

‘One of the most backward areas of the country’: The Labour Party’s Grass Roots in South West England, 1918–45

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In Britain as a whole, the period between 1918 and 1945 saw the Labour Party move from being the third party in the state to a position of majority government. Most regions of Britain saw a similarly impressive improvement in the party’s electoral fortunes. Yet the four counties to the south and west of Bristol, although seeing some progress, remained, in the language much used by Labour organisers of the time, ‘backward’.¹ In Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset, Labour’s profile did increase in this period, but from an extremely low base and to a far lesser extent than in most other regions. Only two of the region’s 27 constituencies *ever* elected a Labour MP before 1945: Frome, in Somerset, in 1923 and 1929, and Plymouth Drake in 1929. This meant that the 189 parliamentary contests at the seven interwar general elections yielded only three Labour victories. It was only in its national *annus mirabilis* of 1945, indeed, that Labour in the South West even managed to displace the Liberals from second place in terms of votes won. But even then, only six of the 27 constituencies elected Labour MPs: all three in Plymouth, two in Somerset (Frome and Taunton), and one in Cornwall (Penryn and Falmouth). Perhaps because of this relative lack of success, historians have been slow to study the region.² Yet, attention to it might tell us much, not just about Labour in the South West, but also about the development of the party more generally. Therefore, this chapter seeks to offer a reappraisal of Labour in the South West in this period. It will focus on the extent of Labour’s weakness, explain the reasons for it, and identify the effects that this weakness had on the outlook of the party and its activists down to, and arguably beyond, 1945.

The South Western Context

In order to understand the nature of Labour politics in the South West, it is necessary first to appreciate the very difficult conditions in which the region’s Labourites had to operate in the period. The first obstacle was the social and economic nature of much of the region. Although we should avoid excessive determinism, Labour tended, in this period, to fare better in areas with a high level of industrial workers, and worse in areas where there were significant numbers of agricultural workers and middle class people. In the South West, both groups

loomed large. In 1931, agriculture was the occupation of more than 30 per cent of the male workforce in eight of the 27 constituencies; in a further seven, it represented between 20 and 30 per cent.³ Only in the five borough seats (three in Plymouth, plus Exeter and Bath) and in largely urbanised Torquay was the figure lower than ten per cent. In South Molton, the figure was 50.4 per cent; only three constituencies exceeded this figure in the whole of the United Kingdom.⁴ Similarly unlikely to pay much heed to Labour appeals were the traditionally 'Radical' fishermen of the St Ives division of Cornwall,⁵ who made up 13.6 per cent of occupied males there. Conversely, industrial workers tended to be less numerous than in other parts of Britain. There was coalmining in the Frome division of Somerset, where 17.5 per cent of the male working population in 1931 were miners; tin mining and china clay in Cornwall, and quarrying in South Dorset. The footwear industry was a significant employer in the Frome constituency. But in most cases, these industries were too small, in terms of employment, to offer any chance of Labour winning the seat. Tiverton town, for example, was well known as a textile centre. But even had the workers there been inclined to Labour politics – a big assumption indeed, given the resilience of paternalism in the textile works – then the number of workers would have been dwarfed in a constituency which stretched many miles beyond the town to the Channel coast at Dawlish.⁶ (In fact only 2.1 per cent of the constituency's male workers in 1931 were employed in the textile industry.) Even the major cities posed problems. Plymouth and, to a lesser extent, Exeter had connexions with the armed forces that tended to inhibit the development of Labour politics, or at least the success of Labour at the polls. If military personnel are taken as middle class then it is noteworthy that Plymouth (39.3 per cent) and Exeter (32.1 per cent) were both much more middle class in occupational composition in 1931 than what might be seen as comparable towns and cities, such as York (27.3), Oxford (26.1), or Norwich (25.1). Exeter, like these others, was a county town and service centre for a largely agricultural hinterland; unlike them, however, it did not develop a particularly important industrial base.⁷ Meanwhile, the phenomenon of an ageing population, already discernible as a result of retirees migrating to the area, was an inhibiting factor for Labour in some of the more urbanised coastal areas, like Weston (in Somerset) and Torquay.⁸ Some social changes did offer greater potential, such as the very rapid development and urbanisation of East Dorset around Poole.⁹ But, on the whole, the South West was not an area that seemed to offer Labour great hope in socio-economic terms.

Second, there was geography. Due to the low density of population in much of the South West, most of its constituencies were very large in area and had relatively poor communications. The unwary observer might assume that seats with the names of small market towns were compact constituencies, most of whose voters lived in or close to those towns. But they would be wrong to do so. The Bridgwater constituency in Somerset, for example, was huge, covering the whole of the northern coast of Somerset and its hinterland. It seems unlikely that it could have been won at the 1938 by-election by the Independent Progressive candidate, Vernon Bartlett, had he not been generously subsidised by Sir Richard Acland (Liberal) and Sir Stafford Cripps (Labour), and lent an election agent and a car by

the latter.¹⁰ The constituency to the west of Bridgwater, Barnstaple, covered the whole of the north Devon coast and some way inland. South Molton, named after a small market town between mid and north Devon, in fact stretched from Crediton, close to the outskirts of Exeter, in the South, to Great Torrington in the north, a distance of about 30 miles. Similarly, Tavistock, named after the stannary town which formed its main urban centre, was actually a vast expanse which stretched from the outskirts of Plymouth to cover much of Dartmoor, a fact which placed great strain on candidates and organisers who had to try to hold meetings 'in the most remote villages'.¹¹ Even in Frome, ostensibly one of the more compact constituencies, it was 14 miles from Frome in the south east to Keynsham in the north west, and 16 miles from north east to south west. Given that the constituency was significantly contoured, and that main road and rail routes to and from Bristol therefore largely by-passed it, transport was an obstacle to members trying to attend Divisional Labour Party (DLP) meetings from outlying towns and villages.¹² These difficulties were especially pronounced at elections, where a lack of polling stations could involve people 'having to walk many miles' in order to cast a vote.¹³ It was hard to set up new Labour groups in the scattered villages of these constituencies. Rivalry between different centres within a constituency could also lead to problems. Further problems could be created if those willing to act as DLP officials lived at the wrong end of the constituency. Of course, it was the same for all parties, but Labour tended to depend more than its rivals on constituency-level meetings on a regular basis, and the difficulty of holding these, or at least of getting decent attendances, was an obstacle. Fare pooling by delegates could alleviate some of the worst effects, where it was adopted.¹⁴ By and large, however, Labour's rivals were more likely to be able to afford the means of overcoming such obstacles, like paid agents and generous travel expenses (including, certainly by the 1930s, a car allowance), than Labour was itself; and at election times, Labour's rivals had far more cars with which to transport supporters to the polls.¹⁵ The Liberals and Conservatives had also developed networks of groups and clubs in many parts of the region, creating an associational culture that Labour could not hope to rival outside the main urban centres. It would have taken a massive effort by Labour, with a significant national input, to have overcome some of the worst obstacles posed by geography; and there was never the will, or the means, to mount an effort on such a scale.

