'Our first business is to hate the British capitalist system'
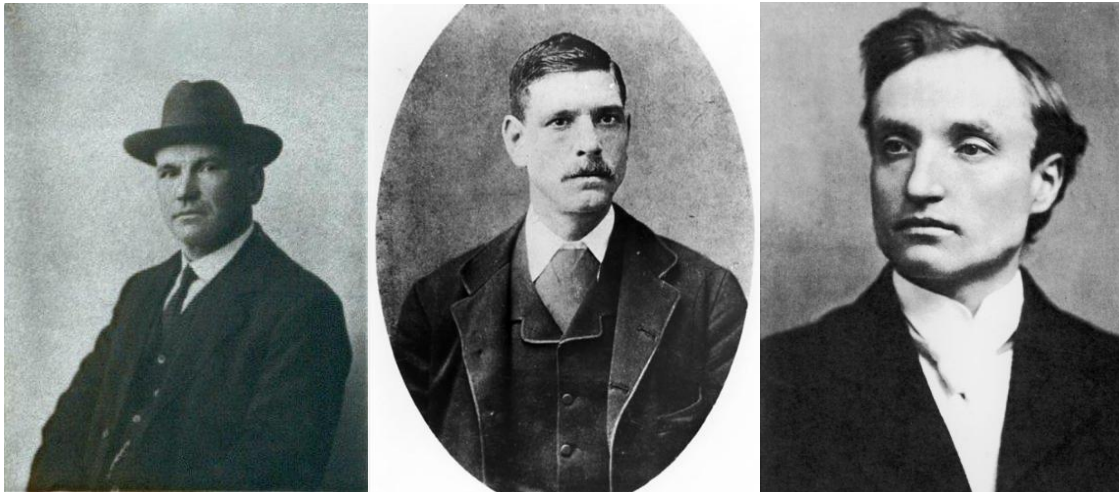

John Maclean [1], Will Thorne [2] and Ben Tillett [3].

Three socialists and their attitudes to the British political structures, 1910-1923

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Events, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and routine procedures; only in a world in which nothing of importance ever happens could the futurologists' dream come true.

- Hannah Arendt, *On violence* (New York 1970).

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Introduction: the British Labour Party in government

In 1924, Ramsay Macdonald became the first Labour Party prime minister of Great-Britain. That was a momentous achievement for him and the people around him. From a rather unorganised coalition of different interest groups and political movements, his party had developed into a well-organized national party deemed fit to govern. This was a fairly recent development, too. Only in the fifteen years before Macdonald took office, the Labour Party experienced its parliamentary breakthrough in a political system that was, until then, heavily dominated by Liberals and Conservatives. Historians have offered a variety of explanations for the rise of the party. Labour benefited from their participation in a war-time government of national unity and the growing number of trade union members, which increased their bargaining power. At the same time, they profited from the extension of suffrage and the changing preferences of the electorate, the decline of the Liberal Party and the fact that their political opponents were slowly accepting Labour as a political force. Older, left-wing, explanations credit a growing class-consciousness for the Labour Party's upsurge.[1]

However, it has also been established that these factors – external factors, so to say – are not enough to explain the party's rise to power. By adopting the methods of established politics, the politicians and activists of the movement that formed the backbone of the Labour Party had a crucial role, too.[2] Despite their importance and except for several leading figures, however, they are rarely treated outside of the biographies. When they do play a part in more general accounts, they are often treated only in relation to the external factors mentioned above. Furthermore, because of the decision of the Labour Party to enter government in 1924, it has been tempting for historians to assume that the installation of the first Labour government was the result of a long battle of its members to achieve just that. The opposite was true: for a long time, many within the party and the movement it represented were doubting whether they would even want to enter parliament to achieve their political goals.[3]

In short, their dilemma was whether the political institutions of a 'capitalist' Great Britain should and could be used for the socialist purpose, or whether it was better to try to create a socialist society by revolutionary methods. These questions were connected to some fundamental aspects of the socialist

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[1] D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge 1990) 419.
[2] M. Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party* (London 2010) 2.
[3] For a careful analysis of the different currents of socialism that existed in Britain before, roughly, the turn of the century, see: M. Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton 2011).

and Marxist ideology. Would the proletarian society, the end-stage of history, come inevitably, as a number of influential figures argued it was predicted in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels? And what should be the response to that? Some argued that the nature of history, with an inevitable ending in a socialist revolution, meant that it was not necessary to become involved in ordinary politics. Others proclaimed that it was the duty of the Marxists to, in the meantime, join the existing political structures to do what they could to improve the fate of the workers.[4] On the other hand, what if the historical laws would not work without human initiative? Again, there were different answers one could choose between. Some argued that it was best to try and topple the existing regimes from the outside, but at least as many British socialists argued that it was necessary to join established political structures and change them from within.[5] 'To make reform the instrument of revolution', as one historian aptly noted.[6]

