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THE POLITICS OF FORESIGHT

BRITISH ELECTION MANIFESTOS AND SOCIAL CHANGE, 1945–2010

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INTRODUCTION

As the 2015 general election approaches, the UK's innovation charity, Nesta, is undertaking a wide-ranging programme of research into the challenges and opportunities which the nation will face over the next five years. We have been commissioned to examine how far Britain's political parties have proactively foreseen major social, economic, political, and technological changes in their election manifestos over the last 70 years.

Manifestos have come to play a central role in the British democratic process, as both campaigning documents and programmes for government.[1] A century ago they generally consisted of the party leader's election address, which ran to no more than a few pages; nowadays the main parties all offer detailed statements of policy which in 2010 averaged more than 25,000 words.[2] Modern manifestos are often composite documents which reflect months of policy debate within the parties, yet they also seek to develop a convincing argument about the need for policy continuity or change. In this sense, British elections can be seen as a five-yearly contest between the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats to frame the nation's past and present and articulate a vision for the future.

Since every manifesto's purpose is essentially political, it would perhaps be too much to expect them to contain objective forecasts of innovations and future social trends. Nevertheless, UK parties have always been keen to show that they understand contemporary society and that their policies are relevant to the challenges of a rapidly-changing world. There is therefore much to be gained from exploring cases in which manifestos conspicuously ignored emerging issues or misread the policy environment in which a party would have to govern. Some of these cases involved apparently extraneous 'shocks', such as the 1973 oil price spike and the 2007–08 financial crisis; others related to longer-range economic, demographic, or technological developments. Crucially, of course, none of these changes had a single uncomplicated meaning; rather, their implications for public policy depended on how they were framed by opinion-formers, campaign groups, and the parties themselves.

This article is not a study of policy failure — a topic which Anthony King and Ivor Crewe have dealt with admirably in their recent book on *The Blunders of our Governments* (2013). Nor is it a wider judgment on the foresight of politicians and their officials, many of whom have been more prescient than party programmes show. Rather, we have focussed our attention narrowly on manifestos as artefacts and, within this remit, on seven case studies, ranging from climate change to demography, automation to European integration, and the welfare state to the internet. There is much else that might have been included; one way or another, almost every policy area has been affected by innovation and social change. Nevertheless, we believe our examples are wide-ranging enough to provide a basis for some preliminary conclusions. If these act as a stimulus to debate and further research, so much the better.[3]

MANIFESTOS AND SOCIAL CHANGE TIMELINE 1945–2010

1940s 1950s 1960s 1970s 1980s 1990s 2000s 2010s

MANIFESTO

1945 — Party manifestos call for measures to increase the birth rate

1950 — Labour manifesto claims the welfare state has abolished destitution

1954 — R.A. Butler commissions first government study into automation

1955 — Labour manifesto highlights potential of atomic energy and other innovations

1955 — Conservative manifesto declares expanding school population the 'most urgent problem in education' as new baby boom begins. Conservatives first warn of effect of ageing population

1955 — Liberal manifesto criticises government's 'timidity and caution' towards European institutions

1959 — Conservative manifesto calls for industrial conference to 'forward the spread and understanding of automation'

1959 — Labour manifesto proposes earnings-related National Superannuation scheme

1959 — Conservative manifesto justifies decision to form rival European Free Trade Area (EFTA)

1964 — All three parties hail the coming age of automation

1964 — Labour manifesto promises incomes guarantee for poorer pensioners

1964 — Labour manifesto insists that 'the first responsibility of a British Government is still to the Commonwealth'

1964 — Labour manifesto centered around 'white heat of technology'

1966 — Conservative manifesto calls for selective assistance for children in low-income households

1970 — Conservative manifesto proposes negative income tax to improve work incentives

1970 — Conservative manifesto proposes end to 'lame duck' industrial assistance

1970 — Conservative manifesto contains first environment section

1974 — Conservative manifesto celebrates successful investment in British Steel in policy 'u-turn'

1979 — Labour emphasises the role of 'microtechonologies' in driving growth

1979 — Conservative manifesto argues that 'too much emphasis has been placed on attempts to preserve existing jobs'

1983 — Conservative manifesto foreshadows creation of Single Market in 1986

1983 — Conservative manifesto hails 'rapid drift of jobs' into services

1983 — Conservative and Labour manifestos highlight support for new cable and broadband networks

1987 — Importance of City recognised in Conservative manifesto following 'Big Bang'

1987 — Conservative manifesto invokes 'greenhouse effect' to justify expansion of nuclear power

1992 — All parties advocate eastward expansion of EU - without discussing the implications for immigration

1992 — Rio Earth Summit; climate change appears in all three manifestos

1997 — Labour manifesto promises to 'nurture investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies' whilst recognising importance of service sector

2001 — Labour manifesto emphasises economic importance of the internet and the need to close the 'digital divide'