These economic, social and geographical factors hindered the development of trade unionism. The onset of agricultural depression from 1920 onwards, combined with the heavy levels of indebtedness of many newly owner-occupying farmers, meant that there was little toleration of the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW). Its membership in this region was low, and there was far less farming trade unionism here than in, say, Norfolk, where a different kind and scale of agriculture did offer some shelter for the union.¹⁶ The railways, of course, had a presence across most of the region, and members of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), in particular, were often key figures in local Labour politics. In some smaller communities, they might be practically the only trade unionists present.¹⁷ There were also localised centres of union strength, reflecting the prominence of particular industries: both the Somerset Miners' Association (SMA,

affiliated to the Miners' Federation of Great Britain) and the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) had a significant presence in the Frome constituency, for example. But even in conditions of full employment in 1944, the SMA had a total of only 2,600 members.¹⁸ Workers' Union membership was high among china clay workers around St Austell in the Penryn and Falmouth constituency during the post-Great War boom; but as recession set in, early in the 1920s, it fell by 90 per cent.¹⁹ The development of general unions like the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) in the interwar period probably helped Labour by unionising at least some of the workers in the newer light industries in the region. But, in the South West as a whole, trade unionism was relatively weak. It is also worth bearing in mind that, as Claire Griffiths has shown, even when unions were relatively vibrant, this did not necessarily feed through into support for Labour.²⁰

Of course, it would not do to be overly deterministic. In recent years, scholarship on the rise of Labour has moved away from socio-economic determinism and towards a new emphasis on language and agency. But the South West provides a good example of why we should not see the determinist/agency debate in 'either-or' terms. Here, what might be called the 'objective context' limited Labour's potential to find languages that could be used to mobilize support. For example, one of the party's keenest areas of propaganda, at least until the advent of the second Labour government in 1929, was to attack unemployment, making great play of the slogan of 'Work or Maintenance'. Given that it was difficult to advocate concrete solutions to joblessness, however, Labour tended to focus on the 'maintenance' part of the slogan. But the unemployment insurance scheme, which was the basis of such 'maintenance', did not cover agricultural workers before 1936, and so Labour's attacks fell largely on deaf ears. Meanwhile, Labour's advance was blocked by two further factors. The first of these was a patriotic and imperialist Conservatism, which, in the aftermath of the bloodiest war in Britain's history, and, given the region's extensive military and, still more, naval connexions, was a formidable obstacle. Second, Labour was also blocked by the continuing resilience and, for many, relevance of the language of Liberalism used by a Liberal Party which, although wounded by the party's problems of the period since 1910, remained in reasonable organisational fettle.²¹ The splits of 1886 and 1916–23 were both overcome, to a very large extent, in the South West, at least in the more rural areas; as late as 1929, all the five seats in Cornwall went Liberal, and the county became something of a refuge for prominent members of the party who had lost, or were about to lose, their seats elsewhere. It might be thought that this would leave a radical legacy to which Labour could adhere, but a key problem was that the Liberalism of the South West tended to be somewhat Gladstonian in outlook, emphasising religious nonconformity, retrenchment, and self-reliance: the Cornish Liberal revival of 1929 might be at least as attributable to the controversy over the Revised Prayer Book as to the radical plans of Lloyd George's *Yellow Book*.²² Although South Western Liberalism did ultimately succumb to a third split, in 1931–32, it still retained sufficient residual strength to hinder Labour very considerably indeed in much of the region. And, of course, agency was not the

preserve of Labourites. Their political enemies were assiduous in countering any Labour appeal with alternative models and activities. As Nick Mansfield has shown, after 1918 'gentry, clergy and farmers' provided in many rural areas a 'dynamic leadership' which 'skilfully exploited the possibilities offered by new village institutions – ploughing matches, Women's Institutes, village halls and those connected with the commemoration of the war – to reinforce paternalism and discourage radical political action'.²³

Labour's Electoral Weakness

All of these factors combined to ensure that Labour's electoral position remained very weak in most parts of the region throughout – and in many cases beyond – the interwar period. Nationally, the pattern of party competition in the pre-1914 period has been seen as one in which the Liberals were beginning to be challenged by Labour. In the South West, however, this was not the case. There was no sign at all of an imminent rise of Labour. There was not a single Labour candidate at any parliamentary election in the four counties prior to 1918. What weakening of the Liberal position there was can better be explained as part of the usual vicissitudes of two-party electoral politics.²⁴ Insofar as any trend was discernible, it was a drift towards the Conservatives rather than the start of any kind of swing to the left.

The interwar period did not see any enormous swing to Labour, either. The 1918 election saw the Liberals divided, and it was this division that seemed to offer Labour its political opportunity. But in the South West, the party was able to run candidates in fewer than half the seats, and they fared badly. Although generalisation is difficult for much of the 1920s, given the varying numbers of candidates that were run by the three parties, it is clear that Labour remained in third place. At the 1929 general election – the one genuinely three-party contest of the interwar period – the Conservatives and Labour ran candidates in all 27 seats, the Liberals in all but one. Only two Independents complicated matters (although one of these did, admittedly, win at Exeter). The results confirmed Labour's third-party status in the region, despite the fact that it won at national level. It took a shade under 20 per cent of the votes cast, whereas the Conservatives took over 44 per cent and the Liberals almost 34 per cent. The two Labour victories (Plymouth Drake and Frome) were very small beer beside 16 Conservatives and eight Liberals. Labour's share of the vote in the different counties was also weak: 18.7 per cent in Devon, 17.9 per cent in Cornwall, and only 17 per cent in Dorset. Only in Somerset (24.6 per cent) did it come close to dislodging the Liberals (25.9 per cent) from second place.

The 1930s saw no great surge in Labour support. Liberal support did fall away, due to the continuing atrophy of the party in many areas, and to the 'National' coalition against Labour, especially in 1931. But it is perhaps significant that as late as 1935, when Labour was, at national level, the only conceivable alternative to the National government, Labour was still unable to outpoll the Liberals in the South West, despite running more candidates. It was only in 1945 that Labour was able to move into second place in the region; but, even then, it was

still well behind the Conservatives, and its share of the total poll (33.5 per cent) was a shade lower than that achieved by the Liberals as recently as 1929, while the number of seats won (six) was fewer than the Liberals had managed then (eight).

Table 1 – Share of Vote and Seats Won at General Elections in the South West, 1918–45

General Election	Conservative and allies*		Liberal		Labour		Other	
	% votes	MPs	% votes	MPs	% votes	MPs	% votes	MPs
1918	58.5	23	25.9	4	15.3	0	0.3	0
1922	50.9	21	32.5	5	13.8	0	2.8	1
1923	47.5	8	40.4	18	12.1	1	---	0
1924	52.8	25	32.9	1	14.3	0	---	1
1929	44.3	16	33.8	8	19.8	2	2.0	1
1931	63.4	25	20.0	2	15.6	0	1.0	0
1935	55.9	25	22.3	2	21.5	0	0.3	0
1945	44.7	18	18.8	2	33.5	6	3.1	1

* Includes Coalition Liberals 1918, National Liberals 1922, Liberal Nationals 1931–45.

The Nature of Labour Parties in the South West

Under the 1918 Labour party constitution, divisional Labour parties comprised, essentially, two elements: affiliated organisations (chiefly trade union branches) and individual members. DLPs in the South West were often weak in both respects in this period. This helps to explain the nature of Labour politics in the region.