Although the movement had early on recognized that these questions were important, a decision on a definitive political course was hard to come by. Even in the fifteen years before Ramsay MacDonald took office, the issue never ceased to occupy the minds of the people involved in the different Labour and socialist organizations in Britain. Even when it appeared that the majority would vote for constitutional methods, there was a continuing 'persistence of radical and socialist strands that were not yet ready to be knotted into the orthodoxies' of the movement.[7] The debate about whether Labour had made the right decision, would continue long into the Cold War.[8] Nonetheless, a majority of those who were once highly suspicious of the prospect of the Labour Party playing by the existing political rules chose to support such a course during the 1910s. Without neutralizing these anti-institutional sentiments within the party, a Labour government would not have been possible.

As one of the best known historians of the Labour Party, Martin Pugh, puts it: 'Though not widely studied, this habit of accommodation with the system goes a long way to explaining how Labour successfully evolved from its sectional origins into a British national party.'[9] However, the above already suggests that it is to doubted whether this was really such a habit. Consequently, the central question of what will follow is: why did the people in the Labour Party that had once rejected or criticized the existing political structures of Great Britain now decide to embrace them? To answer that question, a detailed qualitative analysis of the motivations of the politicians involved will be provided. Not of the leaders and intellectual inspirations of the movement, but of three men who were

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[4] The conflict between William Morris and Henry Hyndman in the 1890s epitomized this conflict between a more 'anarchistic' approach of socialism and highly politicized interpretation. See Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 65, 85.

[5] For a detailed analysis of the influence of the Marxist dilemma on British socialists, see: K. Willis, 'The introduction and critical reception of Marxist thought in Britain, 1850-1900', *The Historical Journal* 20.2 (1977) 417-459.

[6] G. Johnson, 'Making reform the Instrument of Revolution': British Social Democracy, 1881-1911', *Historical Journal*, 43.4 (December 2000) 977-1002. Although Johnson, in contrast to this thesis, argues that the matter was already decided before the war.

[7] K. Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (London 2006) 13.

[8] A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (New York 1997) 3-6.

[9] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 2.

active further down the pecking order of what could be called the 'political machine' of the Labour Party. The people who had strong ties to local constituencies and workers and, as Duncan Tanner has noted in his seminal work, propagated the party's 'operative ideology'.[10] Their names were John Maclean, William James (Will) Thorne and Benjamin (Ben) Tillett. It will not be attempted to determine or value how much exactly these men contributed to the Labour Party's decision to join the government. Rather, their political motivations serve as an illustration of why and if, in the fifteen years before MacDonald took office, the Labour Party decided that such a course should be preferred.

Their statements during times of unrest and war can be found in pamphlets, the minutes of the House of Commons, newspaper articles and other publications and form the core of the narrative of decisions presented here. In the first chapter it will be explained what the Labour movement these three men were a part of looked like in the years before the period that is discussed, up to around 1910, and what the standard explanations are for the way it changed into the party that provided the prime minster in 1924. In the rest of the analysis, however, the statements of the three men will be primarily accompanied by biographical information. For each of the three men, conveniently, a detailed biography has been published.[11] The research in those biographies is of a high standard and all three contain a wealth of source-material. As will become obvious in the rest of the thesis, however, the conclusions that are drawn from that research either breath the generic explanations that were dominant at the time they were written in. Or they focus too much on strictly personal explanations that cannot be regarded as representative for the movement. The aim is to cover the ground between those two types of analysis.

Indeed, a part from the fact that there has been paid relatively little attention to the matter of institutionalism among the British Labour movement, the explanations that are available are not fully satisfactory. Therefore, the first chapter will also suggest a perspective that could make an analysis that focusses on that matter both more prominent as well as more effective. The argument is that the discipline of political psychology is able to significantly assist in analysing the motives of the three men to, possibly, accept the British political structures.[12] That approach will illustrate that not only ideological and personal considerations were important. Most importantly, however, it also provides the tools to counterweight the focus on these two aspects. Ideology and personality as explanations should, in short, be complemented by the changing perceptions of the nature and merits of the British political institutes *at that very moment*. Those attitudes would become the decisive motive for the decision of the three men to join those institutes.

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[10] Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 425.

[11] J. Schneer, *Ben Tillett: Portrait of a Labour Leader* (London 1982); B.J. Ripley and J. MacHugh, *John Maclean* (Manchester 1989); G. Radice and L. Radice, *Will Thorne: constructive militant. A study in new unionism and new politics* (London 1974).

[12] The approach is taken from: M.L. Cottam et al., *Introduction to Political Psychology* (2nd edition, New York 2010).

