressive Party saw local government as a realm for civic minded local people of distinction, whether Liberal, Conservative or independent, to offer their services to the community. Labour's partisan approach to local politics was to be deplored not emulated. It was, therefore, crucial, as the Progressive Party stressed in its publicity that they would 'develop the City by encouraging its trade, housing its people, and beautifying its surroundings in accordance with the needs and desires of its citizens, without regard to Political or sectional interests'.³⁶ At the same time the desire to follow the national lead with respect

³³ T. Dan Smith, 'Local Government in Newcastle upon Tyne: The background to some recent developments', *Public Administration*, 43:4 (1965), pp. 413-418; David Byrne, "The Reconstruction of Newcastle: Planning since 1945", in *Newcastle upon Tyne: A Modern History* ed. Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster (Shopwyke, 2001), 242-4; John Pendlebury, 'Alas Smith and Burns? Conservation in Newcastle upon Tyne city centre 1959-68', *Planning Perspectives*, 16: 2 (2001), 115-141.

³⁴ John Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940-1957*, 206.

³⁵ Northumberland Record Office [hereafter NRO], 4137/2 General Purposes of the Northern Counties Provincial Area Minute Book, 24 March 1949; 20 October 1952.

³⁶ Progressive Party of Newcastle City Council advert, *Evening Chronicle*, 11 May 1949.

to labelling provided only part of the motivation for Conservative opponents of the Progressives. This was accompanied by the view that the narrow culture of Progressive politics based in personal connections amongst and elite, was far too bound up with council dealings and a local government environment which was 'sordid, to say the least'.³⁷

Newcastle North Dispute

The dispute in North Newcastle was certainly the most acrimonious in any Conservative Association of its time and indeed quite probably it was the most fractious in the twentieth century Conservative Party. It lasted longer than that of the arguments in either St. Marylebone, 1932-45 or Winchester, 1990-2, the other potential nominees for this dubious honour.³⁸ The arguments centred on the parliamentary nomination for the safest Conservative seat in the Northern Area, emerging into the open in 1940 with Sir Cuthbert Headlam's objections to the sitting MP's attempt to pass the seat on to his son, extending through and beyond repeated attempts to unseat Headlam and only really ending when the old-guard was removed from its last bastion of power with the end of Conservative support for the 'Progressive Party' after it lost control of Newcastle City council in 1958. As described below, throughout this time the party was in more or less open civil war; it split twice, was disaffiliated from the National Union and had the threat or actuality of rival Conservative candidates standing against each other in parliamentary elections.

³⁷ BLO CCO 1/11/69 Newcastle West Basic Report, 28 May 1956.

³⁸ Ball, 'Local Conservatism', 269.

Tensions were already present in Newcastle North in 1940, when Nicholas Grattan-Doyle, its rather obscure backbench MP, decided to stand down due to ill-health. Grattan-Doyle had frustrated many within the Association and angered those outside it by maintaining control of the Association through the appointment of a small clique that kept their distance from the party's Area organisation.³⁹ As a final flourish, on retirement he influenced the executive to select his son Howard, a thirty-two year old Barrister, as candidate in a process which appeared as a kind of feudal succession that by-passed the Area organisation and gave scant consideration to the national organisation's proposed candidates. Amongst the most agitated was Sir Cuthbert Headlam, the former MP for Barnard Castle, the Northern Area chairman and PPC for what he saw as the less desirable seat of Berwick. After Headlam failed to get the North Association to revoke the younger Grattan-Doyle's selection he decided to stand against him. This first split in the Association saw Headlam and his band of supporters pull together a decent sized rival Conservative Association, numbering about 600, in the two weeks before the election.⁴⁰ With neither

³⁹ For Grattan-Doyle see Richard Treadwell, *Speculators and Patriots. Essays in Business Biography* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), pp.102–3; Donald Macraird, *Faith, Fraternity and Fighting. The Orange Order and Irish Migrants in Northern England* (Liverpool, 2005), 271; Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England 1936-1939' (Ph.D. thesis, Newcastle University, 2002), p.233.

⁴⁰ Headlam Diaries, Tuesday 2 April 1940 (p.184); Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex [hereafter M-O A], TC 46/8/B, 'The Newcastle North By-Election', pp.10, 20; Headlam Diaries, Wednesday 22 May 1940 (p.200).

candidate receiving official endorsement Headlam was elected on 6 June 1940 by a large majority, but on a very low turnout.⁴¹

Headlam was then admitted without difficulty into parliamentary party. Yet trouble remained at local level, which was removed from plain sight but not resolved by an uneasy and contested unification of the two associations in January 1941. The simmering tensions from the 1940 split evident throughout the war nearly boiled over in the run-up to the 1945 general election. As party politics re-emerged, Headlam's opponents rallied behind the newly elected Association Chairman William Temple, a prominent member of Progressive Party. In June 1945, the Association executive adopted Temple rather than Headlam as its PPC. A lid was only kept on the dispute by the intervention of regional party grandee and Headlam's friend Lord Matthew Ridley, which eventually saw the Association give a public display of overwhelming support for Headlam. Temple even agreed to propose Headlam as candidate.⁴²

After the 1945 election open hostilities resumed. Looking to the future, the ageing Headlam was desperate to ensure his successor was not among his local opponents and particularly not Temple. Headlam sought to achieve this by obtaining national support for an alternative. After exploring a range of possibilities, Headlam settled on the widely-backed suggestion of former Cabinet Minister Walter Elliott. Temple, however, resisted. Despite the

⁴¹ Headlam won 7,380 votes to Grattan-Doyle's 2,982. The turnout was 22% with other by-elections in the surrounding months was in the 40-50% range T. Katrites, 'British By-Elections in Wartime', *American Political Science Review*, 36:3 (1942), 525-32.