Nationally, at any rate between 1920 and 1940, unions experienced many problems. But in the South West, it was often very hard for unions to organise. Where they could do so, officials were often busy enough with union affairs to preclude their involvement in Labour politics. However, there were exceptions. The main urban centres did see greater union involvement. The NUR played a significant role, not least at Exeter, where it had a substantial membership and where it sponsored the Labour candidate at the 1945 general election.²⁵ In Plymouth, union money substantially funded the three divisional parties as well as the central (city) party.²⁶ Meanwhile, in Frome, various unions played important roles. Fred Swift, the secretary of the SMA, was president of the DLP from its inception in 1918 until 1938.²⁷ The NUBSO sponsored Fred Gould as candidate in the late 1920s and early 1930s, paying 75 per cent of his election expenses and helping fund the agent, although belt-tightening after his 1931 defeat meant that it had to remove its support from the DLP thereafter.²⁸ Subsequently, the TGWU sponsored W. J. Farthing, the candidate adopted in 1943 after 'Kim' Mackay's defection to Common Wealth (see below).²⁹

Overall, however, union input was quite weak. There were not sufficient members of any union, in most constituencies, to make unions very interested in local Labour politics there. The prejudices of most national-level union leaders and executive committee members would not, in any case, have helped matters. And, where assistance was forthcoming to ‘the West Country’, then Bristol would be the first – and often last – place to spring to mind. Thus it was exceptional for candidates to receive official union sponsorship, and, indeed, became more so after the early 1920s. At a time when their memberships had been inflated by the wartime and post-war booms, unions were in expansive mode; but this soon ended following the breaking of the boom in 1920 and the subsequent defeats of the miners and engineers in the lockouts of 1921 and 1922 (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Trade Unions Sponsoring Labour Prospective Parliamentary Candidates in the South West, 1920–45

Amalgamated Society of Engineers/ Amalgamated Engineering Union	Yeovil 1920–22; Weston-super-Mare 1921; Camborne 1922; Plymouth Drake 1922
Miners’ Federation of Great Britain	Frome 1920–23
National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association	Bath 1920
National Union of Agricultural Workers	Taunton 1920; Penryn and Falmouth 1921–22
National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives	Wells 1922; Frome 1926–32
National Union of Railwaymen	Camborne 1921; Exeter 1945
Ship Constructors’ and Shipwrights’ Association	Exeter 1921; Plymouth Drake 1924
Transport and General Workers’ Union	Frome 1943–45
Workers’ Union	Penryn and Falmouth 1920

For the most part, then, sponsorship was short-lived and spasmodic, and, after 1924, very rare indeed: only ten of the 27 constituencies ever enjoyed it, and in all but one case (Frome) on a very short-term basis. At the 1935 election, candidates in none of the 27 seats enjoyed union sponsorship.

This lack of a strong trade union base naturally created problems for the Labour Party in the South West. It clearly went against the prevailing ideal, which envisaged a party buttressed at every level by the money and solidarity of the trade union movement. But this offered an opportunity as well as a threat, because the ‘strong union’ model was not always all that it might have been: it was by no means unknown, for example, for DLPs in safe seats that had a strong union base, like Barnsley in Yorkshire, to be largely inert and discouraging of wider participation in the party. This was hardly the way towards the kind of broad, inclusive party that generations of Labour leaders (at all levels) claimed to want, and which many saw as a prerequisite of a socialist Britain.

In theory at least, therefore, the relative lack of strong trade unionism in most of the South West opened up the possibility of the development of a different kind of Labour politics from that which prevailed in many other parts of Britain. By and large, it must be admitted, the potential was limited and not really exploited. In many parts of the South West, it was very difficult indeed to develop individual membership.³⁰ How difficult can be seen in Table 3. This shows how many of the region's 27 constituencies were in severe difficulties in terms of recruiting individual members. Two indicators are used here, primarily. First, there were a number of constituencies where there was either no DLP in existence, or where, even though it had a secretary and, occasionally, claimed to have adopted a candidate, a DLP did not pay affiliation fees to the national party, calling into question whether it had any real existence at that point at all. Second, there are the published membership figures. From 1929 onwards, the Labour Party's *Annual Conference Report* published detailed figures for membership of each DLP in the previous year: that is, the 1929 *Report* contained the final figures for 1928, and so on. It is worth noting that constituencies had to affiliate a minimum of 240 members, although on occasions very weak parties were able to negotiate a lower figure because they simply could not afford to buy 240 membership cards from headquarters (such parties are also noted in the Table). This means that the figures at the lower end tend to be very inaccurate – a party with only 100 members would usually be forced to declare itself as having 240 in order to maintain its national party affiliation. By and large, we can take it that a party with a declared individual membership of 240 was struggling.

Although it is frustrating that we do not have full figures for the 1920s, a number of points can be made about these figures. The first is that, after a rather slow start, there were signs of real progress in the 1920s. To some extent, this would have offset the problems that came to DLPs with the downturn in trade union membership and, in particular, the virtual collapse of agricultural trade unionism in that decade. The party's aggressive stance in the later 1920s, and its determination to contest as many seats as possible at the 1929 election, undoubtedly helped it further to develop until about 1930, when the disappointments of the second Labour government began to lead to a falling off of membership. Although the heightened emotions of the 1931 crisis and general election probably helped to sustain membership at that point, the 1930s proved to be a depressing decade. Membership fell in many of the South West constituencies and, in some cases, parties that had begun promisingly in the 1920s fell virtually into desuetude. The Second World War was a severe challenge to all the DLPs in the region, and the fact that all but seven of the 27 were either totally inactive, or at the minimum membership level, between 1941 and 1943 told its own story. Finally, however, there was a strong recovery as the end of the war approached, to the extent that only one constituency (North Cornwall) was without a functioning DLP by 1946, and all the others had memberships in excess of the 240 minimum, in some cases spectacularly so.

Table 3 – Weak Divisional Labour Parties in the South West, 1919–46

Year	Divisional Labour parties...			Total (out of 27)
	Not affiliating at all	Affiliating fewer than 240 members	Affiliating 240 members	
1919	10	N/a	N/a	10
1920	10	N/a	N/a	10
1921	7	N/a	N/a	7
1922	8	N/a	N/a	8
1923	3	N/a	N/a	3
1924	3	N/a	N/a	3
1925	4	N/a	N/a	4
1926	2	N/a	N/a	2
1927	4	N/a	N/a	4
1928	3	7	0	10
1929	1	7	1	9
1930	0	0	4	4
1931	1	0	8	9
1932	1	0	12	13
1933	0	0	12	12
1934	1	0	11	12
1935	1	1	9	11
1936	0	1	10	11
1937	0	1	9	10
1938	0	1	12	13
1939	1	1	12	14
1940	2	3	14	19
1941	5	1	14	20
1942	5	0	15	20
1943	5	2	13	20
1944	3	0	12	15
1945	2	0	1	3
1946	1	0	0	1

The extent of the uphill struggle that faced DLPs can be seen with reference to one of the four counties, Cornwall.³¹ Here, there were five constituencies. In Bodmin, in the south east of the county, there was no DLP until 1924, when a secretary, C. F. Turner of Liskeard, was found. The party soon set to work, and indeed adopted a prospective candidate, Paul Reed, in 1925. Reed was an active candidate, but the fact that he lived in Liverpool, where he worked in the University Settlement, must have made it difficult for him to make his presence felt. At the 1931 election, it was decided that no candidate should be run, and the Liberal, Isaac Foot, was returned unopposed. The DLP then had no candidate until 1935, when H. E. J. Falconer was adopted shortly before the general election of that year; he lost his deposit. A candidate was briefly adopted in 1937, but he soon left, and there was no candidate between 1938 and 1945, when Councillor J. H.

Pitts was chosen, again close to an election, and again faring badly at the polls. At no point prior to 1945 did the party's membership exceed 420, and for all but three years of that time it was below 300.