2005 — Liberal Democrat manifesto highlights dangers of excessive personal debt

2010 — Conservative manifesto proposes Universal Credit system

2010 — Labour and Conservative manifestos include plans to raise retirement age, but no party considers implications of new baby boom

2010 — All parties embrace notion of 'rebalancing' economy away from the City of London

2010 — Big data, privacy concerns, and broadband rollout all feature prominently in manifestos

SOCIAL CHANGE

1946 — Post-war baby boom peaks

1947 — School leaving age raised to 15

1947 — Formation of United Europe Movement

1951 — European Coal and Steel Community founded

1952 — Sociologist Peter Townsend highlights issue of 'pensioner poverty'

1957 — European Economic Community created

1960 — US scientist Charles Keeling demonstrates rising CO2 in atmosphere

1961 — Help the Aged founded

1961 — Macmillan government applies to join EEC

1965 — Formation of Child Poverty Action Group

1966 — Arthur C. Clarke predicts that 99% of human activity will replaced by machines by 2001

1966 — UK manufacturing employment peaks; Labour promises that new investment grants will favour manufacturing sector

1967 — Wilson government applies to join EEC

1972 — First report by 'Club of Rome' into global warming

1973 — UK joins EEC

1975 — Fears of 'global cooling' peak

1979 — British Telecom 'Prestel' videotex service launched

1983 — Growing awareness of the need to prepare for an ageing population

1989 — Green Party electoral breakthrough at European elections

1992 — First UK internet service provider launched

1997 — New Labour government introduces tax credits

1997 — Manifestos highlight educational opportunities of internet

2008 — Global financial crisis and 'credit crunch'

- Automation
- Poverty and the Welfare State
- Demographics
- European Integration
- De-Industrialisation
- Environment
- Internet

AUTOMATION

Whether it is viewed positively as means of removing drudgery or negatively as a threat to employment, the belief that machines might soon replace human labour is almost as old as the machine itself. Today, the debate centres around the potential effects of artificial intelligence, autonomous drones, and 'big data' on white-collar employment — with one study by Oxford University suggesting that up to 47 per cent of the US labour market is at risk.[4] Of course, many bold predictions in this field have proven false — Arthur C. Clarke's claim that 99 per cent of human activity would be eliminated between 1966 and 2001 seems particularly outlandish in retrospect.[5] Even so, the post-war UK economy has adopted labour-saving technology on a remarkable scale, beginning in the full-employment 'golden age' of the 1950s and 1960s.[6]

Though British firms had been at the forefront of developing automated tools during the inter-war years, the parties' election manifestos were slow to pick up on the trend of increasing mechanisation. Early post-war manifestos frequently mentioned the need to 'modernise' industry and develop new technologies — for instance, the 1955 Labour document enthused that 'atomic energy and other new inventions can bring dramatic increases in productivity and therefore in wealth and leisure' — but it was not until 1959 that a specific reference to 'automation' appeared. That year's Conservative manifesto called for an industrial conference to 'forward the spread and understanding of automation' in the wake of widely-publicised strikes in the motor industry. One might have perhaps expected a more prominent reference in view of the extensive discussions of the issue which took place during the 1950s: for instance, the former Chancellor R. A. Butler had commissioned an official report on automation as early as 1954, in support of his ambition of doubling the UK's standard of living within 25 years.[7]

By 1964, automation was an important theme for all parties as the potential impact of new technology became apparent; indeed, in the same year the British industrialist Leon Bagrit — founder of the largest computing firm outside the United States — gave the BBC's annual Reith Lectures on the topic.[8] Many Conservatives welcomed automation as a means of improving efficiency, stimulating exports, and reducing the need for immigration, and the party's manifesto emphasised that

> *The rapidly changing world of industrial technology is the last place for Socialism. It calls for a flexibility, and a response to new ideas and requirements, which a system of free competitive enterprise is best suited to provide.*[9]

More specifically, the Conservatives promised that they would expand the National Research Development Corporation to 'encourage the wider spread of automated equipment', whilst improving unemployment benefits and training programmes to help those made redundant by machinery.

Labour also hailed the coming 'age of automation', in a campaign that explicitly highlighted the need to modernise the nation's economy and social institutions. Like the Conservatives, the party called for stronger employment rights and greater access to training — a lack of which, it was argued, had hampered technical change in UK manufacturing. However, Labour also placed automation within the context of leisure, perhaps in order to reassure trade unionists that it represented not a threat to jobs but an opportunity to reduce working hours. The manifesto argued that

> *Automation, new sources of energy and the growing use of the electronic calculating machine are beginning to transform almost all branches of our economic and social life. As these trends develop, the importance of leisure will steadily increase.*

This strategy can be seen as an adroit means of heading off trade-union concern about automation, whilst also highlighting the party's ambitious plans to use the power of the state to develop the UK's arts and culture.[10]