⁴² Headlam Diaries, Wednesday 19 February 1947; Tuesday 4 June 1945; Wednesday 4 July 1945 (pp.461, 466, 488).

intervention of national party chairman Lord Woolton, Temple refused even to refer the idea to the Association, insisting they needed a 'local man'.⁴³ Despite the constitutional irregularity of the chairman becoming candidate, Temple clearly thought himself just that person. At the same time the local party excluded Headlam from much of its activity and open attacks on him from the party Executive, Agent and Chairman became commonplace.⁴⁴ The Association Executive again voted to deselect Headlam at an angry meeting in October 1949, although the decision was overturned at an equally heated but much larger special general meeting, and then decisively by a vote of 704 to 201 at the Association AGM in January 1950.⁴⁵ A comfortable victory for Headlam in the 1950 General Election merely emphasised the ludicrous situation of warfare in the only Conservative stronghold in the region with increasing disquiet at the situation from across the Northern Area.⁴⁶

The second formal split in the Association came the following year, immediately after the AGM, another packed and rowdy affair. Temple painted himself as the victim claiming that he had 'been literally persecuted for the last two years' and condemning the 'secret intrigue from minorities... to dictate the policy of the Association'.⁴⁷ It became clear that Temple's faction was actually increasing its support beyond the Executive. Indeed, with over 1,200 members

⁴³ BLO, CCO 1/7/71 Lord Woolton to Colonel Scanlan, 10 November 1949.

⁴⁴ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 12 July 1951.

⁴⁵ Headlam Diaries, Thursday, 24 November 1949 (p.608); BLO, CCO 1/7/71, Galloway to T.F. Watson, 11 January 1950; Headlam Diaries, Tuesday 10 January 1950 (p.614).

⁴⁶ See for example the open letter to the Press from Conservative Candidates across the region *Newcastle Journal*, 20 April 1951.

⁴⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 21 April 1951.

voting, Headlam's overwhelming support of the previous year had eroded to the point where his opponents secured a narrow victory. A Temple supporter defeated Headlam's incumbent for the post of treasurer by 39 votes, while Temple himself was re-elected Chairman by a majority of 13. The seriousness of the divisions was exemplified in the battle for the post of President. Normally a titular position held uncontroversially by a person of prominence, Lord Ridley just managed to hold onto the post with a 12 vote majority.⁴⁸ Disgusted with these results, Ridley declared himself unable to work with Temple and resigned immediately. Bizarrely, Temple declared to the Press there was 'no real split in the Association' and that 'free from external intervention, [he had] no doubt that the Association [would] continue to progress from strength to strength...'.⁴⁹

Temple's public optimism was not borne out. Establishing rival Associations within a constituency was strongly discouraged by the Conservative Party.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, immediately after the AGM the pro-Headlam dissidents approached the National Union about setting up just such an organisation. On 8 May 1951, led by Ridley, they formed a 'New North Newcastle Conservative Association'.⁵¹ Strangely, Headlam equivocated in public for over a month before declaring his support for the new association because it was founded on 'sound and democratic lines calculated to prevent its control being secured by

⁴⁸ The votes were; President; Ridley 620 to J.C. Lawson's 608; Chairman; Temple 622, to G.C. White's 609 and Treasurer; Alridge 633 to Houston's 594. BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Galloway to T.F. Watson, 23 April 1951.

⁴⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 21 April 1951.

⁵⁰ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, T.F. Watson to General Director, 15 March 1951; Mr. Thomas to General Director, 25 April 1951

⁵¹ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Galloway to T.F. Watson, 9 May 1951.

any kind of caucus'.⁵² Despite Headlam's hesitation it grew rapidly, feeding from substantial resignations from the old which, in turn, denounced the new as undemocratic and unconstitutional.⁵³ On 3 July 1951, only a few weeks after its formation, over 700 people attended the new Association's first general meeting. By then it had raised several hundred pounds and had a membership of 2,548 including 1,100 who had signed a resignation declaration from the old Association.⁵⁴

Although National and Area sympathies were clearly with the new Association, it received no formal support until it forced the issue by applying for affiliation to the party centre.⁵⁵ The National Union then convened a Committee of Enquiry which considered a substantial body of evidence, the overwhelming majority of which was taken from representatives of the new Association. The evidence collected from the old Association consisted of just a brief claim of their democratic and constitutional legitimacy and a supporting petition of eighty-five office-holding Conservatives from surrounding constituencies.⁵⁶ The Committee's report found that there had been disloyalty to Headlam, inefficient administration, an unsatisfactory financial position, a failure to cooperate with the Area organisation and breaches of voting procedures. The report also

⁵² *Newcastle Journal*, 18 June 1951.