Northern Cornwall also offered poor prospects. It remained Liberal throughout the period under discussion, and its radicalism made for few opportunities for Labour. In the whole period, indeed, there were only Labour candidates at two elections, in 1929 and 1931, and both lost their deposits by a humiliating margin. There were hints of something better: it was, for example, one of the few DLPs in the region to send a delegate to every party conference between 1928 and 1934. Thereafter, however, the party fell into increasing problems, and although it adopted a candidate (D. N. C. Wakley of Plymouth) in 1936, it made no membership returns to the national party from 1940 onwards. A key problem here, of course, was that the Liberal MP from 1939 was the pro-Labour radical, T. L. Horabin, who eventually defected to Labour in 1948.³² With the departure of the longstanding DLP secretary, J. H. Brown of Delabole, in 1945, the DLP appears to have ceased to have had any meaningful life at all.

St Ives, covering the far south western tip of the county, was another very weak DLP in the period as a whole, despite the symbolic importance of the fact, occasionally stressed by Labour speakers, that it included Land's End.³³ It had begun brightly enough, as early as 1920. Its membership was recorded as 408 in 1928, 425 in 1929, and 380 in 1930. However, the party's failure to contest the 1931 election appears to have been a heavy blow to what remained of morale, and it struggled from then right through to the end of the Second World War. In only one year, 1933, did it even manage to affiliate on the 'minimum' 240 membership. The following year, it did not affiliate; the year after that, it did so on the basis of 40 members of its women's section, presumably the only active part of the organisation that remained. No candidate was adopted at any point between then and 1945, however, leaving the 1935 general election and the 1937 by-election uncontested. There was some limited and patchy recovery of membership down to 1940, but the war again essentially terminated all but the most local-level activities until 1944, when some recovery did culminate in the running of a candidate at the 1945 election, but he was unable to unseat the Liberal National chief whip, N. A. Beechman.

But weak DLPs were not confined to what might be thought of as 'hopeless' seats. Camborne, as seen above, had a significant mining population, and almost went Labour in 1918 when G. Nicholls took 48 per cent of the votes cast in a straight fight with the Liberal, Francis Acland. But no candidate came as close again up to and including 1945. Defeats in 1922 and 1924, and the fact that no candidate was run in 1923, all served to demoralise Labourites. In the space of ten years between 1918 and 1927, the party adopted no fewer than six candidates. The party failed to pay affiliation fees to the national party in five of the six years between 1924 and 1929, and again in 1940–42; otherwise its individual membership never exceeded 240 prior to 1946, when it rose to a very unimpressive 259. Here, of course, matters were not helped by the events that culminated in the disaffiliation of the Independent Labour Party from Labour in 1932: Kay Spurrell,

the adopted candidate, was refused Labour endorsement at the 1931 election, and stood (although being heavily defeated) against the Labour candidate in 1935.

Thus, the only consistently vibrant DLP in Cornwall before 1945 was at Penryn and Falmouth. This was the main mining constituency in the county, with 13.9 per cent of male workers occupied in that industry in 1931. It included four reasonably sized towns – Falmouth, Penryn, St Austell, and the county town, Truro – which made for relatively easy organisation. It was well organised, and membership boomed from 1926 onwards, judging by the high affiliation fees that were being paid to the national party from that date. Individual membership had its vicissitudes, but reached 1,518 in 1930 and – after falling to 740 in 1933 – peaked again at 1,356 in 1936. Even during the Second World War, it did not fall below 518 (in 1941), and it was once again well above 1,000 by the time of the 1945 general election. Successive candidates, most notably the scholar A. L. Rowse (candidate from 1930 to 1942), built up the Labour vote gradually at successive elections, and even 1931 did not see too heavy a falling away of support. The seat fell to Labour in 1945.

Indeed, the example of Penryn and Falmouth showed that there was the potential, in the right circumstances, for Labour to develop strong constituency parties. For the lack of strong trade unionism in much of the South West might have meant an inevitable deviation from the prescribed model, but it did not necessarily mean that DLPs had to be weak. Indeed, the very absence of strong trade unionism offered Labour an alternative way forward – that is, through high levels of individual membership.

One person who understood this very well was R. W. G. 'Kim' Mackay, the prospective candidate for Frome between 1934 and 1942. Frome had been a Labour seat in the 1929–31 parliament, but the MP, Fred Gould, had been swept away in the National landslide at the 1931 election. When NUBSO decided that they could no longer afford to sponsor his candidature, Frome found it necessary to seek another candidate who could offer some financial support. Mackay was an Australian lawyer, who came with the recommendation of Sir Stafford Cripps, MP for the adjoining constituency of Bristol East.³⁴ Although part of his attraction was that he was prepared to sink some of his own money into the party,³⁵ Mackay was not a typical carpetbagger. He was an excellent organiser, and developed a highly sophisticated system of canvassing for membership.³⁶ This system showed spectacular results. Membership rose from 518 in 1934 to 1,979 in 1936 and 2,111 in 1937, and even in 1940 it remained over 1,000. By 1938, the DLP was overseeing the work of 46 active local Labour parties, and had 22 organisations (mainly trade union branches) affiliated to it.³⁷ Mackay only lost narrowly in 1935, when a Liberal intervention almost certainly cost him victory, and in 1945 the seat was won again for Labour, although not by Mackay, who had departed in 1942 to fight as an Independent in the wartime by-election in Llandaff and Barry. For so doing, he was expelled from the Labour Party for breaching the wartime electoral truce. He subsequently became national organiser of Common Wealth, before returning to Labour and sitting as Labour MP for Hull North West between 1945 and 1950, and Reading North (1950–51).³⁸

Frome was exceptional in many ways, but five other DLPs did manage to acquire an individual membership of over 1,000 at some point during the period before 1945, as can be seen in Table 4. These figures alone suggest that the South West was not quite the Labour desert that contemporaries, and most historians, have suggested. Furthermore, there was some spectacular expansion at the very end of the war, around the 1945 general election, and in the immediate post-war period. There were some spectacular increases: between 1944 and 1946, Exeter rose from 384 to 1,053, Plymouth Devonport from 427 to 2,212, Taunton from 350 to 2,902, and Wells from 326 to 2,536. By 1946, no fewer than 13 of the 27 DLPs in the region had at least 1,000 individual members and, of these, four (Devonport, Taunton, Wells and Yeovil) had over 2,000. Most remarkably of all, perhaps, South Molton, a hopeless seat which as late as 1944 had had neither a secretary nor any members, had 869 members in 1945 and 1,000 a year later. Likewise, Tiverton, which had never affiliated more than 240 members since 1931, was claiming 930 members in 1945 and 1,011 a year later; while Totnes, whose pre-war and wartime membership levels had been scarcely more impressive, fared even better, with 1,224 members in 1945 and 1,505 in 1946. Meanwhile, East Dorset, which included the rapidly growing town of Poole, quadrupled its membership to 1,270 between 1943 and 1946.

Table 4 – DLPs with Individual Membership over 1,000, 1928–46

Cornwall, Penryn and Falmouth	1936, 1945–46
Exeter	1934–36, 1946
Plymouth, Devonport	1930–40, 1945–46
Plymouth, Drake	1928–29, 1935, 1946
Plymouth, Sutton	1934–37
Devon, South Molton	1946
Devon, Tiverton	1946
Devon, Totnes	1946
Dorset, East	1945–46
Bath	1945–46
Somerset, Frome	1930, 1936–40, 1945–46
Somerset, Taunton	1945–46
Somerset, Wells	1945–46
Somerset, Yeovil	1945–46

But, in reality, individual membership by itself could not have been the basis of successful DLPs, as defined by the national party. Even in the South West, trade union affiliations remained a key aim of most Labour activists. At the national level, any model which seemed to ignore trade unionism was naïve at best, and mendacious at worst. Strong DLPs were what the party claimed to want, but there were few in the party who could believe that DLPs could be really strong without a firm union underpinning. This meant, though, that many of the DLPs in this region could never be regarded as other than ‘backward’ by the party’s powers-that-be.