The 1964 manifestos did, then, pick up on the emerging trend of automation and anticipated some of its potential effects, primarily in the field of employment. However, as our case study of deindustrialisation (below) points out, the three main parties continued to take the primacy of manufacturing industry for granted, and with the exception of Labour's brief reference to 'electronic counting machines' the replacement of a whole class of clerical workers by computing power was conspicuously missed. When manifestos in the Wilson and Heath era did refer to computers, it was primarily as an export industry in which Britain might one day excel rather than as a technology which was transforming working patterns. Only in 1979 did Labour develop the theme that 'microtechnologies' such as the silicon chip held out 'the prospect of faster growth and a better quality of life for all' — provided that 'longer holidays, … earlier voluntary retirement, and a progressive move to a 35-hour working week' were used to share out the work available.

POVERTY AND THE WELFARE STATE

One of the most significant fields for policy innovation in post-war Britain has been the social security system — which, alongside education and the National Health Service, forms a central plank of the welfare state. In the 70 years since the war, the social insurance model envisaged in William Beveridge's 1942 report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services* has been modified in a multitude of ways, but two sets of changes deserve particular attention. The first is the identification of 'new categories of need' which were inadequately covered by the Beveridgean welfare state; the second is the growing effort to bring about closer integration between income tax and social welfare benefits in order to simplify administration and improve work incentives. In both cases, the issue agenda has been shaped as much by the efforts of campaign groups, political parties, and governments to define 'need' and identify social problems as by objective changes in the nature and distribution of poverty itself.

The period immediately after the Second World War was marked by considerable pride in the comprehensiveness of the welfare state. The 1950 Labour manifesto boasted that 'destitution had been banished' by the Attlee government, and Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers' 1951 study of *Poverty and the Welfare State* appeared to confirm that a combination of full employment, contributory National Insurance (NI) benefits, means-tested National Assistance, and universal family allowances had largely abolished acute poverty in Britain.[11] At the same time, Conservative politicians and Treasury officials expressed nagging concern about the financial sustainability of welfare: as the Conservatives warned in 1950, 'Britain can only enjoy the social services for which she is prepared to work'.

The adequacy of the NI system was first called into serious question in the early 1950s, when the sociologist Peter Townsend pointed out that a growing number of retired people were becoming dependent on National Assistance, either because they did not qualify for NI pensions or because the NI pension itself was insufficient for subsistence.[12] Pensioner poverty thus became the central social policy issue of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and featured particularly prominently in the 1959 Labour manifesto, which complained that 'the living standards of more than half our old-age pensioners are a national disgrace' and promised to introduce an earnings-related National Superannuation scheme. Five years later, Labour proposed to introduce an incomes guarantee, linked to the tax system, which would provide an income supplement for poorer pensioners 'as of right, and without recourse to National Assistance'.[13] Though the Conservatives also promised to raise pension rates, Labour's greater emphasis on the issue brought electoral dividends: the over-65s were one of the few groups to swing towards Labour in the 1959 general election.

By the time Harold Wilson's government took office in 1964, however, another social policy issue was about to burst onto the agenda: the 'rediscovery' of child poverty among large and low-income families. Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend's landmark study of *The Poor and the Poorest* (1965) estimated that in 1960 more than 600,000 children had lived in households with incomes below the National Assistance scale. Abel-Smith and Townsend's research galvanised the newly-formed Child Poverty Action Group and prompted a series of policy innovations designed to tackle child poverty: higher family allowances with 'clawback' from high earners in 1968, a means-tested Family Income Supplement in 1971, and the replacement of family allowances and child tax allowances with tax-free Child Benefit during the late 1970s.

None of the major parties anticipated the emergence of the family poverty issue in their 1964 manifesto; indeed, Labour had made so many promises to pensioners that the Wilson government struggled to find the resources to deal with it. However, the Conservatives took up the issue thereafter as an illustration of the need to move away from universal provision towards a more selective welfare state. The 1966 Conservative manifesto called for 'more generous help for children in families where the income is below minimum need, to the very old, to the chronic sick, to the severely disabled and to others most in need'. One means of providing extra help for low-income families was to replace child tax allowances with a higher family allowance; this was the approach favoured by the Child Poverty Action Group and eventually followed by the second Wilson government after 1974. Another, proposed by the Conservatives in 1970, was to introduce a negative income tax which 'would allow benefits to be related to family need… increase incentive for those at work, and bring much-needed help to children living in poverty'. This foreshadowed the tax credits system introduced by the Blair government after 1997 and Iain Duncan Smith's Universal Credit scheme.[14] Yet what advocates of negative income tax did not foresee was the administrative difficulty of calculating and paying income-tested benefits in real time, even with the aid of computerisation. This problem continues to plague innovative efforts to relate welfare payments more closely to need.[15]