⁵³ Headlam only declared his position on 19 June after he was called to make a statement of loyalty to the old Association, which led him to demand a declaration of loyalty to him which of course was not forthcoming see BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, De Jonghe to T.F. Watson, 19 June 1951; *Newcastle Journal*, 18 June 1951; cf. DRO, D/He/133/18 Cuthbert Headlam Statement on the Dispute, 23 June 1951; DRO, D/He/133/19 North Newcastle 1940-1945.

⁵⁴ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Galloway to T.F. Watson, 3 July 1951.

⁵⁵ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, The General Director to Galloway, 27 June 1951.

⁵⁶ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, 'Petition Expressing Strong Disapproval of the Breakaway'.

accepted that the general health of the new Association testified to the majority support it received in the constituency. It reiterated the general case against the formation of breakaway Associations, but in this particular case agreed that ‘the action was justified’ and not simply ‘because the personal antagonisms were deep and unrelenting’.⁵⁷ Finding in favour of the new Association, the National Union accepted it and disaffiliated the old Association.

The ‘old’ Association responded that it was ‘completely in the dark’ about the reasons for disaffiliation but remained ‘determined to carry on as usual’.⁵⁸ It retained a substantial presence with a significant although diminished membership and control of one of the constituency’s two Conservative Clubs.⁵⁹ With Temple effectively out of the way Headlam decided to step down at the 1951 election and the Association selected Gwilym Lloyd George, David’s son and technically a Liberal MP until 1950 and described in the local press as an ‘outstanding national figure’, as its candidate.⁶⁰ The old Association was not prepared to offer its support and fielded Colin Gray, chairman of the Wallsend Young Conservatives, as an Independent Conservative, although Lloyd George easily won with over 51% of the votes on an 85% turnout.

Despite his removal from the Conservative Party Temple maintained an influence in the Progressive Party, which controlled Newcastle City Council. Throughout the 1950s the divisive debate about whether the party in Newcastle should stand under the Conservative label. When Lloyd George ended his

⁵⁷ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 12 July 1951.

⁵⁸ *Newcastle Journal*, 20 July 1951.

⁵⁹ BLO, CCO 1/11/68, North Newcastle Basic Report, 28 May 1958.

⁶⁰ *Newcastle Journal*, 20 July 1951.

ministerial career in 1957 and retired to the Lords, the resultant by-election prompted a 'last hurrah' from Temple and his followers. On 17 February 1957, the national office received a letter from Temple claiming, rather ironically, that the official candidate, William Elliott, was chosen in an unconstitutional manner. Temple asked for a meeting to discuss his (the old) Association's preferred candidate.⁶¹ The old Association responded to the inevitable rebuff by formally adopting William McKeag, a Liberal and longstanding member of the Progressive Party, as its candidate on 25 February 1957.⁶² There followed feverish activity on both sides which eventually resulted in McKeag standing down, for fear of splitting the anti-Socialist vote.⁶³ While Area officials still referred to 'disgruntled Conservatives involved in the trouble in North Newcastle' who were still on the council in March 1959, their days were numbered.⁶⁴ With the loss of control of Newcastle City Council in 1958 the party finally made the move to stand as 'Conservatives', and from 1960 this was implemented across the whole city. With the removal of Temple's last bastion of support the dispute which had dominated Newcastle Conservative politics for twenty years was finally at an end.

Newcastle West Dispute

The dispute in the neighbouring constituency of Newcastle West centred on the place of the Association's women's organisation named the Bentinck Women's Committee. The dispute revolved around the Association's attempts to bring the

⁶¹ BLO, CCO 120/2/58, Oliver Poole to alderman Temple, 19 February 1957.

⁶² *The Times*, 26 February 1957.

⁶³ BLO, CCO 120/2/58, S.H. Pierssené to the Party chairman, 18 February 1957.

⁶⁴ BLO, CCO 4/8/228, C.A.J. Norton Memo to the General Director, 19 March 1959.

women's organization under their control in line with national suggestions about Association structures. The women refused and disaffiliated from both the local association and the National Union, establishing a separate organisation which lasted from 1951 until 1966.

Part of the problem was that the constitutional position of the Bentinck Women's Committee had never been properly established. Established in the 1930s, prior to 1948 the women in the Newcastle West Association had a single constituency level organisation named after street on which the headquarters were located. This comprised representatives from all the women's ward organisations in the constituency, with Mrs. Claude Newman as Chairman from 1946.⁶⁵ In financial terms, the Association depended almost entirely on the Bentinck Committee's work. Newman and other leading Bentinck figures regarded themselves as an autonomous unit on equal terms with, and certainly not responsible to, the constituency Association.⁶⁶

In the wake of the 1945 general election defeat, the Conservative Party embarked on a major reorganisation of its constituency Associations. Conservative headquarters advocated 'fused Associations' with joint branches for men and women, abolishing the old separate male and female branch structure. Although separate women's sections were to continue (coordinated by a Women's Advisory Committee), the aim was to integrate the women more

⁶⁵ Tyne and Wear Archives Service [hereafter TWAS], 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 28 November 1946.

