ADVERSARY POLITICS IN BRITAIN 1964-1979: CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT AND THE CLIMATE OF STRESS

By Geoffrey Debnam

THE central theme of the adversary politics thesis is that frequent changes of government in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s led to policy reversals on a scale that was damaging to the economy and society. The adversary politics theorists attributed the problem to the operation of the simple plurality electoral system and the associated two-party system, and used the conclusion as a justification for proposing electoral reform.¹

In an article in this journal, however, R.M. Punnett set out to show that relatively frequent change of government was a recurrent feature of British politics.² If problems had arisen in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not because of any newly experienced governmental instability but because the demands made on governments were changing. Short-term governments had been adequate when problems could either be solved in the short term or ignored because the consequences appeared of marginal concern to a strong economy. As Britain’s economic position deteriorated, and as planning perspectives widened because of growing technological and international complexity, the need for policy continuity showed up the weakness in the system. According to Punnett’s view the ending of the second world war saw a return to “politics as usual”. What had changed was the complexity of the environment in which governments operated. The adversary politics thesis had overlooked this, Punnett implied, because its claims had not been set in an historical context: it was simply an attempt to establish a structural relationship between electoral system and policy outcome that was persuasive in its description of a limited period, but unconvincing in any broader application.

The argument to be developed here is that, contrary to Punnett’s view, the length, and particularly the nature, of government tenure in the 1960s and 1970s was quite unusual. The adversary politics theorists were right to respond as they did, right to attribute the problem to the electoral system, but wrong in identifying the mechanisms by which it occurred.

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Punnett set out to examine whether the frequency of change of British governments since 1945 is unusual in either a comparative or historical context. The sharpness of his focus enabled him to reach some firm conclusions. In his historical analysis he looked at the life of governments over the period from 1830 to 1980 and found that the average was just over four years. Average tenure for the post-1945 period until 1980 was five years, demonstrating that the period that had generated the adversary politics thesis was not as exceptional as it implied. Punnett then made a comparative analysis of the position in 22 democracies to see whether Britain’s performance in this respect was typical or not. He found that, although Britain appeared to be unexceptional when this broad comparison was made, ranking eleventh equal with the Republic of Ireland, the relative position was significantly changed when a distinction was made between countries that had typically been governed by coalitions and those where single-party government had been the norm. When Britain’s performance was compared with ten other countries where single-party government had been more common than any other form, Punnett found that only Japan and Denmark had experienced more rapid government turnover. In Denmark, however, single-party government had been frequently interspersed with coalitions, so the significance of government turnover would have been greatly reduced because of continuity of ministerial personnel between one administration and the next. Japan’s status in the rankings is explained by seven short-lived governments between the years 1946 and 1955 when democracy was first being established. In Britain’s case there were no mitigating circumstances that would explain away its relatively frequent changes of government in the post-war period, and this had been sustained by the historical analysis already cited.

Because looking at changes of government had not allowed him to make a direct comparison between the British experience and that of countries commonly under coalition government, Punnett then looked at the dominant party’s share of office in 21 countries (i.e. except Switzerland, where the three major parties had shared power throughout the period). The result of his analysis confirmed his view that the nature of party competition in Britain was exceptional. In all other countries the dominant party had been in power for at least two-thirds of the period reviewed. In Britain, on the other hand, the party enjoying the longest share of office, the Conservative Party, had been in power for only just over half of the period. Even then, its dominance might have been greater than this figure suggests, if the opposition had been fragmented, but this was not the case. The Labour Party was the only other party in office during the period. If that second most successful party’s (Labour) share of power is expressed as a percentage of the dominant party’s (Conservative) share, it comes to
95.6%. Of the ten other countries most commonly having single-party government, no other came anywhere near this. The next highest was New Zealand with 41.4%. In other words, in contrast to the near parity between the two major parties in Britain, the dominant party in New Zealand enjoyed more than twice as long in power as its only opponent. This data justified Punnett's conclusion that, within the period analysed, "Britain is unique in being without a dominant party and in having frequently-alternating single-party governments". The pattern is no different, argues Punnett, from that exhibited throughout the longer period since 1830. What has changed, however, is the complexity of the problems facing governments and of the governmental process. "Britain's uniqueness in experiencing life without a dominant party" is a more critical factor, Punnett claimed, in explaining the country's poor performance after 1945 than "the extent of the ideological divide between the parties".

