

The Butler Kavanagh papers

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In the preface to my first book *The British General Election of 1951*, I made two fundamental errors. Discussing the possibilities and limitations of psephology (a word being put into print for the first time- although I certainly did not invent it), I pointed to two necessary limitations in writing about contemporary elections.

*‘There are two large gaps [in work so far. Little is said about the inner history of the decisions made by the party leaders and little is said about the motives which drove the voters to behave as they did. The first gap is inevitable. One does not know-and if one knew one could not reveal- the arguments which must have taken place within the party hierarchies about the timing of the contest and about the campaign strategy to be followed. Years will pass before such information is available or, perhaps more reliable but certainly more distant, the opening of their papers to research students.*

*‘The second gap is not so impossible to fill. Much work can be done about what makes the voter act as he does. ...This has been made possible by the advent of the sample survey’.*

Those words were written in 1951. Since then I have spent much of my life trying to fill the two gaps.

Academic and journalistic sample surveys have transformed our understanding of the British electorate. Thanks to my wonderful co-author, Donald Stokes *Political Change in Britain* won grand prizes on both sides of the Atlantic. But electoral behaviour is not our subject tonight.

The theme for Dennis and me tonight is political interviewing. My predecessors in the Nuffield series, Ronald McCallum in 1945 and Herbert Nicholas in 1950, made almost no contact with the political elite. And the same could be said of my work in 1951 and 1955, although in the latter year I did have my first formal encounter with a party leader (it was Hugh Gaitskell). Even in 1959 the recorded interviews were not very

numerous. But since then, encouraged by my co-authors, Anthony King, Austin Mitchell, Michael Pinto-Duschinsky and, above all, Dennis Kavanagh, the process ballooned.

This lecture is advertised as *'The Butler Papers'*. There are about 15,000 interviews in the 36 volumes which are destined for Bodley's shelves. But I must stress that many were written up by my co-authors and by research assistants. I was present at most, but far from all, of them. A fair proportion are with party agents or with other minor actors. Some people in top positions as party advisers, such as Michael Fraser, Chris Patten, Reg Underhill, Philip Gould and Chris Rennard, each have more than 10 entries in these files. And every Prime Minister and a large number of front-benchers have given us their time.

These interviews were not written as articles. Here is an example: Douglas-Home, at the beginning of the 1964 election. They were 'working notes' collected as deep background to assist us in the writing of a book. or to be more precise in the writing of 22 books: 15 on general elections, 5 on European elections, one on the 1975 referendum and one on the poll-tax. They were mostly dictated from memory at the end of the day, often helped by brief mnemonic one-word scribbles. Any one reading them must be mindful of the health warning at the beginning of each volume. We cannot guarantee that at the end of a long day with three or four interviews to record we did not, inadvertently, misattribute some fact or anecdote. But we can guarantee the integrity of our intentions and the immediacy of their writing. Biographers who have used these notes have testified most gratifyingly to their value as an unvarnished contemporary record.

Whenever we talked with senior figures we made it plain that the conversation was strictly 'off-the-record'; nothing would be published until after the election and, while they were alive, nothing attributable would be published without their express permission. We have so far survived without complaint. Actually 98% of all these words could be put on line without offence to anyone. But the moral problem remains- granted the conditions on which these interviews were conducted, when can Bodley place them on totally free access? That decision will have to be made- but only after my death and in consultation with any surviving co-authors.

The interviews were thoroughly catalogued in 1994 by an old student, Lewis Baston. He was at a loose end and I had a Leverhulme Retirement Fellowship with money to be spent, not on myself but on *'some academic project still uncompleted at the*

*time of retirement*'. Bodley and the rest of us are very grateful to Leverhulme and to Lewis.

An eminent Fellow of Nuffield, Margery Perham once described her style of interviewing African potentates as 'Caress the ego. Caress the ego'. I myself learnt about interviewing through months of hitch-hiking across the United States in 1948. People like to talk about themselves and their problems; they like to paint themselves as heroes- and they like a sympathetic listener.

We found access remarkably easy. Our targets could be approached by letter or just buttonholed in the corridors of a Party Conference or Westminster. The Nuffield Studies were known and I can only recall one or two refusals; indeed there seemed to be more complaints from reviewers or others, protesting because they had not been interviewed.