⁶⁶ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 29 August 1946; 21 September 1946; 5 June 1947; 5 December 1947; 7 June 1948; 5 July 1948; 14 April 1949; F&GPC Minutes, 28 April 1947 and 19 November 1947.

fully into the Associations' organisations.⁶⁷ In Newcastle West local level changes imposed by the redistribution of constituency boundaries in 1948 augmented these national pressures towards organisational change.⁶⁸ In line with National Union model rules, Association officials proposed a revised constitution with a Women's Advisory Committee composed of all female members of the Association's Executive Council. This was to have no separate funds and no authority over ward or polling district committees. The constitution did retain the Bentinck committee, allowing it to draw members from all wards, hold propaganda meetings and raise funds, but it no longer had direct representation on important committees and in every formal respect it was clearly now constitutionally subordinate to the Association.⁶⁹

The Bentinck women saw the changes as a downgrading of their status. With the leading women attending the 1948 Conservative Party conference they had immediately objected to the proposed changes.⁷⁰ They wanted their women's branch to have the highest levels of 'function and status', autonomy (particularly in financial terms), and for it to coordinate and take credit for women's work at ward level. They rejected compromises like a proposed women's divisional

⁶⁷ BLO, CCO 4/2/138, 'The Organisation of Women within the Party ([nd])'; Maguire, *Conservative Women*, p.140.

⁶⁸ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 21 October 1948; 14 April 1949; F&GPC Minutes, 5 October 1950.

⁶⁹ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 14 September 1950; List of Organisations (including their roles and powers) within Newcastle West CCA, October 1950; BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951.

⁷⁰ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 21 October 1948; BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951.

committee with the power to convene an annual meeting.⁷¹ Their demands were repeatedly discussed at Executive Council meetings and rejected by increasingly large majorities with a particular insistence on the right of the Association as a whole, rather than the women alone, to decide on constitutional matters.

As in North Newcastle the split came in 1951. At the AGM tensions simmered below the surface and there were veiled attacks on the women.⁷² Mrs. Newman, although remaining Chairman of the women's Association, was beaten decisively in the ballot for vice-chairmanship of the Association by her rival Mrs. Graham of Kenton (brought into the constituency in 1948).⁷³ Just three days after the AGM the Bentinck women declared their independence from the West Association, establishing themselves as the 'Newcastle West Women's Conservative and Unionist Association' effective from 26 July 1951. They claimed to number several hundred and were certainly much larger than the West Association's estimate of fifty presented to minimise the split.⁷⁴ The new women's Association presented this move as simply reverting 'to our original organisation' in order to retain a 'separate identity' and applied to the National

⁷¹ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 7 December 1950; 29 March 1951; 28 June 1951; F&GPC Minutes, 11 June 1951.

⁷² TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 28 June 1951; F&GPC Minutes, 9 July 1951.

⁷³ TWAS, 1579/1, Newcastle West CCA, 1951 AGM Minutes; BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951.

⁷⁴ *Newcastle Journal*, 4 August 1951. The women sent a copy of this letter to Galloway who forwarded it to the national office. BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951.

Union for affiliation.⁷⁵ The West Association responded that the women's Association had never been separate, but rather always subject to the Association's Executive.

Despite initial prospects of reconciliation on both sides it was not long before the Bentinck women were using the press to launch public attacks on the West Association.⁷⁶ There were also fierce disputes about finance including over the proprietorship of all the former women's branches' assets and especially the well-stocked building fund which had been accruing money since 1935.⁷⁷ As William Temple had close connections with the West Association (having been a previous Chairman), informed speculators made the obvious links with the North Newcastle dispute.⁷⁸ This connection made Area officials, in consultation with the National Union, even keener to facilitate reconciliation. The West

⁷⁵ Jack Galloway, the Area Agent, contradicted this in August 1951. BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951; De Jonghe Memo to Miss Fetcher, 30 August 1951, appendix 'B'.

⁷⁶ BLO, CCO 1/8/72, S.E. Atchison to chair of Newcastle West CCA, August 1951; TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Special Executive Council Minutes, 22 August 1951; BLO, CCO 1/8/72, De Jonghe Memo to Miss Fetcher, 30 August 1951, appendix 'B'; TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Special Executive Council Minutes, 22 August 1951; *Newcastle Journal*, 4 August 1951.

⁷⁷ BLO, CCO 1/8/72, De Jonghe Memo to Miss Fetcher, 30 August 1951; Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951; CCO 1/11/69, Newcastle West Basic Report, 28 May 1956; TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Special Executive Council Minutes, 22 August 1951; Executive Council Minutes, 10 September 1951; 19 November 1951; *Newcastle Journal*, 4 August 1951.

⁷⁸ BLO, CCO 1/8/72, Galloway Memo to T.F. Watson, 3 August 1951; De Jonghe Memo to Miss Spencer, 30 August 1951; BLO, CCO 1/11/69, Newcastle West Basic Report, 28 May 1956.