Viewed from the perspectives of 1980, when there was no reason to suppose that the new Conservative government under the unpopular leadership of Margaret Thatcher would last any longer than its immediate predecessors, Punnett had good cause to suppose that the pattern he had identified was in fact persisting throughout the later period. Yet there are two reasons why his conclusions should now be viewed with some caution. The first is the obvious one that Conservative rule under Margaret Thatcher looks set to repeat the performance of the long-running Conservative governments of 1951 to 1964. This is obviously going to affect the statistics for the post-1945 period—a point he recognised.

In fact, if the current Conservative government lasts for four of its five-year term, the average tenure of British governments since 1945 will be approximately 6 years and 7 months—a picture very different from the average of 5 years that Punnett found for the post-war period up to 1980, and even more so from the 150-year average of 4 years and 1 month. Punnett divided this 150-year period into a series of shorter periods, but in none of them was average tenure any more than 4 years and 7 months. This revised perspective shows, however, that tenure is now running at a rate over 40% in excess of the figure for the longer period that Punnett gave. Is something unusual happening in British politics?

The second reason for caution stems from the way in which his data was presented. Punnett listed the "Longest Lasting British Governments 1830-1980", defined as all those that had survived for more than six years. He ranked them in terms of their longevity, with the 1951-1964 Conservative administration coming top. He did not, however, test this data to see if it showed any particular trend. If it is re-ranked chronologically, and if a column is added that takes note of the length of intervening periods of 'short-lived' (i.e. less than six years) governments, an interesting picture emerges.
This table has two interesting features. In the first place, longevity is a more marked phenomenon in the twentieth than in the nineteenth century. The second feature that is of interest is the fact that from 1895 to 1980 there were two spells when one long-lasting government was followed by another, resulting in two periods of almost 20 years on each occasion when there was only one change of government. The record of government in the nineteenth century has nothing comparable to offer. The final column in Table 1 shows how the frequency of short-lived governments gradually decreased in the period up to 1915 with, conversely, an increasing probability that governments would last longer than six years. The 30-year gap that followed reflects the emergence of the Labour Party and its effect on the traditional two party system of Conservatives and Liberals, but the re-establishment of two-partyism in 1945, with Labour replacing the Liberals, indicates a return to greater government stability, broken, however, by the troublesome times of the late 1960s and 1970s. Although Punnett was able to conclude that not much had changed, his approach masked a change in the frequency of the phenomenon he was observing.

Anyone viewing these figures from a perspective dominated by the troubled 1970s must necessarily have seen in them a confirmation of the continually re-emerging fragility of British governments. But the data can be made to give a different picture if two amendments are made. In the first place, it is a reasonable assumption that the present Conservative administration will survive until 1991—both of the previous Thatcher governments having lasted for four years. Table 1 can be amended, therefore, by including another row in recognition of this probability. In the second place, it is curious that Punnett chose to ignore the long period of Conservative dominance of government beginning with the election of 1931, when they won 77% of seats in the House of Commons, and continued by the election of 1935, when their share of seats dropped but was nevertheless still an impressive 63%. It is true that from 1931 to 1935 and from 1940 to 1945 the Conservative Party was formally part of a coalition government, and that for the earlier period the former Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay
MacDonald, served as Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party's political dominance throughout the period was such that it should not be overlooked in any account of governmental stability.

Punnett argues that 'a “change of government” is deemed to have taken place only when there was a change in the party or parties in office'. Since the purpose of his article was to assess the incidence of "frequently-alternating single-party governments" in Britain, it hardly seems appropriate to treat the years 1931 to 1945 as if they were just that—a period of frequently-alternating single-party governments—which is the effect of not including them in the list of "longest-lasting governments". Punnett is right to point out that "The surprising thing about the inter-war period is not that the Conservatives did spend more years in office than the declining Liberals and the emerging Labour Party, but that the Conservatives failed to establish a long unbroken spell of single party government." He is surely wrong, though, not to acknowledge the sustained and massive dominance enjoyed by them during the period, which has been approached by no other party, including the Conservatives, before or since. In that context, variation in the detail of coalition membership cannot be construed as constituting a "change of government", particularly where doing so implies a lack of policy continuity. If both of these adjustments are made, and a further adjustment changing 'Unionist' to 'Conservative' (in recognition of the fact that the former title was adopted by the Conservative Party as a temporary expedient to assert their position on the Irish question), the revisions will present the rather different picture of Table 1a.