The years between 1910 and 1924 could be divided in roughly three episodes which will also be the subjects of the chapters two, three and four. First, from 1910 until 1914, there was a period of intense industrial unrest during which the British labour movement was divided on how to direct these forces. Thereafter, the First World War broke out, which challenged the socialist commitment to internationalism on the one hand, and their relation to the national institutions of Great Britain on the other. And, as if that was not enough, the British socialists were thrown into fundamental doubt once more when the Bolsheviks took over in Russia in 1917. For the first time ever, it appeared that a true Marxist revolution was possible. The British socialist and labour movement had to decide what this meant for their own commitment to their revolutionary ideas and whether they would try to get to their ideal society the way the Bolsheviks did, or through the use of Britain's existing political structures. The disagreements were spurred on by a resurgence of industrial unrest during the final years of war which continued until the summer of 1921.

During those years fifteen years, the three socialists had to decide whether their first business was indeed 'to hate the British capitalist' system, as John Maclean said in 1914.[13] Even though such a remark seemed deeply entrenched into their worldview and they would argue similar things on a routine basis, they were often not quite so sure about what exactly should be their priority. Often, their ideas and personal goals were overtaken by the changing historical context. Therefore, this thesis will also show that, perhaps more than any psychological motivation or ideological analysis, it was the way people responded to the changing world around them that influenced their decision-making and political careers. As Hannah Arendt wrote in the citation that is used as a maxim for this thesis, the dynamic between events and routine would decide whether the dreams of these three men would come true.

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[13] *Justice*, September 17, 1914.

Chapter 1: The British Labour movement and historical approaches

Historians have often presented the choice for the members of the British Labour Party during these years of crisis as being a decision between the 'constitutional/parliamentary/reformist' or the 'unconstitutional/extra-parliamentary/revolutionary' form of socialist politics.[14] However, when looking at the state of the British Labour movement in the early twentieth century, it immediately becomes obvious that the question of whether to join the political structures of Great Britain was not a simple matter of 'yes or no'. To illustrate that, one only needs to look at the organizational structures of the Labour movement during those years. Although some historians have in previous decades painstakingly tried to argue that there was a growing class-consciousness and a 'pervasive communality of experience' among the British working class during these years,[15] it has become clear that, in reality, the identity of the British working class was highly fragmented.[16] That, unsurprisingly, did result in a situation where there was not a single organisational framework that could claim to represent the workers as a whole. There was a plethora of strategies, organisations and people available for the workers to express their loyalty to. That, even the adepts of the 'class-explanation' have had to admit.[17]

The efforts to found a single overarching organisation were, however, gathering pace. The franchise reform of the nineteenth century, for instance, had made it worthwhile to effectively mobilize the forces of labour with the aim to participate in parliamentary and local elections, even though only a small part of the workers had yet the right to vote.[18] It is in an attempt to coordinate these electoral efforts that the origins of the Labour Party can be found. In 1900 the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was founded on the initiative of the Trade Union Congress and several socialist organisations. The new organization was also necessary because it was only in 1913 that it became legal for trade unions to directly fund political parties.[19] In 1906, the LRC was renamed into the Labour Party. In 1908, the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) was founded for the MP's only, to arrange a form of party discipline in the House of Commons without the interference of the lower echelons of the party. Between the unions, the PLP, the wider Labour Party and all the associated societies and localities, there operated an National Executive Committee (NEC) to (attempt to)

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[14] R. Toye, '"Perfectly parliamentary"? The Labour Party and the house of Commons in the Interwar Years', *Twentieth Century British History* 25.1 (2014) 1-29: 6.
[15] R. Price, *Labour in British Society. An Interpretative History* (London etc. 1986) 128-129
[16] Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 420.
[17] Price, *Labour in British Society*, 169.
[18] G. Philips, *The Rise of the Labour Party, 1893-1931* (London and New York 1992) 3-11.
[19] A. Taylor, *The Trade Unions and the Labour Party* (London etc. 1987) 205.

coordinate everything. Between 1900 and 1914, in other words, the Labour Party was 'a disjointed amalgamation', as one historian has a long time ago aptly noted when referring to its ineffectiveness.[20]

Alternatively, one could say that within the party 'there was room for a whole spectrum of political ideas.'[21] The goals the Trade Unions had with the LRC were, for instance, fairly limited. They regarded the Labour Party as an instrument to increase their bargaining power against the employers. The socialist organisations involved in the foundation of the party had further reaching ideas. Among them, the most famous factions were the Fabian Society, Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Social Democratic Federation. The first two advocated a form of ethical and reformist socialism, in contrast to what one could the call scientific or Marxist socialism of the SDF. The degree to which these socialist organization could influence the party differed through the years and over time. The SDF, for instance, dissociated from the party between 1902 and 1916, because of their disagreements with the rest of the party.