Association leaders were prepared for the Area officials to arrange discussions with the women. However, the women, in line with their demands for autonomy, were not compliant. By October 1951, the women's Association held that they and the West Association were two entirely separate bodies which, according to Newman, meant that there was no dispute between these two Associations; 'all that exists is the offer of cooperation on the one side and non-acceptance of this by the other side'.⁷⁹ Area officials repeatedly challenged this rather idiosyncratic interpretation of what constituted a dispute, and at each point offered arbitration. The women continually refused, denying there *was* a dispute. Increasingly, however, they voiced suspicions about the impartiality of Area decisions, pointing to the closeness of ties between Area officials and West Association leaders. When Area officials firmly opposed national recognition of the women's Association in February 1952, the women withdrew their application for affiliation to the National Union.⁸⁰

In March 1952 the West Association took control of the party premises at No.3 Bentinck Villas and posted notices informing the Bentinck women that there could be no more whist drives or other functions held there other than those the Association managed for its direct benefit. The Area and National Unions reassured the West Association of its position, that the women's Association would not be officially recognised nor would any financial assistance be taken from them. The West Executive then symbolically removed the balances of the Bentinck women's branch and the building fund, which had hitherto been carried

⁷⁹ NRO, 4137/2, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 30 October 1951.

⁸⁰ NRO, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 30 October 1951; 3 December 1951; 11 February 1952; TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 19 November 1951; 15 January 1952.

forward, from its accounts.⁸¹ Subsequently, both the West Association and the National Union decided not to concern themselves with the women's organisation, refusing to reply to correspondence received.⁸² By 1956 the Area agent commented that 'the atmosphere is much quieter now' and the women's Association seemed to be 'developing into a card-playing Club'.⁸³ The issue resurfaced only in December 1965 when the Association discussed at length the women's Association's disbandment.⁸⁴ By April 1966, the women had sold their Club House to North Newcastle Association with 'the proceeds distributed among the members of Mrs. Newman's "organisation"'. Newman had ignored an Association letter asking for a meeting on this and the Association 'agreed with reluctance to consider the matter closed'.⁸⁵

Images of Local Conservatism Revisited

The situations in North and West Newcastle provide interesting test cases for the arguments about the supposed 'golden age' of party membership in the immediate post-war years. Broadly, the national pattern of increasing membership from 1945 to the early 1950s to levels that are out of all proportion with later periods was replicated in both Associations. The claimed memberships for 1946 of 1,000 in West and 1,388 in North would be very healthy by today's standards, but occurred in organizations which had

⁸¹ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 17 March 1952.

⁸² BLO, CCO 1/10/72, Mrs. Crowe to National secretary of the Conservative Party, 12 June 1954; Mr. Streatfield to Mrs. Crowe, 13 July 1954.

⁸³ BLO, CCO 1/11/69, Newcastle West Basic Report, 28 May 1956.

⁸⁴ TWAS, 1579/6, Newcastle West CCA, F&GPC Minutes, 14 December 1965.

⁸⁵ TWAS, 1579/6, Newcastle West CCA F&GPC Minutes, 26 April 1966.

disintegrated during the war. These levels were rapidly eclipsed with the Associations claiming membership of 4,500 and 3,784 respectively by 1951. Yet these normal patterns are of particular interest as they occurred in Associations where organization was the opposite of that desired by the Conservative Party. Indeed, the disputes themselves are not the only evidence of what might be regarded as negligent or inappropriate approaches to building a local Association's strength. Even in the mid-1950s the Newcastle West Association was singled out 'by the marked absence of leaders of any quality' with the longstanding Agent regarded as a disaster who was interested in 'intrigue' and getting her own way rather than developing the party.⁸⁶ In Newcastle North the situation was even worse. The 'old' Association's complete lack of interest in membership was a major plank of evidence deployed by Headlam's supporters when securing the new Association's recognition from the National Union.⁸⁷ Where the Association executive could not be sure of political support they blocked the formation of new branches, which would have brought in many new members. They even reprimanded those seeking to create the branches for taking 'unwarranted action' without consulting the 'Senior branches of the Association'.⁸⁸ In both constituencies then organization was appalling whilst patterns of membership growth were fairly normal. This combination provides prima facie evidence against one conventional view that post-war organizational efficiency explains the boost in membership.

⁸⁶ BLO, CCO 1/11/69, Newcastle West Basic Report, 28 May 1956.

⁸⁷ BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Statement by the Viscount Ridley.

⁸⁸ There were two branches blocked, one was a branch of the Young Conservatives the other a new women's branch in Elswick war. BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Eric Snowdon Evidence to Enquiry.

However, the contrary case that the growth in membership stemmed from an upsurge in popular interest in politics is not so easily established. A more detailed examination shows that membership levels were frequently inaccurate or exaggerated and that membership did respond to organizational imperatives as well as popular enthusiasm. The Newcastle West figures provide a decent example of both inaccuracy and exaggeration. That their public estimates were always rounded to the nearest hundred itself suggests a lack of accurate membership records but in their internal discussion the approximation is made explicit with overall figures sometimes spanning a range of 500.⁸⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence of exaggeration for political reasons; In 1951 the public claim of 4,500 members was not only 1,000 greater than the estimate for internal consumption but was explicitly linked to a criticism of the Bentinck women with the claim that the 'growth could never have happened with the old separate men's and women's organizations'.⁹⁰

In Newcastle North more careful records of membership were kept, but this did not stop and the figures being manipulated in other ways. In particular, although there were rules about who could join and how they could participate, these were simply brushed aside when it suited. Most significantly, in 1951 Temple's supporters signed up several hundred members on an unconstitutionally reduced rate of one shilling, encouraging them to vote at the AGM contrary to the rule requiring participants to have been members for at least a month.⁹¹ Even clearer

⁸⁹ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 19 November 1951.