Labour Outlooks in the South West

What, if any, were the chief common characteristics of Labour grass roots politics in South West England in this period? First, the party in the South West was not particularly left wing; moderation tended to be the dominant trend. South Western DLPs were not, at least before the popular front agitation of the later 1930s, much affected by left wing campaigns; nor were they notably critical of Labour's efforts in government in 1924 and 1929–31. Fred Gould might have been 'caught up in ideas of "Workers' Control" in industry' while secretary of the small NUBSO branch in Midsomer Norton during the Great War, but he showed no signs of radical leanings as Labour candidate and MP in the 1920s, and indeed became parliamentary private secretary to W. R. Smith, a junior minister at the Board of Trade, in 1930, at just the point when left wingers were beginning to attack the second Labour government's failings.³⁹

There were a number of reasons for Labour's moderation. In part, they derived from the party's weakness. It was, for example, very difficult to argue that the party would fare better than it was doing by taking a more radical stance. Instead, Labour appeared to be best off trying to compete with the Liberals and Conservatives for centre-ground votes. A context in which many of the workers were believed to be in fear of victimisation, and where unionisation was low, seemed to confirm such a strategy. Thus, for most Labourites, the only chance of success was to couch the party's appeal in moderate terms. Such calculations would only have reinforced the continuing pull of nonconformity – especially, but by no means exclusively, in Cornwall – in the same direction.⁴⁰ The strong Co-operative influence in Plymouth and some other parts of the South West also tended to push Labour's politics towards moderation, though not necessarily blandness.⁴¹ Conversely, the far-left was very weak indeed. Early in 1926, there appears to have been a Communist Party factory cell in Plymouth, which claimed fifteen members and a circulation of over 200 for its paper.⁴² But this seems unlikely to have survived the party's loss of membership later in the decade and, other than this, it would appear that the far left had no presence to speak of in the region before the later 1930s.⁴³ There was some far-right activity in the 1930s. In Plymouth, an active branch of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) claimed up to a thousand members, and tried to capitalise on rural discontent in nearby Cornwall through a body called the British Union of Farmers, launched at Bodmin in early 1934.⁴⁴ The BUF's fortunes appear to have dipped along with those of the national organisation after June 1934, but as late as 1939 at least one young woman fascist was making open air public speeches in prominent locations in Exeter.⁴⁵ But the native far-right threat was not such as to lead to the wholesale radicalisation of Labour in the region.

Second, the weakness of the party in most of the region meant that considerable national-level assistance would be needed if the party were to make more impact there. But such assistance was not particularly forthcoming, at least for large parts of the period, and while the reasons for this were often understood by the region's Labour activists, it could breed a combination of helplessness in some areas and criticism of the national party in others. The region was not left

totally to its own devices. In 1920, the national party machine was reorganised, and a new regional structure was created.⁴⁶ Under this scheme, Great Britain was divided into nine areas. Area 6 (later 'F'), 'South-Western', comprised the four counties under discussion in this article, plus Wiltshire and Bristol. Like all the other areas, it had a district (later regional) organiser and a woman organiser. Their job was to work under the direction of party headquarters to advise DLPs, develop organisation where it existed and to establish it where it did not, to assist in the training of agents, and 'generally to co-operate in the organisation work of the Party as required by the Head Office'.⁴⁷ The first regional organisers were J. H. Edwards and Annie Townley. In 1924, Edwards was replaced by the Smethwick DLP agent, Clem Jones, who remained in the post until 1951.⁴⁸ Townley remained in the post of woman organiser until she retired in 1943, to be replaced by Florence Caruth of Huddersfield.⁴⁹ In short, there was considerable continuity at regional level.

But it was a lot to expect two organisers to cover so many constituencies spread over such a wide geographical area, especially given that the party was so weak.⁵⁰ The party conference reports of the early 1920s made frequent references to the 'difficult circumstances'⁵¹ that faced Edwards, Townley and Jones in their 'arduous work' in what was variously described as 'one of the most difficult areas of the country'⁵² or 'one of the most backward areas of the country'.⁵³ As has been seen, there was at least some progress to show in these early years; and the work of the two organisers remained a keystone of the party's construction in the region. Inevitably, though, Jones and Townley faced huge difficulties. One of these was the almost total lack of any other full-time party officials in the region. Relatively few DLPs nationally could afford a full-time agent before 1945, but the South West had an unusually low number. In the whole of the period up to 1945, only 12 of the 27 DLPs (plus Plymouth Borough Labour Party) ever had a full-time agent; and only Frome (1920–24, 1930–35, 1939) and Penryn and Falmouth (1921–22, 1925–30) had one for any significant stretch of time. There were a number of appointments in the years immediately after the Great War: four DLPs had agents in 1920, and six (plus Plymouth borough) in 1921 and 1922. Union difficulties played the largest part here, as with candidate sponsorship. For most of the period after 1922, there were never more than two paid agents among the whole of the region's DLPs: and, between 1935 and 1945, there were none at all except for a brief period in Frome in the later 1930s. It is important not to go too far, of course: some DLP secretaries managed long and, in some cases, distinguished periods in office, and thus provided safe pairs of hands with which the regional organisers could deal. J. Oxnam of Redruth was secretary of Camborne DLP from 1923 to 1935; J. H. Bennetts of Truro was the Penryn and Falmouth secretary from 1931 until the constituency's disappearance at the hands of the Boundary Commissioners in 1949; F. C. Reeves of Parkstone was secretary of East Dorset (later Poole) from 1925 until the early 1950s (latterly on a full-time basis). In other places, however, continuity was a good deal less marked. Honiton (Devon) DLP managed to get through nine secretaries in 14 years between 1933 and 1947. If, for whatever reason, the part-time secretary could not attend properly to party work,

then the result was almost invariably a degree of stagnation, even inertia, on the part of the divisional party, as was the case in Plymouth Sutton during the Second World War, when the secretary found himself working very long shifts at the Royal William naval victualling yard.⁵⁴ It is worth adding, in parentheses, that few of these people ever attained national status within the party: one exception was George Brinham of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, who was secretary of the Torquay party for most of the period between 1937 and 1946, and who later served on the NEC and as chairman of the party in 1960.⁵⁵

This is not to argue that the South West was entirely by-passed by the national party. Major national propaganda campaigns almost always included meetings there. In 1922, a series of regional conferences included rallies at Plymouth and Bristol.⁵⁶ The party's nationwide campaign against the 1927 Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Bill had its South West Regional Committee. Plymouth, Bristol, Exeter and, to a lesser extent, Taunton, Truro and Dorchester all hosted conferences connected with national campaigns on matters like election preparations in 1929, 'Victory for Socialism' in 1934, and peace aims and reconstruction during the Second World War. These meetings, attended predominantly by Labourites from the local area, enabled the party in the South West to keep touch with the party at national level.⁵⁷ Furthermore, special summer-time agricultural campaigns were geared explicitly to spreading the Labour word in regions like the South West. As Griffiths has shown, these campaigns began a little haltingly, but were pretty much an annual event during the period from 1933 onwards, and did bring succour to the often beleaguered Labourites of this, and other, regions.⁵⁸ (Doubtless, they also served to give Labourites from other areas a cheap holiday in the countryside.)