Since people could be a member of multiple Labour organisations at the same time, even if those organizations were in conflict which each other, Will Thorne, John Maclean and Ben Tillett represented almost all currents that were associated with the party between 1900 and 1924. Thorne and Tillett, for instance, were trade union members and in that way affiliated with the Labour Party, but Tillett had been a founding member of the ILP too, while all three were members of the SDF and its successor, the British Socialist Party (BSP). As a result, they were all – although not continually in the years before – a member of the Labour Party in 1923.

Being a member of the same organization did not mean that the three men were true political allies at either the very beginning or the end of the period discussed here. Maclean, Tillett and Thorne never supported the exact same policies and ideologies. When it comes to the subject of this thesis, that was particularly obvious. In 1911, when the three men joined the British Socialist Party while maintaining their other memberships, John Maclean was committed to using the existing political structures and attempting to create a Marxist influence in parliament. He also supported other initiatives, such as the cooperative movement, but all while expressing the believe that – eventually – they too would join the BSP in its struggle to enter parliament and continue the revolution from there.

Around the same time, Ben Tillett started to express his support for the syndicalist movement of Tom Mann, who advocated a way of workers' organization that avoided any of the existing political and economic structures. Tillett was a member of the same party as John Maclean, but he was – at first sight – extremely critical of how the method of parliamentary politics was affecting the fate of the workers. Will Thorne, on the other hand, positioned himself somewhere in between. He was a

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[20] M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge 1971) 26.
[21] L. Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party* (Edinburgh 1991) 8.

prominent trade unionist and a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party too, but as a member of the BSP he advocated a more Marxist policy for those two organisations.

The political decisions of the three men show that if their initial alliance was not unambiguous, their political careers in the decade that followed were even less straightforward. By the time the Labour Party had established itself in British national politics in the early 1920s, Thorne and Tillett were both in parliament. Tillett was even considered to be a part of the right wing of the Labour Party, thereby mirroring his position of 1911. Thorne, in theory, remained more loyal to his old Marxist friends by never completely abandoning his revolutionary rhetoric. Maclean however, was dead. He died a poor and lonely man after years of imprisonment and an ongoing fight against the Labour Party and the two men he had joined forces with in the early 1910s. In the final years of his life he had been the Soviet ambassador in Scotland and he had become a fierce advocate of international revolutionary socialism, loathing his former comrades for their turn to the established political structures. At least, that is how it seemed, but again his position towards the British political institutions was far from unequivocal.

The explanations at hand

What exactly are the explanation currently at hand for the decision of the Labour Party to accept the British political structures during these years? For the purpose of answering that question, this thesis will focus on two fairly new books of two giants in the field, Martin Pugh and Kenneth Morgan, and a recent article written by Richard Toye. These publications show that the variations within the Labour Party have wholeheartedly been acknowledged. Indeed, their work of the past few years stands in remarkable contrast to the explanations of the 1960, 70s and 80s. Then, the predominant explanation for the Labour Party's embedment in the political structures was the awakening of the working class and their newfound willingness to get involved in those structure, that is, to vote for the Labour Party.[22] For the organization of the Labour Party itself, the traditional approach presents a grand narrative 'which charts a trajectory from the early nineteenth-century plebeian radical societies, most notably the Chartists, to the development of organized trade unions and the Labour Party'.[23]

But whereas the class-consciousness explanation has been left behind, Toye argues that the image of a linear and orderly rise of the Labour Party's towards a party of government and constitutionalism is still very predominant. Instead, he argues, the Labour Party was for a very long time characterized by the exact opposite of the 'undifferentiated parliamentarism' he sees in the analyse of his colleagues.[24] Toye, in that respect, is right. Even Morgan and Pugh do not satisfactory

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[22] An argument refuted, as said before, by Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*.
[23] K. Navickas, 'What happened to class? New histories of labour and collective action in Britain', *Social History* 36.2 (May 2011) 192-204: 197.
[24] Toye, 'Perfectly parliamentary?', 21

present explanations that are as differentiated as the party's position was. Naturally, that is also an inevitable consequence of their focus on the bigger story and thus of a valid academic consideration.

Nonetheless, the way they have tried to combine the attention Pugh asked for on the matter of institutionalism to the concept of differentiated parliamentarism provides a perfect starting point for this thesis. Kenneth Morgan, for instance, mentioned the industrial experience, political engagement, cultural formation and personal circumstances of the political activists involved as the factors to look at to explain the changes within the movement.[25] He argues that these factors have, in the first place, received insufficient attention because of the existing 'grand narrative'. Secondly, he discerns the focus on the organisational structures as a simplifying force. When the different organisations are the historical actors, individuals are regarded as being merely a member of those different organisations. As Morgan argues: in the historiography the 'collective actor was dominant, and the individual traced only as a career path through the institutions.'[26] Morgan argues that this results in the appearance of 'generically' defined organizations that together formed the Labour movement as a whole. These organisation were important and influential, he said, and the Labour Party was 'largely shaped by the strength of pre-existing forms of associations', but their programs do not suffice as an explanation of what happened next.[27]

To counter that, Morgan provides another mode of explanation: a 'complex interaction between agency, opportunity and constraints', which is overlooked with the 'generic approach'.[28] Morgan has applied that method to a different part of the Labour movement, the part that did not accept the political institutes of Great Britain by the time the story of this thesis end. Furthermore, his approach is relatively vague and for the purpose of this thesis unpractical too. To research and analyse the industrial experience, political engagement, cultural formation and personal circumstances of the political activists involved, one needs to have the space to present several full-length thick descriptions.