DEMOGRAPHICS

One change in the policy environment which all governments face is demography, which exerts a major impact on demand for public services across the age spectrum. During the post-war period, fluctuations in the birth rate have forced governments to expand or contract educational provision at relatively short notice, whilst rising life expectancy has stoked concern about a looming 'pensions crisis'. Immigration, internal migration, and changes in household structure can also have significant implications for public service delivery and the labour market.[16]

Changes in fertility are intrinsically difficult to predict, though the tendency for birth rates to rise in the wake of disruptive events (such as wars) and in periods of relative economic optimism is well established.[17] The baby boom of 1942–47 should thus perhaps have been anticipated, but wartime policymakers assumed with some justification that the reproduction rate would subsequently revert to the historically low levels of the inter-war period.[18] The 1945 party manifestos thus echoed the pro-natal concerns of the 1920s and 1930s: for instance, Labour promised to 'work specially for the care of Britain's mothers and children' through family allowances, school meals, and maternity and child welfare services, in the belief that 'parenthood must not be penalised if the population of Britain is to be prevented from dwindling'.

Despite this preoccupation with the prospect of population decline, the Ministry of Education applied itself to the task of expanding school buildings to accommodate the post-war bulge, as well as the raising of the school leaving age to 15 in 1947. The 1955 Conservative manifesto described this as 'the most urgent problem in education since the war' and promised to provide 'at least another million new school places, mostly in secondary schools', by 1960. Similar comments appeared in the 1964 and 1970 Conservative manifestos, as the more sustained baby boom of 1955–65 made itself felt. By contrast, the SDP–Liberal Alliance noted in 1983 that a falling school population released resources which could be used to raise standards and 'create better education opportunities'.

In all of these cases, the government found itself responding to fertility patterns rather than anticipating them. The same has been true of the recent increase in the UK birth rate from 669,000 in 2002 to 813,000 in 2012, which is projected to create a shortfall of more than 200,000 school places by the end of the decade.[19] None of the three main parties anticipated this problem in their 2005 or 2010 manifestos.

The pressures created by an ageing population are easier to predict and prepare for, both because the trend towards longer life expectancy is a secular one and because the lead-in time is much longer. Indeed, concern about the rising number of retirees has been a powerful influence on pensions policy since the 1950s. As early as 1955, the Conservative manifesto warned that

> *The nation has assumed very large obligations towards the pensioners of tomorrow; and tomorrow there will be very many more pensioners. For every ten people of working age there are now two of pensionable age; but within a quarter of a century there will be three.*

The party explained that it hoped to 'avoid any change in the present minimum pension age', but this would only be possible if the nation continued to expand its wealth and productivity. Indeed, the introduction of earnings-related contributions and benefits in 1959 was designed partly to improve the future finances of the National Insurance Fund.[20]

Despite the emergence of vocal pensioner campaign groups such as Help the Aged (1961) and Age Concern (1971), the problem of an ageing population receded from the political agenda for a time before returning to the fore during the Thatcher years. Since the 1980s, the manifestos of all three parties have dwelt repeatedly on the need to remodel the pensions system and increase spending on health and social care in preparation for a sharp increase in the number of elderly people in the 21st century. In 2010, for instance, the Labour manifesto outlined plans to raise the pension age to 68 by 2048 in order 'to keep state pensions affordable in the long term', and the Conservatives indicated that they would seek to accelerate this timetable, foreshadowing measures taken in the 2011 and 2014 Pensions Acts. On the other hand, the opportunities presented by an ageing population have also been increasingly recognised, especially by the Labour Party. The party's 2005 manifesto promised to create 'a new programme for older people to be mentors and coaches to gifted and talented young people', whilst the 2010 version highlighted the wider social contribution made by retirees 'as carers for family members, active grandparents, and pillars of local civic life'.

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The pursuit of closer European integration has been one of the most significant geopolitical developments in the post-war period. Half a century on from the 1957 Treaty of Rome, a European Economic Community of six members has grown to a European Union of 28, bound together by a single market, a single currency (for some members), and a complex network of political and judicial institutions. The UK has long been an 'awkward partner' in European affairs, and the Conservative Party's commitment to an in-out referendum after the 2015 general election has placed Britain's continued membership of the bloc in question.[21] EEC and EU membership has nevertheless had a far-reaching impact on British governance, foreign policy, and economic development. For instance, the proportion of UK exports sold to the original EEC six rose from 13.1 per cent in 1958 to 41.3 per cent in 1990, with a corresponding decline in the importance of Commonwealth trade, and almost half of all British trade now takes place within the EU.[22]

Despite some early enthusiasm for the concept of European unity, British policymakers were slow to grasp the opportunities which it presented, and Conservative and Labour manifestos from the 1950s reflect the scepticism which underlay the decision not to become a founding

member of the Common Market.[23] In 1950, for instance, both main parties paid lip service to 'the aim of closer unity in Europe' but placed much greater emphasis on Britain's duty to the Commonwealth. Only the Liberal Party went further, calling in 1955 for the UK to 'play its proper role in the evolution of organs such as the Council of Europe and the Coal and Steel Community' and criticising the government's 'timidity and hesitation' in this sphere. By 1959 the EEC had been established, but the Conservatives merely touched on the government's rival plan to create a European Free Trade Area and the Labour manifesto ignored the development altogether. The first British application to join the Common Market, in 1961, had thus hardly been foreshadowed at the previous election. Thereafter the Conservative and Liberal parties were firmly committed to membership, but Labour remained lukewarm, insisting in 1964 that 'the first responsibility of a British Government is still to the Commonwealth'.