Three conclusions can be drawn from this revised data. In the first place, the incidence of "longest-lasting governments" has increased significantly in the twentieth century. Whatever may have been the perceptions derived from the difficult political conditions of the 1970s, that period offers no confirmation of a tendency (either well established or more recent in origin) towards instability in British governments. If
anything, the trend is towards greater stability. The second conclusion follows as a corollary: the incidence of short-lived governments has decreased. In the 65 years following 1835 there were four periods of short-lived government totalling 35 years (i.e. 55% of the time). From 1900 to 1991, however, there have been only two such periods representing a total of 31 years (34% of the time). In the context of the politics of the twentieth century these are unusual occurrences. Why did they happen? The third conclusion is that, contrary to Punnett's claim that "Britain is unique in being without a dominant party", the Conservative Party is clearly cast for such a role. Between 1874 and 1991 the party will have been in power for approximately 72 out of 117 years (nearly 62% of the time). Since 1931 its dominance has increased, with the party in power for approximately 44 out of 60 years.

If the explanation that Punnett offered for Britain's ills now looks discredited, what alternative is available? A comparison with New Zealand is instructive. Punnett came to his conclusion because he chose 1945 as the datum point for his comparative analysis. From the British perspective, the justification seems to be straightforward. With the second world war in Europe just ended, the Labour Party had marked a new departure in British politics by winning a governing majority for the first time, at the same time heralding in the welfare state and a return to classic two-partyism, with the exit of the Liberal Party as a serious contender for power. But if 1945 is a starting point for British politics, it is certainly not for New Zealand which was one of the countries with which Punnett compared Britain. From the New Zealand perspective there is as much justification for taking 1935 as the datum point: the year when the New Zealand Labour Party first won control of government, bringing in its own version of the welfare state, finally replacing the Liberal Party as the reformist party of New Zealand politics.

The year 1935 marks the beginning of the modern two-party system in New Zealand. Although it is not fashionable to refer to 1935 in the same way in relation to British politics, it is clear that the Liberal Party was a spent force by then, its 1929 vote of 23.6% having slumped to 6.7% and 6.8% in the 1931 and 1935 elections—a contributory factor being the loss of a significant minority through the defection of the National Liberals to the ruling coalition. But although the Liberals had ceased to exist as a significant force by 1931, that is not an appropriate year to suggest as an alternative date for the beginning of the modern two-party system as the Labour Party was decimated at the election of that year. In 1935, though, with 38% of the popular vote, and 25% of the parliamentary seats, its position as the only effective opposition to the Conservative Party was established. From that point there was no question about the nature of the British party system until it appeared to be at risk because of the rise of third-party forces in the 1970s and
early 1980s. If 1935 is used as the datum point in a comparison between Britain and New Zealand, the significance of the changed focus is immediately apparent. Table 2 shows calculations of party tenure of office in Britain and New Zealand for the period 1945-1980 as well as for 1935-1990.

The contrast between the two sets of figures for the two periods is marked. Lengthening the period of observation has the effect of standing the relationships observed in the shorter period on their head. In contrast to Britain, it is now New Zealand that exhibits the critical condition of experiencing "life without a dominant party" which Punnett suggested is a potentially more important determinant of the style of politics than the "extent of the ideological divide between the parties". If it is now New Zealand that might be regarded as unique in this respect, it does not follow that New Zealand is therefore an alternative candidate for having "frequently-alternating single-party governments". Table 3a compares change of government in Britain and New Zealand from 1935 to 1990, and Table 3b indicates the tenure of successive governments over the same period.