The difficulties surrounding the definitions connected to the Labour movement are further illustrated by the classic distinction between 'agitators' and 'administrators' and the idea that activists almost always change from the former to the latter.[29] This distinction has also proved to be very persistent in the historiography on British labour and has had a big influence on interpretation of why the party joined the political establishment. The BSP and its members, which means the three men too, for instance, have been described as extremely hostile to trade unions and strikes who they are then supposed to have judged as too militant. They, the activists, were then opposed by the agitators who

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[25] K. Morgan, *Bolshevism, syndicalism and the General Strike. The lost internationalist world of A.A. Purcell* (London 2013) 10.
[26] Morgan, *Bolshevism, syndicalism and the General Strike*, 14.
[27] Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, 17
[28] Morgan, *Bolshevism, syndicalism and the General Strike*, 17.
[29] Ibidem, 14-15.

were radically opposed to political action.[30] The Labour Party road to constitutionalism is then presented as the inevitable victory of the former over the latter. Again, however, the three men and many others were somewhere in between, if only because they were members of multiple organizations. This thesis will thus not attempt to strictly define their political identity. Or better, as Katrina Navickas wrote in a recent article, it is necessary to realize that in the history of the British Labour movement, people held multiple identities.[31] As another historian has noted:

> the real issue with respect to Labour's ideological and policy sophistication, therefore, becomes not the extent of its socialism, but its success in combining insights from a number of ideological approaches in a coherent policy programme capable of maximizing support.[32]

In this thesis ideological labels are thus only used when they reflect the way the people involved thought about themselves. In that way, they do of course have an explanatory value. For instance, the 'Marxist' label signifies that the three men saw themselves as more than just the advocates of working class conditions in a practical way. They all had a desire to change the political and economic structures of society. They had a larger mission for the working class and the British nation than merely practical concerns.[33]

Finally, apart from the unpracticality of thick description and the heritage of older explanations, if all the variations within the Labour movement are known and historians have acknowledged that the motivations of its members to join a certain variation were manifold, how is it possible that there is still something lacking in the explanation of the decision of those members to join the political institutes of Great Britain? Martin Pugh, who himself has suggested that the matter of institutional accommodation has not received sufficient attention, perhaps unwillingly provides the answer to that question himself. He did so by characterizing the issue as a '*habit* of adaptation and accommodation to existing culture and to formal institutions of British politics.' [34] Apparently, it is still very difficult to avoid linear explanations and the idea that once one approaches a political institute, it is very difficult to oppose it again. Pugh's book indeed never doubts whether the members of the Labour Party were actually committed to the political structures. In that way, the sense that his explanations misses the complexity of the historical context remains.

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[30] D. Renton, *Classical Marxism. Socialist theory and the Second International* (New Clarion 2002) 26.
[31] Navickas, 'What happened to class?', 197.
[32] P. Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Pace, 1900-1924* (Woodbridge 2009) 3.
[33] S. Pierson, *British Socialists: the journey from fantasy to politics* (Cambridge, Mass and London 1979) 254.
[34] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 11. My italics.

Political psychology: discerning motives

Inevitably, not only historians try to delve into the minds of political actors. With the discipline of 'political psychology' there is a whole field of expertise available for use when one tries to research how exactly a political decision is made. In Cottam's *Introduction to Political Psychology*, a clear outline is given about the possibilities. As one could expect since the subject of study, the 'political being', is the same, there are multiple instances where the disciplines of political history and political psychology meet. But while doing so, the discipline of political psychology does a better job in systematically discerning the different types of motives that interact within the human mind and that eventually result in a political choice. These categorizations are, of course, not absolute and inherently imperfect due to the complexities of the human mind, but very helpful to understand the decision-making process.