After the UK joined the EEC in 1973, calls for the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the reduction of the British budget contribution became manifesto staples, but the parties also showed some foresight about the direction of future integration. In 1979 the Liberal Party advocated UK participation in economic and monetary union, while the Conservatives supported greater 'co-ordination of Member States' foreign policies'; the 1983 Conservative manifesto also called for 'the removal of unnecessary restrictions on the free movement of goods and services between member states', foreshadowing the 1986 Single European Act. By 1992 all three parties were looking forward to enlargement, including the admission of new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. What was not foreseen — either in manifestos or by the Blair government — was the inflow of migrants from new member states which would follow enlargement in 2004, with significant social and political consequences. Nor did any party explicitly anticipate the destabilising impact which the 2007-08 banking crisis has had on the Eurozone, though opponents of the single currency have been able to claim with some justification that their scepticism has been vindicated.

DEINDUSTRIALISATION

The decline of manufacturing industry and the growing dominance of the service sector have been central to the economic and social transformation of post-war Britain. UK manufacturing employment has fallen from a peak of almost nine million in 1966 to less than three million today, contributing just one-tenth of GDP.[24] Though the UK remains a global leader in high-tech sectors such as aerospace and pharmaceuticals, many of the industries which made it 'the first industrial nation' — coal, textiles, shipbuilding, and iron and steel — have virtually disappeared. The counterpart of deindustrialisation has been the rapid growth of the service sector — especially, but not only, financial services, education, and retail.

To a certain extent, the beginnings of this shift could be foreseen as early as the 1950s, when the challenges of 'automation' began to appear on the political agenda. Until the Thatcher era, however, awareness of the implications of new industrial processes rarely extended to an acceptance that the UK manufacturing sector as a whole might become smaller and more specialised. Rather, all three parties' manifestos continued to emphasise the continued importance of industrial production during the 1960s and 1970s. Policy bias towards manufacturing was most starkly evident under the 1964–70 Wilson government, partly because the Hungarian economist Nicholas Kaldor believed that it held the greatest potential for productivity and export growth.[25] The 1966 Labour manifesto explained that new investment grants would 'differentiate sharply in favour of manufacturing industries, upon which the competitive strength of the economy depends'. Though the Heath government took office in 1970 promising to break with Labour's interventionism, it went to the country four years later boasting about the 'massive ten-year expansion and modernisation programme' it had launched for British Steel.

Only after Margaret Thatcher became Conservative leader did it become fashionable to argue that government should allow deindustrialisation to take its course. The 1979 Conservative manifesto complained that 'too much emphasis had been placed on attempts to preserve

existing jobs' and emphasised the importance of entrepreneurship and small business — a theme which the Liberals had often sounded in the past. The 1983 Conservative manifesto hailed the 'rapid drift of jobs' into services, whilst the 1987 version underlined the growing economic importance of the City of London in the aftermath of the 'Big Bang'. By 1997 this structural transformation had been accepted by all parties, though New Labour still promised to 'nurture investment in industry, skills, infrastructure and new technologies'. Eight years later, the party matched its support for manufacturing with a commitment to help Britain's financial services industry 'prosper' within an appropriate regulatory framework.

Most economists and policymakers now regard some degree of deindustrialisation as inevitable in advanced industrial economies, especially those (such as Britain) which are closely integrated into world markets. Nevertheless, the 2007–08 banking crisis brought into sharp relief the risks associated with a large financial services industry, prompting a spate of proposals for 'rebalancing' the UK economy both spatially and sectorally away from the City of London. None of the 2005 party manifestos anticipated the financial crisis, though the Liberal Democrat document included two prescient warnings from the party's Treasury spokesman Vince Cable: that the government had failed 'to contain the explosion of personal debt' and was 'making unrealistic assumptions about future growth'. By 2010, the Liberal Democrats were accusing Labour and Conservative governments of creating 'an unsustainable economy, preoccupied with the artificial wealth of inflated property prices rather than productive work and invention', and promised to 'break up the banks and build up diverse local and regional sources of business finance'. The Conservatives also promised to 'build a more balanced economy that does not depend so heavily on the success of financial services, and where all parts of the country share in the gains', whilst Labour argued that the Brown government had already begun to develop 'an activist industrial strategy' focussed on 'the new digital, transport and energy infrastructures that will support the return to sustainable growth'. The extent to which the coalition has succeeded in creating 'a fairer and more balanced economy' is likely to be a major topic of debate in the run-up to the 2015 election.