Nonetheless, at least some of this might have looked like going through the motions, and any special assistance was often tempered by a sense that at least some of Labour's national strategists saw little point in throwing good money after bad in the pursuit of votes in such a 'backward' area. In the 1920s, the South West was quite well covered by the campaigns. But during the 1930s it was far less so, as national-level strategists began to give up on it; and although the extensive 1938 campaign did cover a number of South West seats, it was significant that, when cost cutting led to the slashing of the 1939 programme, not a single South West seat remained in the campaign.⁵⁹ The party was also less and less concerned to provide the help of propagandists from the centre: such assistance was forthcoming in the 1920s, but far less so from later in that decade, and although the party's two remaining national propagandists did occasionally visit the South West in the 1930s, such visits cannot have been more than brief excursions with minimal long-term impact.⁶⁰

The perception that the party nationally was doing little to help the 'backward' regions like the South West did not go unremarked. The 1926 party conference passed a resolution calling on the National Executive Committee (NEC) to do more to assist the DLPs in such areas. The delegate from Monmouth – a large and sparsely populated constituency, like many in the South West – demanded that the assistance should be real rather than token, and pointed out that many industrial constituencies paid only the minimum affiliation fee of 30s

(£1.50), while 'Bath and Bridgwater were paying £2 10s [£2.50] each'.⁶¹ But although the resolution was passed by the conference, the adverse effects on party funding of the 1927 Trade Disputes Act meant that little material assistance ensued. Thereafter, regular motions at the party conference for greater assistance were met, with equal regularity, by arguments along the lines that 'there would be no difficulty in accepting the resolution were the necessary finance available'.⁶²

The establishment of some kind of organisation at the regional level might have helped to overcome some of these problems. However, the regional organisers were very much the appointees of party headquarters in London, and the regions existed for the national party's administrative convenience, rather than as forums for the discussion of common problems. Indeed, the Conservatives, Liberals, Communists and ILP all had more meaningful regional-level bodies than Labour between the wars. True, there were county federations of DLPs in all four counties for much of the period, although Somerset was by some way the strongest and most active, whereas that in Dorset was probably little more than an extension of the strongest of the four DLPs, East Dorset, whose secretary (Reeves) acted in the same capacity for it.⁶³ Other than in Somerset, indeed, it seems likely that the county federations were more of a pooling of weakness, with minimal headquarters assistance, than anything else.

But Labour was slow to move towards more regional-level bodies. The first such body (excluding the London Labour Party), was the South Wales Regional Council of Labour (RCL), formed in 1937. At first, its main purpose was to counter Communist influences in the South Wales coalfield,⁶⁴ but the wider benefits soon became apparent, and so further RCLs were established, first in the North West, and then during the Second World War in the North, in Yorkshire, and in the East and West Midlands. However, the process then stalled as the end of the war approached, and an NEC statement of intent to establish such a body in the South West ran up against the brick wall of finance and a modicum of indifference.⁶⁵ In the meantime, the increase in the number of Labour Party regions from nine to eleven, partly the result of the needs of the new regional councils, actually had the effect of *increasing* the size of the South West region by adding the Gloucestershire constituencies outside Bristol which had been a part of the old Midlands region. This only served to increase the burdens on the regional organisers. It was only in 1948 that the South West RCL was finally established, with its headquarters in Exeter.⁶⁶

One way in which the national party might have helped its affiliates in the region would have been to bring the party conference to it. This was by no means out of the question, given that the conference travelled widely in this period, that the 1916 conference had been held at Bristol, and that parts of the South West were tourist destinations with plenty of hotel accommodation for conference delegates. The NEC itself recognised the extent to which holding the party conference in a particular place could benefit Labour in the surrounding area.⁶⁷ However, when Plymouth Devonport DLP formally invited the NEC to hold the conference in the city in 1927, it was rebuffed, partly due to some doubts about the availability of suitable halls and accommodation, but also because, as the party secretary Arthur Henderson put it, the 1926 conference had been held in Margate (Kent), and 'it

would be very unfair to ask people who came from the far North to go a second time so far South as Plymouth'.⁶⁸ The fact that Plymouth delegates, having travelled over 250 miles to Margate in 1926, then had to travel more than 300 miles to Blackpool the following year, does not appear to have entered Henderson's calculations; and, needless to say, the conference did not go to Plymouth after its northern interlude in the following, or any subsequent, year. It was only in 1937 that the conference first went to Bournemouth, which was at least close to Dorset, though not particularly easy of access from much of the rest of the region.

Table 5 – South West DLP Delegates to Labour Party Annual Conferences, 1920–47

Year	Location of conference	South West DLPs sending delegates (max = 27)
1920	Scarborough	4
1921	Brighton	2
1922	Edinburgh	1
1923	London	6
1924	London	9
1925	Liverpool	10
1926	Margate	10
1927	Blackpool	10
1928	Birmingham	11
1929	Brighton	14
1930	Llandudno	17
1931	Scarborough	10
1932	Leicester	5
1933	Hastings	5
1934	Southport	8
1935	Brighton	11
1936	Edinburgh	6
1937	Bournemouth	8
1938	<i>No conference held</i>	<i>No conference held</i>
1939	Southport	9
1940	Bournemouth	6
1941	London	2
1942	London	7
1943	London	13
1944	London	13
1945	Blackpool	15
1946	Bournemouth	23
1947	Margate	23

One result of this, of course, was to discourage DLPs which, in many cases, were already in financial difficulties, from sending delegates to conference; and

this tended to marginalise the region still further in the counsels of the party. As Table 5 shows, it was almost invariably a minority of South Western DLPs, and sometimes a very small minority indeed, that sent a delegate to the conference. Geography played a part, as can be seen by the sparse attendances at Edinburgh in 1922 and 1936, although the fact that 17 delegates travelled to North Wales in 1930 warns against excessive geographical determinism. So too did the overall mood of the party: the high attendances of the optimistic periods like the late 1920s and the latter part of the Second World War, or during election years like 1931 or 1935, can be contrasted with the flatter periods like 1932–34, or the early part of the war. More delegates attended when Labour was in government, as in 1924, 1929 and 1930. Some DLPs failed to send delegates simply because they were so weak. North Dorset, for example, sent one for the first time ever in 1939, and did not do so again in this period. It was not until 1946 that the first ever delegate from Tiverton DLP attended; and he was Sir Richard Acland, the former Liberal MP and Common Wealth leader, who happened to live in the constituency. He now wished to become a Labour MP and was, in effect, using the DLP as a flag of convenience to allow him to display himself to the wider party. Wells – by no means the weakest party in the region – only sent delegates in 1923, 1932, 1946 and 1947.

But the failure to integrate the party in the South West more closely with the national party was not all the fault of party headquarters, for a third feature of the Labour Party in the region during this period was a degree of parochialism, or what might less patronisingly be termed local patriotism. This could work both for and against the interests of DLPs. On the one hand, it could help to foster an identity, and a sense of common purpose. But on the other, it could serve to divide divisional parties within themselves, in large constituencies which had little historic logic, or where two or more relatively major centres within the constituency were rivals for primacy.