2. Two Party Share of Office Contrasted over Two Periods in Britain and New Zealand (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1945-1980</th>
<th>1935-1990a</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cons/Nat b</td>
<td>Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>70 7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>51 1</td>
<td>48 9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

a. It has been assumed that both current British and New Zealand governments survive until August 1990 when the next N.Z. general election is due.
b. The British Conservative Party and the New Zealand National Party are roughly comparable right of centre parties.
c. This figure includes the British Labour Party's period as a coalition partner during the second world war. There was no coalition government in New Zealand during the period.


|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

a. The New Zealand Labour Party came to power in 1935 and thereafter alternated with the National Party.
b. The British Conservative Party was the major partner (holding 388 out of 615 parliamentary seats) in the National government continued in office by the 1935 election and the wartime coalition formed in 1940. It was the sole participant in the caretaker government that served from May to July 1945. Thereafter, it has alternated in power with the Labour Party.

3b. Government Tenures, 1935-1990 (to nearest year)

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<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two things are immediately apparent. The first is that, despite the different circumstances experienced by the two countries throughout the 55-year period, and despite the fact that Britain's parliamentary term is five years and New Zealand's is three, both countries will have
had exactly the same number of changes of government. So despite the fact that Britain has a dominant party and New Zealand does not, governments in both countries have had the same average tenure. What, then, is the relationship between dominance and tenure? The second point to note is that short-term governments (i.e. less than 6 years) have been followed by long-term governments (over 6 years) in all cases except two. Both exceptions happened consecutively in Britain in the 1970s. The first of these, the Conservative administration of Edward Heath, is in fact the only single-term administration of the post-1945 period in Britain—a distinction it shares with the two New Zealand Labour Governments of 1957-1960 and 1972-1975. So the difference between Britain and New Zealand in this respect is not that one country has a dominant party and the other not, nor that average government tenure is longer in one than in the other, but simply that since 1935 New Zealand has not had two consecutive periods of short-lived government.

Whereas Punnet argued that frequently-alternating governments occur in Britain because there is no dominant party, the revised view is that they are disappearing because there is a dominant party. These two conclusions, while at variance in their historical interpretation, nevertheless seem to be in agreement over one thing—there does appear to be a positive relationship between the two phenomena. But since Punnett’s data is faulty, it cannot be used in support of such a proposition. What is wanted is a test case that shows whether the relationship is constant. Table 2 shows that New Zealand can properly be described as being without a dominant party over the period 1935-1990, yet, despite this, the country has not suffered from frequently alternating governments. In the period concerned New Zealand will have had exactly the same average length of government as Britain—yet Britain has a dominant party and New Zealand does not. The comparison of these two cases can hardly be conclusive, but it does throw the possibility of a direct relationship between party dominance and security of government tenure into doubt. The foregoing argument suggests, though, that just as the phenomenon of frequently-alternating government is more historically localised, so is the explanation. Its occurrence was, after all, diminishing throughout the nineteenth century as the modern party system developed. The question is, can the two twentieth century occurrences be attributed to problems of the party system, or do they reflect the imperatives of the same sort of historical setting?

What features do the periods 1915-1931 and 1964-1979 have in common? The first was dominated by world war followed by a chronic economic crisis that led to 2.5 million unemployed in 1921, the General Strike of 1926, and the Great Depression heralded by the financial collapse of 1929. By contrast, the years 1964-1979 opened with the
continuation of unparalleled growth in the general standard of living, although the shadow of future economic difficulties was thrown by the massive deficit inherited by the incoming Labour government. The years following were marked by rising inflation triggered by what Samuel Beer has described as a ‘scramble’ for increases in benefits, pay and subsidies, exhilarated out of all measure by the dramatic oil price rises of the 1970s. Certainly, neither period was placid, but then neither was the period immediately before the first world war, marked as it was by the activities of the suffragettes, strike action on an unprecedented scale and constitutional confrontations including the continuing and worsening Irish question. Nor were the years after 1931, which started with a world-wide depression and ended in world war. Neither of these periods, the first dominated by the Liberal Party and the second by the Conservatives, show the signs of political fragility that are so evident in 1915-1931 and 1964-1979. The broad outlines of the two periods are, therefore, neither markedly similar, nor are they unique, yet both were certainly occasions when the two-party system came under threat. In the period after the first world war this reflected growing support for the new Labour Party and the decline of the Liberals. From 1964 to 1979 both parties were under threat, first marginally from the growth of the nationalist vote in the Celtic areas, and then more substantially from the resurgence later in the period of the Liberal vote, although it was the Conservative vote that appeared more likely to suffer.