For the purpose of this thesis, only a part of the methodology will be borrowed. It would be interesting to also revaluate the dynamics of society and party-politics, but for now, the focus is on 'internal' processes in the mind of the historical actor. What then, influences a political choice? First of all, there is his or her personality. The personality of a person is unique, although certain personality traits appear in many people. Crucially, this is a type of motivation that works on a – for most people – subconscious level. People are often largely unaware of its mechanisms or deny their importance. Then, there are emotions, which operate on a roughly similar level when it comes to how much one can influence them. The difference is that they are more noticeable for the actor involved.[35]

Equally difficult to understand for the actors in question, are the cognitive processes that work within his or her mind: 'the channels through which the mind and the environment interact. [Which] facilitate the individual's ability to process information, interpret the environment, and decide how to act toward it.'[36] Although difficult to grasp, I would argue that these three factors are generally well described in the full-length biographies of the people that were involved. These deal extensively with personal traits, emotional conflicts and how they perceived their relations and duties towards other people.

On a different, to the actor himself more accessible, level operate the values and identities of the person involved: 'concepts that involve deeply held beliefs about what is right and wrong (values) and a deeply held sense of who a person is (identity).'[37] These develop, mostly, under influence of the persons and writings one encounters and learns from during a lifetime. Again, this is something that is described extensively in biographies and political histories of the Labour movement. As said before, in recent monographs ideology often plays a central role in explaining the behaviour of the party's members and the importance of the ideology, e.g. Marxist, an individual identifies with has also been

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[35] Cottam, *Introduction to Political Psychology*, 13-20.
[36] Ibidem, 9.
[37] Ibidem, 7.

mentioned. It is thus never the aim of to argue that ideology and the intellectual developments did not play a part in the Labour movements acceptance of the British political structures. One could then think of a desire for equality in a society, reflected in ideas on collectivism, or democracy. In other words, values are the motivations that are connected to what a person things the situation *ought* to be.

There is, however, also a type of motivation that has been given less attention than justified because the motivations mentioned above have had such an overwhelming presence in the available explanations, both in the 1910s and in the hundred years since. The final factor that influences political decision making according to Cottam's introduction are 'attitudes'. And these can possibly connect the biographical information of members of the British Labour movement to the larger political histories of British Labour. In short, attitudes are defined as: 'units of thought composed of some cognitive component (i.e. knowledge) and an emotional response to it (like, dislike, etc.)'. In other words, after political actors decide what they believe the situation is, instead of what they want it to be, he or she positively or negatively evaluates that situation. Then, the valuation and knowledge combined result in an action or decision towards the entity that is being evaluated.[38] In contrast to values, identities and personalities, attitudes are to a much higher degree 'accessible to the thinker, subject to change through new information, changes in feeling or persuasion.'[39]

The focus will thus be on the interpretations of the British political institutes as they were, and how they could be used at a specific moment in time. We will see that this was equally, if not more influential on the decision of the British socialists to join the political structures of Britain compared to their other motivations. This does not mean that this thesis will discuss aspects that have until now been completely ignored. On the contrary, but the attitudes have mostly been treated as a result of the values, identities and personal motivations of the actors involved. This thesis, on the other hand, will try and isolate the attitudes from what the people involved thought the situation ought to be and what their personal involvement was. In other words, attitudes stand in a clear relation to the other types of motivations, but they can also change independently of the developments in personality and ideology.

In this analysis, furthermore, the House of Commons will epitomize the British political structures. That is out of practical reasons, since the development of Labour's local policies would require a whole study of its own. It was, however, also the most important political institute. Certainly when one wants to explain why the people involved decided to support the government in 1924. Finally, a short remark on source criticism is necessary. The use of the concept of attitudes requires a large degree of trust in the historical actors. The assumption is that the three men meant what they said when they spoke or wrote about the institutes that were discussed, and that they were honest when saying whether they liked or disliked it. In all three biographies, and those of Tillett and Maclean in particular, the authors have noted that their subjects have 'lied'. That could be the result of range of

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[38] Cottam, *Introduction to Political Psychology*, 57.
[39] Ibidem, 9.

things, from political strategy to personal vendettas. Where necessary, this has of course been noted. At the same time, by using the concept of attitudes for the reasons that were discussed earlier, it has also been a conscious decision to focus on certain aspects of the statements involved and not on everything that could have influenced and clouded the function of a statement.

Chapter 2: Industrial unrest and the British Socialist Party, 1910-1913

The debate within the British Labour movement on its position towards the existing structures of British society was dominated by two developments in the early 1910s. On the one hand, there was the gradual development of the Labour Party and what it stood for. That fact that from 1910 until 1914, trade union membership increased by 50% increased the political influence of the trade unions over other organizations in the party. And although one could argue that this, increasing the political leverage of the workers, was exactly what the LRC was founded for in 1900,[40] not everybody was happy with how this affected the policy of the party.

On the other hand, and much more urgent for the members of the movement, there was the wave of industrial unrest that swept through pre-war Britain. Declining real term wages combined with long working hours and bad housing conditions resulted in growing militancy among Britain's workers. In 1911, the Transport Workers' union organized a strike which halted commercial movement in most ports for weeks. The government responded by sending troops. In Liverpool, two hundred strikers were wounded and two killed.[41] That the unrest was serious is confirmed by the statistics. Between 1902 and 1906 there were on average 300 to 400 yearly strikes, between 1911 and 1914, that would rise to close to 900. In 1913, there were 1459 recorded strikes, more than ever before.[42] Almost all Labour movement organizations were involved in the strikes, or they tried to be.