CLIMATE CHANGE

While environmental issues in the broadest sense have always figured prominently in British politics, the emergence of 'the environment' as a distinct field of policy is a relatively recent development — reflecting the growing prominence of 'post-materialist' issues across all Western nations since the 1960s. Though manifestos in the years after 1945 frequently contained references to issues such as pollution and soil quality, it was only in 1970 that a manifesto first included a dedicated environment section. Such passages have since become the norm, complemented in some cases by separate 'Green Manifestos' and efforts to highlight the environmental implications of other party policies. The proportion of manifesto content devoted to environmental protection has correspondingly increased from an average of 0.6 per cent in 1945 to almost 6 per cent in 2010.[26]

Despite this growing emphasis on green issues, manifesto writers have not always been successful at identifying emerging environmental trends or spelling out the environmental impact of their policy proposals. Though a number of missteps could have been chosen for analysis — from dystopian predictions of over-population in the mid-1970s to the failure to mention ozone depletion a decade later — the issue of climate change best reveals the conflicting political, economic, and environmental priorities of the three main parties.

The notion that man's activity has an impact on climatic conditions dates back to ancient Greece, but it was not until 1938 that scientist Guy S. Calendar linked the burning of fossil fuels and the emission of carbon dioxide with global warming. As further evidence emerged to support this thesis during the 1950s and 1960s, scientists became increasingly concerned about its consequences. Although fears of a new ice age made headlines during the mid-1970s, by the early 1980s most climate scientists agreed that man-made global warming was occurring.[27]

The issue of climate change was conspicuously absent from British election manifestos during the late 1970s and early 1980s, despite environmental fringe organisations in all three parties, numerous newspaper reports on the 'greenhouse effect' and a growing number of parliamentary questions related to the topic.[28] To an extent this omission can be explained by the uncertainties which continued to exist within the scientific community over the nature and speed of global warming.[29] Perhaps more pertinent, however, was the UK's continuing reliance on coal for power generation and the belief that North Sea oil could transform the prospects for British industry. Moreover, unlike the issue of air pollution — which did appear in manifestos in the 1970s — the threat of climate change seemed to have little immediate effect on Britain and was not susceptible to the kind of quick 'technological fixes' favoured by Labour and the Conservatives.[30]

It was thus not until 1987 that a reference to climate change appeared in the Conservative manifesto, *The Next Moves Forward*. The party warned that

> *The world's resources of fossil fuels will come under increasing strain during the 21st century; so may the global environment if the build-up of carbon dioxide — the so-called 'greenhouse effect' — significantly raises temperatures and changes climates.*

Perhaps significantly, this reference appeared in a section which sought to justify the development of a new generation of nuclear power stations, opposed by both Labour and the SDP–Liberal Alliance in the wake of the miners' strike and the Chernobyl disaster.

Environmental issues reached a new level of prominence in 1992, following the Green Party's remarkable breakthrough at the 1989 European elections. Climate change appeared in all three party manifestos, as Labour and the Liberal Democrats committed themselves to cuts in Britain's CO_2 emissions and the Conservatives promised to stabilise them. The newly merged Liberal Democrats paid the greatest attention to climate change in a manifesto which included an innovative 'environmental balance sheet'. Proposing a number of ideas — including carbon taxes and emissions trading — which would eventually form the backbone of UK government policy, the party sought to renew its claim to be Britain's 'greenest party' and recapture votes lost to the Greens.

Alongside this electoral imperative, there were three other reasons why the main UK parties had suddenly awoken to the issue of climate change. Firstly, by 1992 the science on the issue had become clearer and appeared to have widespread international support, culminating in the Rio Earth Summit which took place two months after the election; all parties agreed that the Prime Minister should attend. Secondly, the issue had received much greater attention from the Conservative government in the years since 1987. Margaret Thatcher placing the threat of climate change centre stage in her highly publicised 1988 speech to the Royal Society, and the government followed this up with the influential 1990 White Paper *This Common Inheritance*. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats responded to this 'greening' of Conservatism with comprehensive policy documents of their own.[31] Finally, the emergence of the concept of 'sustainable development' meant that environmental protection had come to be seen as compatible with economic growth, and even as a potential contributor to it. The success of British manufacturers in developing renewable energy technologies allowed the political parties, especially Labour, to present the fight against climate change as a potential boon for British industry.