4. Indicators of Government Strength, Britain 1895-1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of elections</th>
<th>Share of seats (%)</th>
<th>Seat margin (%)</th>
<th>Share of votes (%)</th>
<th>Vote margin (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895-1915*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-1931</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-1964b</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-1979</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979-1990</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Calculations for the period 1895-1915 have been simplified by treating it as a period of two-bloc rather than two-party politics. Total votes and seats won by the Liberals and Irish Nationalists have been combined, as have votes and seats for Conservatives and Liberal Unionists.

b. For the elections 1931 and 1935, the returns and results for Conservatives, National Liberals and National Labour have been amalgamated.

The impact of these movements in support can be seen in Table 4 where four sets of statistics for the two periods are shown in historical context. Between them these capture different facets of a government’s strength. Its security is greater if it controls a comfortable majority in Parliament (share of seats), a security that is enhanced if it is accompanied by a wide margin over the next most successful party (seat margin). The Labour Government’s victory at the 1950 election
gave it an absolute majority in the House of Commons, but only 2.7% more seats than the Conservative opposition. In 1964 the Labour Party's parliamentary margin was even smaller. Both occasions led to an early election. But since a government will become increasingly preoccupied throughout its term of office with the forthcoming election, and since its estimation of its chances will be partly derived from its level of voter support at the previous election, its share of the vote is also included. The greater its overall share, the more confident it must be about the future, although not where the opposition is breathing down its neck. The last column therefore gives the vote margin achieved by governments at general elections.

Although Table 4 shows that the two periods concerned are similar in that both showed a low average share of seats for the government, as well as a low share of the popular vote, there are marked differences. For example, in terms of vote and seat margins, the post first world war period is more like the three periods that have been marked by "longest-lasting governments". The period from 1964 to the election of 1979 that brought a return of stable government is exceptional in that during it government was carried on without the level of electoral and parliamentary security enjoyed by governments at all other times. Something unusual appears to have been happening between the years 1964 and 1979 for which there is no precedent in modern British two party politics.

It should be recalled that, during this period, governments had to face a series of problems that not only called into question their own general competence and legitimacy, but also that of the democratic system itself. A literature generated by what Anthony Wright has described as a "decline industry" sought to explain the phenomenon. 6 Most of the products of this industry, according to Wright, focused variously on the social and economic problems of the times. In their view the political system is seen as being the more or less pathetic victim suffering under the weight of problems it was totally incapable of solving. The adversary politics thesis was different from these in that it portrayed the political system as villain rather than victim because it manufactured confrontation between the parties and made it possible for minorities within them to gain disproportionate power. As a result, policy making was distorted and erratic. It has already been pointed out, though, that while the thesis is persuasively suggestive, it does not establish a necessary link between system input and policy output. If the system caused policy problems in the 1970s, why not in the 1950s and 1980s? The thesis does not discriminate. What is beyond dispute, however, is that there was crisis enough in the late 1960s and 1970s to create stress for the governing party. In such critical conditions, according to A.J. Oppenheim, decision-making will tend to be based either on "extrapolation from the past... on ideology... on various
prejudices and unfounded assumptions, or simply on inspired
guesswork.” Irving Janis distinguished among five “coping
patterns”; Four of them are as follows. The decision-maker (1)
complacently decides to continue whatever he, or she, has been doing,
ignoring information about the risk of losses; (2) uncritically adopts
whichever new course of action is most salient or most strongly
recommended; (3) evades the conflict by procrastinating, shifting
responsibility to someone else, or constructing wishful rationalizations
and remaining selectively inattentive to corrective information; (4)
searches frantically for a way out of the dilemma and impulsively seizes
upon a hastily contrived solution that seems to promise immediate
relief, overlooking the full range of consequences of choice because of
emotional excitement.