⁹⁰ TWAS, 1579/4, Newcastle West CCA Executive Council Minutes, 28 June 1951; F&GPC Minutes, 9 July 1951.

⁹¹ The necessary two-thirds majority to effect a reduction in the membership fee was only obtained after they had been signed up, and only then by using the votes of those brought in at

evidence that membership levels responded to the approach of the parties themselves can be found in the achievements of the New North Newcastle Association. When it focused on recruitment the New North Association achieved a membership of 5,358 by 1952, more than 1,500 greater than the maximum reached by the old Association in the previous year.⁹² North Newcastle had amongst the best attended annual general meetings of any constituency Association in the country; over 1,200 in 1951, about one third of the Association's membership. Accounting for this is equally complex. There were claims that people were cajoled to attend meetings, and many were present to watch a good fight rather than to participate in democratic deliberation. Once the dispute was settled in the late 1950s, meeting attendances settled down to more usual levels of about 100-150, indicating that factionalism was clearly a spur to attendance.⁹³

These points call some of the figures into question and indicate an importance for the Associations' activities in recruiting members and activists. However, they do not show that there was no upsurge in popular support for the Conservative Party. The membership figures given, whilst far from perfect indicators of support, and in need of critical reading, nevertheless remain useful. The short-term illicit practices in North Newcastle had only a limited effect on membership levels; the net increase over the year was less than 100 individuals. Even in inauspicious circumstances recruitment of new members appeared

the reduced rate (and even then the majority was contested. BLO CCO 1/8/71/1 Statement by New North Newcastle Association.

⁹² BLO CCO 500/11/5 Northern Area Membership Campaign Results, 1952.

⁹³ BLO CCO 1/12/68/1, C.A.J Norton to COO, 24 June 1957; C.A.J. Norton to COO, 22 March 1958.

relatively easy. When the North Association split in 1940 the mass observation records indicate that most voters believed there was nothing much at stake between Headlam and Grattan-Doyle and the war was a much more pressing concern to most people. Still, in the space of a couple of weeks, the new Association not only put together a decent campaigning organization but, according to independent accounts, it recruited about 600 members.⁹⁴

In Newcastle West whilst the figures are clearly approximations and significant weight cannot be placed on detailed claims about increases or decreases in membership, it would be wrong to dismiss them completely. In West Newcastle membership figures were not only presented to the public in annual reports but were also identified internally as an important indicator of success and failure.⁹⁵ The internal figures were at least informed guesses; some wards did keep careful membership lists and the breakdown of membership at ward level suggests that the overall numbers offered were not massively over inflated.⁹⁶

Thus, taken together the cases have two implications for the debate about a 'golden age' of participation. First, there is an obvious but important point that the evidence in support of both sides suggests that these arguments have been framed in a way which is too simplistic. Probing the accuracy of membership data and arguing that party organization contributed to increases in membership is perfectly consistent with the view that there was a higher level of popular interest in parties in the 1940s and 1950s than seen subsequently. Crudely,

⁹⁴ M-O A, TC 46/8/B, 'The Newcastle North By-Election', p. 21.

⁹⁵ See for example TWAS 1979/4 Annual Reports 1950, 1951; F&GPC Minutes, 11 April 1951.

⁹⁶ See for examples TWAS, 1579/20, Women's Branch Membership Lists; TWAS, 1579/21, Bentinck Young Conservatives Membership Lists; F&GPC Minutes, 9 July 1951.

concerted efforts could recruit hundreds of members and dozens of new activists in a single day in the 1940s and 1950s. This is best explained by *both* organizational imperatives on membership (which is why there was a campaign in the first place) *and* a public who were receptive to these approaches (which is why those approached were happy to join and become active).

Second, and perhaps less evidently, the cases suggest that the meaning of political activity as well as its quantity needs more careful investigation.

Although there were large numbers of participants, their motivations were much more varied than usually supposed. The reasons for the high levels of activism in our cases tell against roseate 'golden age' assumptions and included activists treating politics, and the open disputes associated with it, as a public spectacle much more than as a careful and deliberative process. Clearly, given the unusual nature of the situations in these Associations, we do not suggest that such features explain generally high levels of membership and activism seen in the 1950s. Rather the point is that the picture of the golden age moves too quickly from observing quantities of membership and activism without also being attentive to what those joining parties and attending meetings were actually doing and why.