The 1992 manifestos thus largely established the parameters of the main parties' engagement with the issue of climate change. Each party claimed that climate change was a vital issue for the world, promised further global action, included a reference to cutting emissions, and focussed on the possibility of 'green growth' through energy conservation and the development of renewables. Subsequent Conservative manifestos have continued to highlight the relationship between conservation and conservatism — most notably with the 2010 'vote blue go green' slogan — but have favoured an approach rooted in personal responsibility rather than government intervention: for instance, the party has been wary of proposals for higher taxes

on drivers and air passengers. Labour, by contrast, has been more willing to spell out specific measures and has been keen to highlight the role of active government in combating climate change, particularly by supporting 'green jobs'. The Liberal Democrats have tended to take a similar approach, though the party has been more aggressive in its commitment to lowering carbon emissions and more ready to adopt policies which penalise high emitters.

THE INTERNET

The internet has been the most transformative technology of the last 30 years, changing the way people work, shop, learn, interact, and conduct politics. As one recent *Technology Manifesto* pointed out, 'from education to healthcare and from energy to transport, no policy area is immune from its influence'.[32] Indeed, in quantitative terms alone the impact of the internet on British life has been staggering: 36 million Britons access the web every day, 73 per cent of adults purchase goods and services online, and internet-related activities are projected to account for 16 per cent of GDP by 2016.[33]

It has sometimes been suggested — as an indicator of the political parties' lack of foresight — that no UK manifesto before 2001 mentioned the internet. On closer inspection, we have found that this is an urban myth. If anything, manifesto-writers have been more successful at spotting the potential of the internet than most other emerging trends.

Today the term 'internet' is used to describe a host of technologies used to communicate between electronic devices. However, the rules and networks behind the contemporary internet are both specific and a relatively recent development, dating from opening up of the US military's ARPANET in the mid-1990s. Prior to this a variety of platforms existed, including the videotext-based French Minitel and British Prestel systems, which used telephone lines and a variety of micro-computers, terminals, and television to distribute basic information, allow simple transactions, and provide limited email functionality.

In the early 1980s, when these technologies were in their infancy, UK manifestos were remarkably prescient in imagining their potential. The 1983 Conservative manifesto included a reference to the party's commitment to 'sanction the launch of new cable networks to bring wider choice to consumers, not just for entertainment, but for the whole new world of tele-shopping and tele-banking'. Indeed, the latter reference was particularly notable given that a banking service via Prestel had only recently been launched. Labour also included support for these early online experiments in its 1983 manifesto — a document which remains famous for its forthright espousal of nationalisation and planning. For instance, Labour promised that British Telecom would not only remain in public ownership but would also be given sole responsibility for creating an integrated national broadband network. Moreover, in an anticipation of later demands for e-voting, Labour pledged this this network would 'promote the development and use of new information and communication services to support a wider democracy'. Yet references to the potential impacts of computer-based connectivity waned as fast as they had appeared. The commercial failure of the Prestel system and the restrictions on the emerging internet — public access to which continued to be discouraged by the government into the 1990s — meant that it was not until 1997 that party manifestos once again broached the issue.

In 1997 — the UK's first 'internet election' — all three main parties set out detailed policies for the development of the 'information super-highway', with a common focus on the need to expand internet access and improve computing skills.[34] All three parties promised to work with industry to ensure that schools, libraries, and hospitals were connected to the internet by the millennium. Labour also proposed to create a new 'National Grid for Learning' and an email account for every student, whilst the Liberal Democrats were impressed by the potential for information technology to 'decentralise work' and reduce the need for commuting.

This emphasis on access and education reappeared in the 2001 manifestos, with both Labour and the Liberal Democrats promising to increase funding for computer equipment in schools. However, 2001 was notable for being the first election in which a manifesto referenced the wider economic impact of the internet — an issue which had gained public salience as a result of the 'dot–com bubble' between 1998 and 2000. In a section entitled 'Digital Nation', the Labour manifesto argued that a 'digital divide' would hurt business and that universal access to the internet was 'vital to effective markets'. A re–elected Blair government would place all government services online by 2005 as a means of improving accessibility and encouraging e–commerce.

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of the rapid growth of internet usage during the 2000s, the web did not feature in two of the 2005 manifestos and made only a brief appearance in the Labour one. By contrast, the 2010 documents all included extended discussions of digital challenges and possibilities. One common theme was the economic potential of the technology sector, with the Conservatives expressing the hope that Britain might become 'a European hub for hi–tech, digital and creative industries' on the model of Silicon Valley; another was the need to improve the UK's digital infrastructure by rolling out fibre–optic broadband, a programme which Labour proposed to finance through a levy on fixed–line telephones. More contentious were the issues of copyright and privacy which the digital revolution raised. For instance, Labour promised to 'update the intellectual property framework that is crucial to the creative industries –and take further action to tackle online piracy', building on the tough measures against copyright infringement which had been included in the Digital Economy Act 2010 and opposed by the Liberal Democrats. For their part, the Liberal Democrats promised to 'end plans to store your email and internet records without good cause', whilst the Conservatives combined a critique of Labour's 'database state' with proposals for publishing government data in an open and standardised format.