A major feature of the British political system is that it regularly
allocates a monopoly of political power to a single party. Having sole
responsibility for all governmental decision-making will have the effect
of concentrating the party mind on the specifics of the current
problems. Where the party’s control of government is insecure,
problem solving will become subordinate to, or at least will be
intimately bound up with, the question of survival. Under the normal
conditions of British government as indicated in Table 4,
decision-makers will face conditions of crisis with a greater degree of
political assurance than they did in the 1960s and 1970s. They might
even be guilty of complacency in the way they respond (pattern 1); of
not being sufficiently critical in their approach (pattern 2); or of simply
evading the issues (pattern 3). Pattern 4 (Janis calls this
‘hypervigilance’) would be associated with very different
circumstances, however. Periods of political security do not, after all,
conjure up images of frantic searches and emotional excitement as does
the period from 1964 to 1979. It is here that the general political
insecurity of governments during the period may be a significant
means of explaining why adversary politics occurred during these years
and not at other times. If on top of the uncertainty created by recurrent
hostilities members of the government were concerned about the security of
their position, a different set of considerations would apply that could
well create the conditions identified by the adversary politics thesis.
The question is “How does this proposal survive the objections made
by the critics of the thesis?”

The two major criticisms of the thesis are, first, that it fails to offer
any explanation of why two-partyism created problems in the 1960s
and 1970s but not before or after, and, second, that it is only a partial
account of that period since it overlooks the level of consensus within
the system. The first, ahistorical, gap in the thesis has been closed here
by the suggestion that the electoral and parliamentary conditions in the
period were quite different from what is normally experienced by
governing parties in Britain. The second critique is based largely on the work of Richard Rose who, having looked at various aspects of the political process, and quantified most of them, came to the conclusion that, whereas adversarial confrontation is part of the rhetoric of political life in Britain, the reality is best described in terms of a moving consensus. If Rose is right then, contrary to the argument being made here, the special conditions obtaining in the 1960s and 1970s had no significant impact on political outcomes. In a more balanced attempt to question the significance of adversary politics, Dennis Kavanagh notes that while there is evidence that party conflict has had damaging consequences in some policy areas, there is also evidence that parties have less impact than their rhetoric would suggest. "Changes in government have led to discontinuities in policy, but trends towards convergence have also occurred despite the parties in office attempting to carry out different policies." Kavanagh argues that this convergence occurs because "governments often abruptly or gradually change their policies, generally around the mid-term of Parliament and . . . continuities occur in spite of the parties starting out with different policies". The explanation for this, he suggests, is that office tenure encourages a political learning process. Cabinet ministers gradually abandon their party commitment to ideologically derived positions formulated when in opposition in favour of a more pragmatic style. Stephen Ingle argues, though, that this pattern is in itself evidence of the debilitating constraints of the adversarial system. At the same time as one party goes through its learning process in office, the other is using its period in opposition to sow the seeds for future policy reversals. As Robert Blake points out, "A party in office inevitably gives little thought to ideology or principles . . . in opposition the situation is quite different . . . defeat gives a lot of people much annoyance and much time on their hands." So, according to this view, parties learn in office, and indulge in ideological regression in defeat. But that interpretation certainly fails to account for the significant adaptations to changing conditions that have been made by both the Conservative and Labour parties when in opposition—the former after 1945 and the latter after 1987, for example.

The view that parties learn only in office can be contrasted with a Downsian approach that emphasises the challenge of electoral competition as the crucial educative experience, and argues that parties are prepared to modify their positions on any given issue so far as this is compatible with their broadly defined ideological perspective if it will increase the size of their vote. Evidence presented by David Robertson suggests that this is what was happening in the period after 1945. In an analysis of the economic content of the major party election manifestos from 1924 to 1966, Robertson found that by the 1960s a
significant narrowing of the ideological gap between the two parties had taken place. Not only does this seem to bear out the argument of Anthony Downs, it also fits in with Gallup poll data assembled by Kavanagh showing voters' perception of differences and similarities between the parties over the period from 1951 to 1979.\(^\text{15}\) This evidence shows that, whereas only 20% of voters thought that the parties were "much of a muchness" at the 1951 and 1955 elections, the figure had risen to at least 40% in the later 1960s and 1970s. If party positions were converging and the voters saw this to be the case, surely adversarial politics must have been a peripheral problem as Kavanagh implies. Under such circumstances, the scope for policy reversal must have diminished, and declining electoral and parliamentary support levels would have been irrelevant to an understanding of the period.