The cases also enable us to examine debates about the place of women within the Conservative Party. Conventional explanations of the predominance of women within the Conservative Party rest on the conjunction of two claims. First, that women tended to be in the majority but whose routine work had a 'social' focus at some distance from the core 'political' work and local centres of power. Second, that the Conservative Party is non-ideological, with disputes based on personality rather than conflicts of ideas. Taking these two points

together it is claimed that 'depoliticisation' -the social, consensual and generally apolitical nature of Conservative Associations - explains the high levels of female involvement. The alternative, political explanation, suggests instead that women's activity was motivated specifically by policy stances in line with gender equality such as the Conservative attitude towards equal pay.

A surface reading of the Newcastle cases might appear to provide support for the conventional, and against the political, view. Women did comprise a majority of the membership in both Associations and certainly did do the bulk of the routine, organizational work. Much of their activity involved organizing jumble sales, whist drives and the like. Indeed, after disaffiliation the separate women's organization in Newcastle West was described as just another card-playing club. Equally, in both North and West personality and manoeuvring for control present themselves as more obvious features than ideology. Certainly, the disputes seem very different from those often found in local Labour parties, where clearly defined political programs sometimes associated with rival political parties or factions clashed.

However, a more careful examination of the cases shows that this interpretation is seriously misleading. In part the mistake is to imagine that ideological disputes will present themselves in the same ways in different parties. In the Labour Party it was often more respectable to present a personality conflict or a bid for power in ideological clothing. In the Conservative Party the opposite was usually true; the ideological content was in need of hiding. On closer inspection it is perhaps not surprising that important or even central aspects of both disputes were battles of ideas. Thus, Headlam was not simply promoting his own return to parliament. He took steps that would otherwise have been

unthinkable for him because he opposed what he saw as nepotism in the modern Conservative Party. Similarly, the old North Association was not just advancing Temple's personal fortunes but was tied into support for the progressive approach to municipal politics in Newcastle. This stressed the importance of leadership from individuals of experience and standing aside from 'politics' in local government and implied a close relationship with local Liberals.

However, more importantly the account given of what attracted women the party is mistaken. Indeed, the whole idea that the women's branches did not in general have power within Conservative Associations is misleading. The conflict in West Newcastle involved a very self-confident group of women who above all desired recognition that they were not subservient to the main association which, as it happened, was male dominated. That this manifested itself in open dispute and disaffiliation was unusual, but the mechanisms that it lays bare are not. The separate Conservative women's structures (when the absence of equivalents was a source of long-running battles within the Labour Party), were an important source of power. Further, the power and self-confidence of women in the Party was not in tension with their social and financial activity, but rather depended upon it to a significant degree. The substantial funds they raised were central to the smooth operation of the Association and consequently gave the women who controlled them significant influence.

All sides in these disputes made great efforts to call specifically for female support. In Newcastle North for example, Temple appealed to the women claiming that only he was prepared to allow them to manage their own affairs. At the same time Headlam's supporters claimed that Temple blocked the

formation of a new women's branch that he was not certain he could control.⁹⁷

Women were the object of such regular appeals for support because their activity sustained the Associations. The cases tell strongly against the view that the 'feminine', non-ideological and consensual nature of the Conservative Party attracted women. However, rather than endorsing the alternative political explanations, the suggestion is that the separation between the political and social sides of party life is artificial and diverts attention from the diverse expressions of political self-confidence by Conservative women.

The two case studies also throw light on 'autonomy'; the right of the local 'us' to refuse the unwanted interference of the outside 'others'. Conventional accounts of autonomy are confined to the formal inability of Head Office or its Area Agents to require action on candidates or staffing by Associations. Certainly, this was evident in both disputes. Indeed, Conservative Central Office thought the disputes demonstrated that autonomy had gone too far and that the Area needed to get involved at an earlier stage. Yet, Area officials *had* become involved in both disputes and in both cases, the Area Agents had clear views about how the dispute could (and should) be settled. However, Area officials removed themselves from intervention because without formal powers their participation seemed likely to inflame the situation. Area involvement in North Newcastle is particularly noteworthy because whilst all kinds of minor spats were formally discussed by the Area committees mention of this most damaging, public and acrimonious dispute is conspicuous by its absence. Whilst in private correspondence the efforts of Area officials to resolve matters are evident, in public all the Area ever said was that the Association alone had the

⁹⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 20 April 1951; BLO, CCO 1/8/71/1, Eric Snowdon Evidence to Enquiry.

right to decide matters.⁹⁸ So careful were the minute takers to avoid the appearance of taking sides that even in discussions where it must have been central minimal traces were left of a connection back to North Newcastle.⁹⁹ When it came to Newcastle West, Area level officials repeatedly offered to arbitrate.¹⁰⁰ When the women refused the offers, alleging bias at Area level, refused the offer Area officials took the matter no further realising that in part it was discussion of the dispute at Area level which was fuelling the women's suspicions.¹⁰¹ One consequence of autonomy was that the Area officials could be viewed as outsiders rather than neutral arbiters in disputes. Viewed in this way, the constraints that constituency autonomy imposed on central control demonstrate that the party is not best characterized solely by central control.