CONCLUSION

This report has identified seven key areas in which the manifestos of the UK's three main parties have either anticipated or failed to anticipate emerging trends. Though the cases we have studied are by no means comprehensive, it is nonetheless possible to draw some tentative conclusions. We hope that these will help voters, journalists, and policymakers to read the parties' 2015 manifestos against the backdrop of recent history and to evaluate their arguments more critically.

WHEN?

The case studies examined here suggest that the variable prescience of party election manifestos might be explained in terms of three main factors. Firstly, there is the question of political context: the type and timing of the election campaign, the party's strategic position, and the manifesto's objectives.

In many respects, 2015 is set to be a textbook Westminster election — a close-fought contest at the end of a five-year Parliament, during which all the parties have had ample time to refine their policies. Elections of this type have often produced the most detailed and self-consciously forward-thinking manifestos, highlighting issues such as automation in 1964 and the internet in 1997. By contrast, the documents produced for 'snap' elections tend to be shorter and more ephemeral. Perhaps the best examples are the February and October 1974 manifestos, which focussed on the implications of the oil price spike, the miners' strike, and rising inflation.

The secular trend towards longer manifestos has also led to a closer engagement with social, economic, and technological trends, especially since the 1980s. For instance, all three parties have sought to show that they are in touch with the modern world by highlighting the policy challenges presented by an ageing population and climate change. However, the tendency to offer a discursive analysis of the nation's prospects has sometimes been offset by the desire for a more tightly-focussed campaigning document. The 2005 Conservative manifesto, *Are You Thinking What We're Thinking?*, was built around six focus-grouped slogans and ran to just 8,000 words, with policy details relegated to separate mini-manifestos. In the same election, the Liberal Democrats published their programme as a tabloid newspaper so that it could be delivered cheaply and easily to target voters.[35] Though neither of these innovations was repeated in 2010, they highlight the potential for manifestos to evolve in new directions in an age of media-driven campaigning.

WHAT?

Secondly, the treatment of emerging trends in manifestos can be seen to have varied according to their perceived social and political implications. Since manifestos are largely designed to attract votes, parties have every reason to highlight beneficent innovations — such as the internet — as part of an optimistic vision of the future. Potentially destabilising developments such as deindustrialisation are somewhat harder to deal with. Politicians may think it best to ignore them, or they may believe that the electorate will give them credit for facing up to 'tough choices'.

The Labour and Conservative parties' responses to this dilemma have traditionally been shaped by their very different political cultures. In particular, the Labour Party's longstanding association with the trade union movement made it difficult to welcome structural changes in the economy which threatened to destroy existing jobs; and when Labour manifestos did refer to automation and deindustrialisation, they emphasised the need for an active state to cushion the pain and spread the benefits. By contrast, the Conservatives have frequently used social and economic developments to cast doubt on the viability of the post-war settlement, an approach encapsulated in the title of Enoch Powell and Angus Maude's book *Change Is Our Ally* (1954). Demographic change and the emergence of new categories of need have been used to justify

changes in the welfare state, whilst the decline of manufacturing industry and the rise of the service sector have weakened trade union power and reinforced the economic and political primacy of south east England.

Parties have also shown a predictable tendency to highlight trends which fit with their policy priorities and campaign themes. For instance, Labour's discussion of the internet in 1997 reflected Tony Blair's mantra of 'education, education, education', whilst the 2010 Conservative manifesto highlighted the potential for open-source data to improve government transparency as part of the 'Big Society' agenda. More generally, the Liberals and Liberal Democrats have frequently sought to stake out distinctive positions on issues such as European integration and the environment, seeking to attract voters who are disillusioned with the left-right conflict between the two larger parties.

HOW?

Finally, it is worth considering how well parties have engaged with change and innovation. In a sense, identifying an emerging trend is the easy part; the real challenge is to judge its speed and implications and devise an appropriate policy response. Here the record of the main UK parties has been decidedly patchy. Too often, manifestos have veered between neglect of key developments and exaggerated rhetoric over a supposed 'age of automation' and a looming demographic 'crisis'. Likewise, successive government have been keen to highlight the potential for new technology to transform public service delivery, but have found it much harder to introduce new IT systems on time and on budget.[36] Opposition parties can find it especially difficult to anticipate the challenges of implementation. For instance, using the tax system to pay social benefits has often seemed a good idea in principle, but the Wilson government's abortive incomes guarantee was only the first of several troubled attempts to make it work in practice. Major policy blunders are perhaps as likely to stem from an uncritical embrace of innovations as from a failure to notice them.

Whether the parties' 2015 manifestos will repeat these past mistakes remains to be seen. Manifesto writers have certainly sought to engage more seriously with new developments in recent years. Even so, voters will be well advised to read the documents critically and carefully, paying as much attention to what they do not say as to what they do. Only then will their potential value as aids to democratic choice be fully realised.

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