Kavanagh's argument that the adversary politics thesis should be a subsidiary theme in the interpretation of British politics, even when restricted to the period for which it was devised, is supported empirically by the voter-judgement and manifesto-convergence data, and theoretically via a Downsian interpretation of the imperatives of electoral competition. Yet there is good reason to doubt this judgement. In the first place, while manifesto convergence does occur, its significance may be questioned. Evidence produced by Colin Railings suggests that party commitment to manifesto promises declined just as the convergence was taking place. Ignoring the achievement rate for the short-lived administrations of 1950-1951, 1964-1966 and February to October 1974, the average proportion of manifesto promises achieved in the period from 1945 to 1964 was 81.3% while between 1966 and 1979 the rate had dropped to 67.9%.\(^\text{16}\) Of course, this evidence may simply mean that it was getting harder to keep promises, although that in itself may reflect a stress climate. But, that objection aside, we may still question the significance of convergence since it gives no indication of the potential divisiveness of the issues on which disagreement remains. In reply to Rose's critique, Finer has pointed out that a quantitative approach overlooks the qualitative impact that one major confrontation can have; "the matters on which parties do battle are the ones that matter to the polity."\(^\text{17}\) Ingle adds that conflict over one issue may shape the character of a whole parliament, and he cites the problem of industrial relations during the 1970-1974 administration of Edward Heath.

The second reason for doubting the significance of policy convergence as an indicator of consensus is that the level of party cohesion in parliamentary divisions declined significantly from the late 1960s. If policy convergence was occurring during this period, it seems as though it did so despite the growth of intra-party conflict. In examining and rejecting three explanations for this declining cohesion,
Mark Franklin, Alison Baxter and Margaret Jordan suggest that the cause was complex and they offer "the status of party programmes" as one of four possible sources. They do not elaborate on this proposal, but it is plausible to suggest that the convergence was itself a source of conflict between the parties. If the Downsian interpretation of the factors shaping party response to issue voting is appropriate to the 1960s and 1970s—Patrick Dunleavy has referred to the 1970 election as the "high-water mark of party convergence"—the two major parties would have been increasingly faced with a demarcation problem.

The greater the tendency to moderate policies because of competition for the median voter, the greater the need to identify and exploit some distinguishing characteristic to capture that vote. A poorly-differentiated product will rely on a distinctive label and an aggressive marketing technique. Examples of the former are Harold Wilson's rhetorical emphasis on "technological modernisation" and Edward Heath's development of a "competition policy", both of which emerged at a time of supposed policy convergence. The latter is illustrated by the incidence of policy reversal. Rose points out that the 1970 Conservative Government repealed only three measures of the previous administration, and that although the 1974 Labour Government repealed eleven Conservative measures it could have been worse! It has already been suggested, though, that the impact of policy reversal cannot be determined quantitatively, but only by reference to the significance of the issues involved. Under certain circumstances—and a climate of stress may figure prominently here—policy convergence may be less significant as an indicator of consensus between parties than it is as a sign of increasing tension within them. The significance of that development, and particularly the way in which it may lead on to dramatic change in party policy, has not been adequately explored in the adversary politics literature.

No convincing case has yet been made in dismissal of the adversary politics thesis. But equally no convincing explanation has been advanced for its localised occurrence in the 1964 to 1979 period. Neither has any proponent of the theory identified the trigger mechanism. Finer has suggested that it lies in the polarisation of the two parties, but no evidence has been brought-forward to show that either Conservative or Labour Party extremists controlled policy-making even while their parties were in office during the period that was, nevertheless, undoubtedly adversarial. S.A. Walkland cites the impact of the left wing of the Labour Party on the party's industrial strategy of 1974, but goes on to describe the "rapid and thorough" dilution of the programme once the party was in power. Douglas Ashford suggests that, although adversarial behaviour is present in any political system, its consequences are exacerbated in Britain by the
possibly unique "concentration of power in a relatively small elite at
the centre."21 Ashford's solution does not, however, resolve the
question, "Why 1964-1979?". The answer lies in the unique
conjunction of policy uncertainty and political insecurity that marked
the period and which was bound to have an impact on the attitudes and
behaviour of decision-makers. Their search for solutions to one of these
problems would inevitably have become tainted with the demands of
the other, with public policy developing an urgency not present when
uncertainty and insecurity levels are lower.