I had intended to include in this lecture a number of quotations. At this point let me offer just one - an encounter with Willie Whitelaw on Saturday 19 February 1972 at the climax of the first miners strike:

*I was driving up Constitution Hill with my small sons when I saw Willie walking alone. I stopped the car and he greeted me warmly. ...He was obviously coming away from a crisis Cabinet meeting and he was in a very exhausted state. He said 'You know last night from 8 till 11 we were looking absolutely into the abyss. The militants in the NUM were for saying 'No'. We had to face up to what fighting them would mean. We would have had to fight but it would have involved everything- troops, a general election, an enormous embitterment of the situation.' It was plain that his relief at getting back from the abyss was far greater than his dismay at the settlement. But he ended as my seven year old son danced on his toes 'But of course there is Ireland, incomparably more important. That can only get worse.'*

Alas! Over the last few months a cataract operation prevented me from much reading so I appealed to a friend, Tim Bale of Sussex University, who had recently explored these files seeking evidence for his history of the post-war Conservative Party. He sent me a splendid paper entitled The Things the David Butler Archive told me [about the Conservatives] and I will venture to quote in a very abridged way from his eleven points.

One. The Tory Party is, like any other organisation, riven less by ideological factions than by divides running along functional lines, with mutual distrust and sometimes loathing between the organisation men in Central Office, the supposed hot-shots in the Research Department, the politicians around the leader, and those on the outer fringe- the fundraisers, consultants and pollsters brought in to help the party (often at great – and therefore much resented – expense). Also, as in any other organisation, the sheer personal pique and animosity flying around has to be read to be believed.

Two. Talking of hopeless cases, what also shines through is the extent to which, since the 1950s – when the Tories were in a majority in Scotland – the Party North of the Border was seen by those in London as a standing joke, run by idiotic grandees and riven with rivalry between Glasgow and Edinburgh and the Lowlands and the Highlands.

Three. The extent to which it took a lot longer than it should have done for intelligent politicians and professionals to recognise that opinion research was a better way of reading public opinion than either views picked up ‘on the doorstep’ by grassroots activists and reported back to Central Office or – even more importantly – the hunches and gut-feelings of senior politicians and even professional publicity people. Nevertheless, resistance was worn down over the decades – with a move from dismissive scepticism, through the selective use of opinion polling to win internal arguments against adopting the pet peeves of activists as well as against colleagues blocking change. As one Central Office staffer put it, ‘When the old-timers talked nonsense before, all you could do was to say “Balls”. And they just say “Balls” back. Now you can produce some evidence.’ By the 1980s there was a general (though by no means total) acceptance that, on balance, polling was worth the money.

Four. The interviews confirm the extent to which Tory Leaders’ choice of Chairman normally had little or nothing to do with their aptitude for running a large organisation – something to which most of them were totally unsuited. It is clear from interviews that, after Lord Woolton, the only men who were halfway successful in doing so were men with extensive business experience. Many were high-profile politicians who may have been good communicators (although even this wasn’t always true) but most of those working for them thought they were pretty useless CEOs. This is not perhaps surprising, given something else that emerges from the interviews, namely the complete and utter lack of interest in organisational matters demonstrated by each and every leader of the Party up until, perhaps, William Hague – a management consultant.

Five. The sheer cost of advertising – and the increased willingness to use it. Politicians were eventually convinced by the professionals (who in turn were reading academic work, not least Butler and Stokes!) of the volatility of the electorate. This turned on its head the old pattern of fundraising (whereby elections were money-spinners which provided sufficient cash to get the Party through the lean years).