The cases illustrate two further points about autonomy. First, the formal relationships identified in the conventional understanding of autonomy do not provide an adequate account of the location of power within the party. This can be illustrated by considering the position of the Area Agents', whose roles including acting as the eyes and ears of the Central Office on the ground. A key task was to build up relationships in the constituencies they covered. Area Agents knew individuals they could trust in each of the Associations. When there were insufficient trustworthy activists the Agents, or those they trusted, attempted to involve such figures (even if, as in the case of Lord Matthew

⁹⁸ NRO, 4137/2, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 8 November 1949.

⁹⁹ They used general formulae, making thinly veiled references to 'disputes in other constituencies' but not even mentioning specific constituencies. See for example NRO, 4132/2, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 30 October 1951.

¹⁰⁰ NRO, 4137/2, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 14 January 1952.

¹⁰¹ NRO, 4137/2, Northern Area GPC Minutes, 5 May 1952.

Ridley, this meant drafting in a local Conservative grandee). At the same time, for constituency level activists, support within the Area or national levels of the party was a significant resource that could be utilized to destabilize opponents and achieve desired ends. The Area Agents gave the national view of local situations and their interpretations of disputes were readily accepted at Central Office. Mrs. Newman frequently complained that Area was hostile to the West women because of the presence of the West Association chairman at Area meetings. She was in fact wrong about the details of who attended specific meetings but the close relationship between Area officials and the West Association chairman means that her concerns were almost certainly justified. Even more clearly, when William Temple appealed directly to the National Union he was given short shrift, not just because the Area level dealt with such matters but more importantly because the Area Agent's assessment had determined Central Office's understanding of the dispute. The biases of the enquiry in North Newcastle, particularly evident in the scanty evidence collected on Temple's side, were a consequence of a decision effectively agreed in advance between the National Union and the Area Agent. If the centre could not control decisions at constituency level, the hand of Association activists was unquestionably strengthened if they were able to call upon the support of higher-level contacts. When considering the location of power within the party from the bottom-up it is particularly evident that many of the most important connections in both directions were informal.

Second, considerations about the location of power do not exhaust the importance of autonomy. Rather autonomy should be understood as possessing normative value for party activists. Agreement about the importance of autonomy stemmed from the similarity of the basic idea of local independence

to contemporary Conservative understandings of freedom, which stressed the non-interference of the political centre. The broad agreement that Association autonomy was important was demonstrated by the place that the idea of local independence played in the disputes. In Newcastle West, all sides argued that autonomy was a principle underpinning the rewriting of the constitution, with the central question being who or what possessed it. On one side, the answer was that the Association as a whole, led by its Executive, possessed the right of self-government. A part of this vision implied that no constituent section of the Association could be completely free to organize itself, independent of the rest. On the other side, the services the Newcastle West women provided to the Association entitled them to autonomy, and the related status, on a level equivalent to the Association as a whole. In North Newcastle too, arguments on all sides were repeatedly cast in terms of freedom from outside interference. Grattan-Doyle presented Headlam as an invading domestic Hitler, stressing his receipt of aid from outside the constituency.¹⁰² Temple emphasized not just the right of the Association Executive to select its own candidate, but also to select a local man. He also claimed the right of an Association to effectively deselect their MP, and certainly to prevent the MP from working against the wishes of the Association to develop a power base. Arguments from Headlam's side presented the rights claimed by Grattan-Doyle and Temple as narrow and self-serving and as the power of a sitting MP to pass the seat to his son and, later, of a party chairman to claim the seat for himself. The exercise of such powers was inimical to 'modern' Conservative values of constitutionality, fairness and democracy. However, the power of the idea of autonomy is reinforced because

¹⁰² 'Facts You Ought to Know', NNCA, cited in M-O A, TC 46/8/B, p.8 and Nicholas Grattan-Doyle, 'Farewell to the Electorate' cited in M-O A, TC 46/8/B, p.13

Headlam and his followers did not present these arguments as being in opposition to autonomy, nor did they suggest the need for it to be pragmatically tempered. Rather they recast the terms of debate presenting a different vision of the 'us' with autonomy and the 'them' threatening it. Specifically, they attacked the domination of a small central clique over the wider Association. Headlam's followers claimed the right of self-management for individual Conservatives in the constituency, thereby rejecting the Association's Executive or leaders' spurious claims for autonomy. Viewed from this perspective autonomy was much more than a formal result of National Union rules, it was an important, and contested, normative value that underpinned Association life.

In summary, our analysis of the case studies suggests revision of traditional ways of looking at grassroots Conservatism. The conventional conception of autonomy as a formal relationship between Associations and the party centre is challenged first because it obscures the informal relationships between different levels and the central role that ideas of autonomy played in structuring these and second, because it overlooks how the idea functioned as a normative value so that debates about constitutional forms and even arguments against local variation from national norms had to take the idea of local autonomy as their starting point. The analysis also challenges conventional stereotypes; of the golden age of activism, where meanings of membership must be attended to alongside studies of quantity, and the nature of female participation, where both social and political motivations were central to shaping conduct. Taken together this suggests that the study of grassroots Conservatism needs to grapple with the meanings, motivations and practices as seen from below as well as the consequences of such activity for those above. In this way the study of politics

from the bottom-up can have significant consequences for our understanding of the Conservative Party.