The argument here, then, is that a distinctive climate for decision-
making emerged in the period 1964-1979. Like any climate, though, its
effects were uneven. In the first place, the perception of stress is
subjective. The statistical indicators used here may be entirely
irrelevant to how any individual decision-maker viewed his or her
position. But, given that Cabinet ministers are not isolated from each
other, the collective view will reflect something of the facts of political
life that are caught by Table 4. In the second place, the indicators have
been generalised to apply to a whole period, whereas it is obvious that
the political environment within a period may change. The contrast
between the results of the elections of 1964 and 1966 is a case in point.
Whereas 1964 had given the Labour Party a bare seat margin over the
Conservative Opposition of 2% and a vote margin of 0.7%, the 1966
election had produced a result that was more in keeping with the other
periods cited in Table 4. The Labour government's vote margin
increased to 6.1% on 48.0% of the poll, while its margin of advantage
in seats as a result of now controlling 57.8% of the House of Commons
had risen to 17.6%. Although the memory of the close run election of
1964 would have remained, 1966 created a different climate. As a
result, Richard Crossman was able to make the following comment
about the post-election Labour Cabinet. "Inside the Cabinet the most
striking feature undoubtedly is the sag in morale and energy which has
occurred as a result of our tremendous election victory. Before the
election we were all tense and excited and defending our majority of
one, and there was a correspondingly high morale in the Parliamentary
Party. The moment the election was won there came this sag. The
Parliamentary Party felt it could indulge itself now in a way it couldn't
before and Ministers settled down in Cabinet for a five years' term.
There is a strange relaxation not only of tension but of energy.
Ministers don't feel the necessity to decide things, to push and drive,
and this is just when they require leadership from the centre of the kind
Harold (Wilson) isn't giving."22

The third reason for the uneven effect of this stress climate is that the
degree of uncertainty will vary over issue areas. It is noticeable that
most of the examples of policy reversal cited in the adversary politics
literature relate directly to the management of the economy which was,
after all, the major stress area of the 1960s and 1970s. This list includes stabilisation policy, economic planning, corporation and purchase tax, investment incentives, incomes, pensions, regional planning, land values and nationalisation of steel. One other prominent candidate that could not be included in such a list is education policy. It may well be that a case can be made to explain the policy conflict and policy reversal that has occurred in that issue area as deriving in an equally direct way from the climate of the period. On the other hand, it is not part of the present case to argue that policy reversal can occur only under such conditions—that would be absurd. It is simply suggested here that features that may be present in the simple-plurality two-party system under normal circumstances, and which are not then regarded as a problem, may well become so when the two conditions of policy uncertainty and political insecurity coincide to produce a climate of stress.

3 He wrote, "Only if the Conservatives were to remain in office until 1995 would they achieve the two-thirds level of dominance that to date has been the minimum achieved by the leading parties in other countries".  
4 Patrick Dunleavy argues that "a two-party Conservative v Labour system has never really existed in Britain. At no time since 1918 has Labour succeeded in displacing the Liberals from command of a basic 15 per cent of the national vote". "Send her Victorious" (New Statesman and Society, 16 September 1988). This runs counter to the definition of a two-party system proposed by Lesley Lipson in "Party Systems in the United Kingdom and the Older Commonwealth" (Political Studies, March 1959) which is based on power probabilities rather than voting statistics.  
5 See for example Gillian Peele, "Political Parties in the 1980s" (Contemporary Record, Winter 1988) where she writes "some people as a result of the 1987 election are now talking not so much of a two-party system or a two-and-half party system but of a one-party dominant system". See also Dunleavy, "Send her Victorious."  
6 S H. Beer, Britain Against Itself. The Political Contradictions of Collectivism (Faber and Faber, 1982).  
7 A. Wright, "British Decline Political or Economic?" Parliamentary Affairs, Spring 1987.  
15 Robertson's analysis and the Gallup poll data are presented in Kavanagh, Thatcherism and British Politics, pp. 36-37.  