Six. The interviews reveal a lot about policy-making and attitudes in opposition. For instance the extent to which policy reviews are essentially cosmetic exercises, with most of the findings (except insofar as they fit with what Leaders want to do anyway) being

completely ignored. Also the extent to which policy commitments made and declared early on in opposition are then very difficult to get out of, meaning that the Party, for all its much-trumpeted preparation for government, entered office in 1970 and 1979, with programmes that were in many ways ill-suited to the challenges faced. A report of an interview conducted in March 1968 with Edward Boyle, a Shadow Minister heavily involved with policy development, sums all this up nicely: the Tories, he lamented, ‘were stuck with 1965-6 policy. They would find on detailed examination that they couldn’t go further without taking on too much and they couldn’t go back and abandon it.’ Also the extent to which often quite momentous policy innovations are driven, at least in part, by ill-considered commitments – the most obvious example being VAT which was the only way the Party could pay for Macleod’s rash promise to abolish Labour’s money-spinning Selective Employment Tax. Another revelation was the extent of concerns, before both 1970 and 1979 that the Conservatives would face major inertia and even resistance from a civil service who, it was feared, had become too loyal to Labour governments and reluctant to implement anything radical.

Seven. The interviews revealed the extent to which from the late 1970s Saatchi continually reminded politicians (sometimes much to their chagrin) of the importance of brevity and repetition and urged them to employ a novel method referred to then as ‘nine-word sentences’ but which we now know as sound bites.

Eight. The interviews show the extent to which Chris Patten was not the patronising patrician outsider he is often painted in accounts of the Thatcher’s leadership in opposition but an absolutely vital and committed player – someone whose politics Thatcher had little time for but whom she respected (much more so than she did many of those supposedly closer to her) for his way with words and his sheer strategic nous.

Tim Bale’s comments might make some Tories wince but I can assure you that any historian of the Labour Party would encounter equally embarrassing evidence in our files. Time is short, So let me end with just two paragraphs from our files.

There is Tony Benn in 1971. Although he is still very much living, I feel free to quote him because he has quoted others so extensively in his published diaries (even I have not escaped)

*‘Wilson was always rather paranoid and never more so than when George Brown resigned. He was sure there was a conspiracy then and was far more worried than he needed to be. Attlee never worried about survival and knew that as long as he had Ernie Bevin’s support, he didn’t have to worry.’*

Peter Shore (a close friend of Tony Benn) said in 1980

*‘The grass roots have fallen into the hands of a lot of wild men. Jim Callaghan and after him Michael Foot were grossly overconfident that they could ride the storm of grass roots indignation and restore the autonomy of the parliamentary party. ...The story of the 1970s was the story of an enormous triumph for Anthony Benn- a pyrrhic victory*

*for his obsession with changing the rules in a way that would favour his own candidature for party leadership.'*

In a few minutes Dennis will comment on my version of our endeavours.

But before I end let me tell you of an interview, not yet in these files, but more extraordinary than any here. In January 1950 the *Economist* published an article revealing the rediscovered Cube Law on the relation between votes and seats. Winston Churchill had seen this and demanded a meeting with the anonymous author. As a result less than two weeks before the February election, I found myself at Chartwell, dining alone with Churchill. He asked me one or two questions about the Cube Law which he could not understand but then he devoted four hours to entertaining me- a totally unknown 25 year old. How unthinkable it would be today for any party manager in the last phase of an election, to allow the leader to take time off like that.

An alcoholic dinner was interrupted to listen to an election broadcast by Anthony Eden. I was asked my view of it which was politely negative. *'Ah you think he should have talked down to the British people'*. Then he gave an imitation of an earthy Trade Union leader broadcasting, adding. *'I could go on like that for hours- Anthony couldn't... But I have never talked down to the British people.'* Then, after reminiscing about the Dundee by-election of 1908 and his speeches on the complexities of Protection in, he turned to 1940 and gave me most of the blood, toil, tears and sweat speech. I remarked that I was only 15 in 1940 and that it had never occurred to me that Britain could be defeated. *'What! only 15 in 1940 [he counted on his fingers]- that means you are only 25 now. Better hurry up, young man, better hurry up. Napoleon was only 26 when he crossed the bridge at Lodi.*

*What a small man Napoleon was. He could sit on his horse at Waterloo and see all the armies of Europe deployed before him. How much bigger was that evil man at Berchtersgaden with his forces spread from the Urals to the Channel...'* and then he drifted off into a long Miltonic speech about his hatred of tyranny.

Somehow, although I have always been respectful to the great, after that remarkable evening I have never found myself in awe of any politician.

But I have had my share of our forty minutes. Let Dennis give his more contemporary thoughts and quotations about our long-term enterprise.

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