Both of these developments were crucial to understand the attitudes of the three men on the issue of the political methods of the Labour movement. While they were also concerned with the Labour Party, this chapter starts with the foundation of another party, the BSP. That party, which would affiliate with the Labour Party in 1916 and counted among its ranks many who had been associated with it before, was created by Henry Hyndman in 1911 to succeed the SDP. It is not that this party will become the focus of the whole chapter or the rest of this thesis. Rather, the fact that all three men joined it – without abandoning their other organizations – makes that a short introduction of the debates within the BSP is the most practical way to outline their positions during these years.

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[40] Thorpe, *History of the British Labour Party*, 5-10.
[41] A. Hochschild, *To End all Wars. A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918* (Boston and New York 2011) 70.
[42] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 88, 107.

The British Socialist Party

The British Socialist Party was created out of dissident ILP members and a host of trade unionists, but most of all out of the members of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which was the new name of the SDF that had cofounded the LRC. Some decades earlier, primarily during the 1890s, the SDF had been the most prominent and vocal socialist political party in Great-Britain. For their efforts they have also been credited with a pioneering role in the development of political organization in Britain.[43] But by the first decade of the twentieth century, it had become relatively unimportant. Whereas there 'was scarcely a pioneer of British Socialism who did not pass through [the SDP] or owed some debt to it', the party's founder, Henry Hyndman, realized that he and his party had been pushed to the fringes.[44] It failed to mobilize the workers in the degree it had intended.[45]

Joining the Labour Party, with which the SDP had been affiliated until 1902, was not an option. The people around Hyndman considered the Labour Party's connections to the trade unions as too constraining.[46] Hyndman, on the other hand, did try to reach the same people as he wanted to replace the Labour Party as the leading political expression of the Labour movement with his own, properly socialist, party.[47] In the end, this proved impossible, but up to 1914, the BSP was considered as the most prominent Marxist organisation on the British Isles.[48]

The BSP, of course, drew a large part of its membership from the same unions and other socialist parties it criticized for their ideological and political aberrations, i.e. their choice for anything other than Marxist socialism. In that way, they had a foothold within the Labour Party who's loose structure left it open for members of other organisations to infiltrate it and, perhaps, change its policies.[49] Although the party of Henry Hyndman has often been described as 'sectarian' and dogmatic, mostly by contemporaries and later historians with little sympathy for their course, it was also relatively diverse.[50] That is also what its dealings in the early 1910s show. In 1912, the first annual conference of the British Socialist Party took place. It was a success, Henry Hyndman wrote in his introduction to the report that was published some months later. There were minor issues, he admitted, and it was not the most orderly convention the world had ever seen, but these were 'lesser troubles'. Hyndman did allow the dissidence, although in his opinion 'if such conduct is repeated, the delegates guilty of it should be ejected at once.' But, in Hyndman's words:

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[43] K. Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: the Social Democratic Federation and the woman question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge 1996) 2.
[44] Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, 10.
[45] Renton, *Classcial Marxism,* 59.
[46] Minkin, *Trade Unions and the Labour Party*, xiii.
[47] K. Laybourn, 'The Failure of Socialist Unity in Britain, c. 1893-1914', *Transaction of the Royal Historical Socciety* sixth series, 4 (1994) 153-175: 156-159.
[48] K. Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism. The British left and the rise of fascism, 1919-39* (Manchester and New York 2010) 31
[49] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 65.
[50] Renton, *Classical Marxism*, 26.

> I declined myself to act upon the strongly-expressed wish of the Conference in this sense, because, difficult as their behaviour made my task, I did not wish to open our serious work of the year with an unseemly scuffle. The vehemence of some of the other speakers was only the natural outcome of deep convictions and the earnest desire to impress their view upon the assembled delegates.[51]

These words suggest that not everybody would agree with him that the BSP was off to a good start with this conference. But in the first issue of the *Socialist Record*, the party's internal newspaper, a member called George Simpson wrote: 'our ideal is a million members in five years.'[52] From that summer onwards, advertisement with that statement would appear in *Justice* too.[53] This was, however, far too ambitious and exactly the opposite happened: the BSP lost members. In 1912, the party had 40 thousand members, in 1913 only 15.313 were left. Hyndman quickly realized that by itself, the BSP could not be very effective. Immediately after the foundation of the party, it also started to contact the ILP and the Labour Party again to see whether they could join forces.[54] Among the most loyal followers of Henry Hyndman, was John Maclean.