The Labour Party in the South West was not only set apart from its counterparts in stronger areas by its physical and mental distance from the national party, however. Another difference was that, in much of the South West, there was little success, or prospect of it, in local government elections. In its stronger areas, Labour had found such polls a crucial crucible of its progress in the Edwardian period; after the Great War, it made considerable inroads; and, by the mid-1920s, it was starting to win power in many parts of the country. Where it did so, however, it tended to find that office constrained it from the easy sloganising of opposition, and pushed many – though not all – Labourites into more moderate positions. Although at times Labour local authorities resisted this effect, by and large it was one of the key factors in shifting Labour from one style of politics to another. In the South West, however, Labour's local election prospects were, in many cases, bleak. In Devon, the party scarcely figured at county council elections before 1945.⁶⁹ Even in places where the concept was not unfamiliar in local government polls, however, Labour had huge obstacles to overcome. In the county borough of Bath, for example, its support was confined mainly to two or three wards, and the Conservatives, in tacit alliance with the Liberals, controlled the council.⁷⁰ The largest city authority in the region, Plymouth, did not go Labour until November 1945, while the other county borough, Exeter, remained beyond the party's grasp.⁷¹

If these large urban authorities remained unwinnable before the end of the Second World War, then it is no wonder that the urban and rural districts, and still more the county councils, afforded Labour so little success.

It is in this context – of poor immediate prospects, residual Liberal strength, and the fact that Labour's weakness in local elections and government meant that there was no 'administration' effect or Conservative–Liberal alliances at local-level – that the support evinced in the South West for broader left alliances in the later 1930s should be seen. The idea of a popular front – an electoral and/or political alliance against the National government, to include Labour, the Liberals, Communists and others – was a non-starter at national level. However, some Labourites in the South West held out hopes for some kind of broader co-operation from the mid-1930s onwards, and this belief had some important advocates.⁷² After all, the broad, expansionist optimism of the 1920s had now given way to a combination of 'heads-down' graft in the few seats that seemed to offer any prospect of success, combined with a degree of pessimism, shading into resignation and even hopelessness, elsewhere. The November 1935 general election, in which Labour's results in the South of England outside London were dismal in the extreme, merely compounded the fact. Furthermore, Liberalism in the South West, although by now clearly in decline, was still clinging stubbornly to life, and appeared likely to remain strong enough to block independent Labour challenges to the Conservatives for some years to come. The absence, also, of a strong Communist Party in the South West paradoxically helped popular front politics: first, because there were no powerful local memories of the Communists' denunciations of Labour during the 'class against class' period (1928–34); and, second, because the idea that broader alliances would lead to a Communist takeover of the Labour Party at local-level could be dismissed with derision. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of Labourites in the region were affected from 1936 onwards by the popular front literature of the Communist influenced Left Book Club. The politics of broader alliances also had some notable advocates in the region, not least Rowse, the candidate for Penryn and Falmouth, who favoured the idea in a much publicised speech at the Liberal Summer School in 1934.⁷³ This pressure for a broader front culminated in the Bridgwater by-election of 17 November 1938, when the withdrawal of the Labour and Liberal candidates allowed the journalist and broadcaster Vernon Bartlett to win the seat from the Conservatives as an 'Independent Progressive' candidate.⁷⁴ The ripples of this result were to be felt for some time: it undoubtedly helped speed up the controversy at national-level that culminated in the expulsion of Sir Stafford Cripps (himself the MP for nearby Bristol East) from the party in January 1939, while also affecting a number of DLPs in the South West.⁷⁵ Ultimately, however, the outbreak of war, and the significant improvement in Labour's fortunes that it eventually brought, left South West Labour once again at the margins, and closed off this potential route of advance: if the best way forward in the South West was progressive unity, the 1945 general election proved that no such compromises were needed at national level, with the result that Labour in the South West was left

once again to fight a frontal campaign, when some kind of deal with the Liberals might have helped it to better results at the local level.

Conclusion

In a sense, of course, it did not matter. This region was not significant enough in terms of the number of parliamentary seats it represented to make much of a difference to Labour's fortunes one way or the other. It is therefore easy to see why it has been neglected in accounts of the party's development. But it will not do to leave it there. Labour may well have been doomed to fail in the vast rural tracts of South Molton and North Dorset. But its failure even in the *cities* of the South West was more disturbing. To some extent, of course, this was cause and effect of the party's weakness in the wider region. But the extension of this weakness into the local government arena did have some profound implications. One, noted above, was that the party's activists did not begin to face the dilemmas of being in power at local level, which caused a tension between the politics of protest with which Labourites were comfortable, and the politics of responsibility which were often burdensome. Second, if one accepts the view that, so far as working class people were concerned, Labour-controlled authorities offered better opportunities and life chances at local-level during the interwar period, then one is forced to conclude that Labour's electoral failure materially impoverished the lives of ordinary people in places like Plymouth and Exeter, and meant that they gained fewer benefits from local government than did people in, say, Sheffield after 1926 or the London County Council area from 1934 onwards. A third point is more speculative, and difficult to prove empirically. However, it may well be that the weakness of Labour in this region – the realisation that the party might *never* win many of the seats, and in particular would never gain control of local government – was a factor in the thinking of the post-war Labour government, in its tendency towards centralisation and the reduction of the powers of local authorities. Fourth, the failure to have more impact here did dent Labour's aspirations to be seen as rivalling the Conservatives as a 'national' party in this period. Had Labour been able to win even half a dozen of the seats in the South West on a regular basis between the wars, it would have been able to make a much stronger claim to 'national' status. As it was, the Conservatives could portray it, all too easily, as sectional – the party of organised labour, representing narrow trade union interests in particular geographical areas, rather than all the people in the country as a whole. It is perhaps noteworthy that one factor in Labour's victories in 1997 and 2001 was its ability, given the collapse of city Conservatism from the 1960s onwards, and the Conservatives' increasingly shattering defeats in Scotland and Wales from the 1980s onwards, to portray its opponents in this 'sectional' light.

Finally, if Labour's organisers and managers had realised to a greater extent the virtues of some of the Labour parties in this area, rather than merely seeing them as 'backward' offenders against the 'one-size-fits-all' model that so many of them clung to, then they might have been able to develop a type of Labour politics that would have been both richer in its cultural and political variety, as well as

more robust in resistance to the assaults on their preferred model in the period from the 1960s onwards. The South West was never going to dominate the Labour Party’s thinking, but the fact that it was so easily dismissed for much of the time might have done the party nationally more harm than good.

Notes

1. Labour Party, *Report of the Annual Conference of the Labour Party* [hereafter *LPAR*], 1924 (London, 1924), p. 7.

2. Though see D. Hearl, A. Lee, M. Rush and J. Stanyer, ‘Politics and Government in the Far South West’, in M. Havinden, J. Queniart and J. Stanyer (eds), *Centre and Periphery: A Comparative Study of Brittany and Cornwall and Devon* (Exeter, 1991), pp. 203–13; G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918: Political Decline, Dormancy and Rebirth* (Exeter, 2000); M. Dawson, ‘Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall, 1910–31’, *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 425–37.

3. Statistics in this paragraph are from the author’s calculations, based on the 1931 *Census*.

4. Leominster (Herefordshire), Holland with Boston (Lincolnshire) and South West Norfolk.

5. H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London, 1967), p. 164.

6. Tiverton Divisional Liberal Association, informal meeting, 18 February 1938 (4996G/A2, Devon Record Office).

7. W. G. Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years in Exeter* (London, 1960), pp. 130–1.

8. N. J. Morgan and A. Pritchard, *Power and Politics at the Seaside: The Development of Devon’s Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Exeter, 1999), p. 79; H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 174.

9. J. H. Bettey, *Dorset* (Newton Abbot, 1974), pp. 142, 144–46.

10. V. Bartlett, *I Know What I Liked* (London, 1974), pp. 121–25.

11. *The Times*, 16 October 1931.

12. See A. Thorpe, *Frome Divisional Labour Party, 1918–49/North Somerset Constituency Labour Party, 1949–83: A Brief Introduction to the Microfilm Edition* (Wakefield, 1998), p. 2; R. Atthill, *The Somerset and Dorset Railway* (Newton Abbot, 1967), pp. 38, 89, 93, 95, 165–72.

13. Frome DLP Management Committee, 21 December 1918 and 18 January 1919 (A/AAW 24, Somerset Record Office); General Committee 18 October 1929 (A/AAW 26).

14. Frome DLP Annual Meeting, 29 April 1922 (A/AAW 25). Whereas DLPs typically met at least monthly, Conservative Associations met less frequently: see, for example, Camborne Conservative Association [CA] minute book 1919–34 (DDX 387) Cornwall Record Office; North Cornwall CA minute book 1926–31 (DDX 381/3); West Dorset CA minute book 1919–41 (D399/3/1, Dorset Record Office).

15. For the reminiscences of one Labour candidate, see R. Ollard (Ed.), *The Diaries of A. L. Rowse* (London, 2003), p. 378, entry for 18 September 1966.

16. C. V. G. Griffiths, ‘Labour and the Countryside: Rural Strands in the British Labour Movement, 1900–39’, University of Oxford DPhil (1996), pp. 81–2.

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17. D. Howell, *Respectable Radicals: Studies in the Politics of Railway Trade Unionism* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 21; J. H. Porter, 'Devon and the General Strike, 1926', *International Review of Social History*, 23 (1978), pp. 333–56, esp. 333, 336–41.
 18. A. Marsh and V. Ryan, *Historical Dictionary of Trade Unions, Volume 2* (Aldershot, 1984), p. 247.
 19. R. Hyman, *The Workers' Union* (Oxford, 1971), p. 152.
 20. C. V. G. Griffiths, 'Labour and the Countryside', pp. 143–4.
 21. P. Payton, *The Making of Modern Cornwall: Historical Experience and the Persistence of 'Difference'* (Redruth, n.d. [1992]), pp. 139–63, esp. pp. 140–1, 156–9.
 22. G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain*, pp. 46–7.
 23. N. Mansfield, *English Farmworkers and Local Patriotism, 1900–30* (Aldershot, 2001), p. 205.
 24. H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections*, p. 173.
 25. *LPAR*, 1945, p. 53.
 26. Plymouth Central Labour Party, financial statement for the year ending 31 December 1938 (Middleton papers, MID 62/5, Ruskin College, Oxford).
 27. Frome DLP, First Annual Conference, 17 April 1918 (A/AAW 24); Annual General Meeting, 22 January 1938 (A/AAW 28). For a brief account of Swift's career, see J. M. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume II* (London, 1974), pp. 361–4.
 28. Frome DLP, Adoption Conference, 10 October 1931 (A/AAW 27); Executive Committee, 31 December 1931, 26 January 1933 (A/AAW 27).
 29. *LPAR*, 1943, p. 105.
 30. All membership figures are taken, unless otherwise stated, from the *LPARs*.
 31. Information for this paragraph, and the four that follow, is taken from the *LPARs*.
 32. G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain*, p. 118.
 33. *LPAR*, 1926, p. 3.
 34. Frome DLP, Executive Committee 20 July 1933 (A/AAW 27). Cripps spoke at his adoption meeting while Mackay was away in Australia: see *ibid.*, special general committee 28 October 1933.
 35. Frome DLP, Executive Committee 20 September 1933 (A/AAW 27).
 36. Frome DLP, Executive Committee 16 January 1936 (A/AAW 27).
 37. Frome DLP, Annual General Meeting, 22 January 1938 (A/AAW 28).
 38. For Mackay, see K. Gildart, D. Howell and N. Kirk (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume XI* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 186–95.
 39. A. Fox, *A History of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives* (Oxford, 1958), p. 400; M. Stenton and S. Lees, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament, Volume III: 1919–45* (Hassocks, 1979), p. 131.
 40. See M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey* (London, 1968), pp. 125–29, for details of nonconformist strength in the area. See also G. Davie and D. Hearl, 'Religion and Politics in Cornwall and Devon', in M. Havinden et al, *Centre and Periphery*, pp. 214–23.
 41. See e.g. M. Hilson, 'Consumers and Politics: The Co-operative Movement in Plymouth, 1890–1920', *Labour History Review*, 67, 1 (2002), pp. 7–27.

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42. ‘Report of the Factory Cell Department to the Org. Bureau of the Communist International’, 26 January 1926 (495/25/300, fo. 3, Russian Centre [RC], Moscow).
43. Anonymous document, ‘Party membership’, n.d. [but c. February 1939] (495/100/1040, fos. 1–3, RC).
44. J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics, 1929–39* (London, 1994), p. 236; G. H. Tregidga, ‘The Liberal Party in Cornwall, 1918–39’, University of Exeter MPhil (1991), p. 199.
45. Private information.
46. For this, see R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–24* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 163–78; *LPAR, 1920*, pp. 17–18.
47. *LPAR, 1920*, p. 18.
48. *LPAR, 1951*, p. 14.
49. *LPAR, 1943*, p. 28.
50. R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party*, p. 176.
51. *LPAR, 1922*, p. 51.
52. *LPAR, 1923*, p. 46.
53. *LPAR, 1924*, p. 7.
54. See F. Lyndon to Lucy Middleton, 13 October 1939 (Middleton papers, MID 62/61–3); C. Townsend to Middleton, 17 January 1940 (MID 63/20); Townsend to Middleton, 20 April 1942 (MID 67/38); Florence Caruth to Middleton, 1 March 1944 (MID 72/67).
55. But he came to a tragic end: see A. Horsfall, ‘Battling for Wolfenden’, in B. Cant and S. Hemmings (eds), *Radical Records: Thirty Years of Lesbian and Gay History, 1957–87* (London, 1988), p. 21.
56. *LPAR, 1923*, p. 47.
57. See, e.g., *LPAR, 1929*, p. 10, *LPAR, 1934*, p. 49, *LPAR, 1940*, pp. 24–5.
58. C. V. G. Griffiths, ‘Labour and the Countryside’, esp. pp. 89–126.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 102, 105, 353–7.
60. For the propagandists, see *LPAR, 1922*, p. 54; *LPAR, 1924*, p. 9; *LPAR, 1928*, p. 5.
61. *LPAR, 1926*, pp. 250–1.
62. *LPAR, 1935*, p. 219.
63. *LPARs, passim*.
64. C. Prothero, *Recount* (Ormskirk, 1982), p. 54.
65. *LPAR, 1944*, p. 14; *LPAR, 1945*, p. 7.
66. *LPAR, 1950*, p. 18. It moved to Bristol in March 1952: See *LPAR, 1952*, p. 19.
67. *LPAR, 1927*, p. 55.
68. *LPAR, 1927*, p. 204.
69. J. Stanyer, *A History of Devon County Council, 1889–1989* (Exeter, 1989), pp. 27, 104.
70. S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919–38: A Comparative Analysis: Volume I, Barnsley–Bournemouth* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 103, 105–7, 115.
71. R. A. J. Walling, *The Story of Plymouth* (London, 1950), p. 287; C. Gill, *Plymouth: A New History, Volume II: 1603 to the present* (Newton Abbot, 1979), pp. 215–6.

72. See G. D. H and M. I. Cole, *The Condition of Britain* (London, 1937), pp. 411–24, 443–51.

73. M. Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914–39* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 341–3.

74. See G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain*, pp. 87–96.

75. Frome DLP Executive Committee, 21 April 1939, for Timsbury local Labour Party protesting against the NEC's action (A/AAW 28). See also Taunton DLP General Committee, 11 February 1939 (DD/TLP/1/1, SRO).