John Maclean: 'It is possible for us to be on the right path but moving in the wrong direction'

John Maclean (1879-1923) was the youngest of the three men. His childhood was, in contrast to that of Thorne and Tillett, a relatively happy one. He grew up in Glasgow, where he later became a teacher. In his spare time, he pursued a degree at Glasgow University and from 1904 onwards he proudly used his academic title. His official teaching career was cut short because of a conflict with his employers, who objected to his socialist activism. Maclean, however, continued his educational career within the unofficial channels. His classes on Marxism drew thousands of attendants over the years and were the largest of its kind in the pre-war years. Maclean also travelled through Scotland and northern England to attend demonstrations and socialist activities. Most of those were in name of the SDF and later the BSP.[55]

John Maclean had joined Henry Hyndman's SDF in 1902, when the Liberal Party was still the most popular party among the workers who had the right to vote in Scotland. As a result, the idea of a Marxist revolution in Britain was most of all a theoretical abstraction, since Maclean argued that those electoral preferences were a sign of very limited class consciousness.[56] If that consciousness would

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[51] *Report of the First Annual Congress of the B.S.P.* (London 1912) 4.
[52] *Socialist Record* (London, July 1912) 7.
[53] *Justice*, September 7, 1912.
[54] Laybourn, 'The failure of socialist unity', 174.
[55] J. McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press 2004; online edn, Jan 2011).
[56] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 10.

have been there, the workers would have voted for the Labour Party or even more radical alternatives.

John Maclean and Henry Hyndman

John Maclean, although a self-proclaimed Marxist, was quite moderate too. To summarize both his ideology and his position towards the issue of reform or revolution in the early 1910s, the statements of the leader he loyally followed are very insightful. At the 'conference of socialist unity' in 1911 where the BSP was founded, Henry Hyndman, as the chairman of the Executive Committee of the SDP, stated that the new socialist party should be

> the political expression of the working-class movement, acting in the closest co-operation with industrial organisations for the socialisation of the means of production and distribution – that is to say, the transformation of capitalist society into a collectivist or communist society. Alike in its objects, its ideals, and in the means employed, the Socialist Party, though striving for the realisation of immediate social reforms demanded by the working class, is not a reformist but a revolutionary party, which recognises that social freedom and equality can only be won by fighting the class war through to the finish, and thus abolishing for ever all class distinctions.[57]

Crucially for discerning Hyndman's attitudes towards the British political structures, regardless of his revolutionary rhetoric, is the phrase 'the political expression.' The party would aim for a revolution in cooperation with industrial organizations, such as the trade unions and some of its members especially hoped that he meant the syndicalists too. But Hyndman's attempt to join forces with those groups was not a bid to incorporate or adopt their ideas. On the contrary, it was an attempt to correct their political misconceptions and to transform them into supporters of his own political course.[58]

Maclean wholeheartedly supported this statement and he expressed his support for Hyndman's course on the pages of *Justice*, on January 14, 1911 when he argued that 'the only position that presents a satisfactory solution to the evils of capitalism [...] is held by our party'.[59] Furthermore, his publications between 1910 and 1913 contained, according to his biographers, an

> emphasis on building a mass open party ultimately committed to social revolution by means of agitation, education and propaganda; the belief in the primacy of political action as the means of achieving social revolution and the consequential rejection of industrial militancy as other than a limited, defensive form of class resistance; and the belief in an international working-class brotherhood.[60]

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[57] *Official Report of the Socialist Unity Conference* (London 1911) 4-5.
[58] Laybourn, 'The failure of Socialist Unity', 171.
[59] *Justice*, January 14, 1911.
[60] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 26.

Maclean's ideas about the ideal state of British society were nothing short of revolutionary. To get there, however, Maclean proposed a rather reformist approach. That seems a crucial dynamic for the Labour movement's accommodation of the British political structures and the explanations for that apparent paradox lie in Maclean's interpretation of the British political institutes and the House of Commons in particular.

Maclean's interpretation of the House of Commons

Many of the working-class who had the right to vote, again voted for the Liberal Party during the two general elections of 1910. Much to the annoyance of John Maclean. As he wrote in *Justice*: Hyndman's program could only be implemented the way he envisioned if the workers would vote for them, the true representatives of the working class.[61] But Maclean's frustration was not only caused by the fact that the BSP did not get enough votes. Crucially for interpreting his political outlook, Maclean was also far from happy with the Labour politicians that were elected. There was, for the first time, a substantial Labour delegation elected to the House of Commons. Will Thorne was among those men, but that did not reassure Maclean. In his eyes, the Members of Parliament for the Labour Party were far too willing to cooperate with the other political parties once elected. They even did so without asking much in return, he stated. As a result, parliamentary tactics were not yielding much to celebrate about yet. This was reason for Maclean to stress his commitment to industrial action too, as Hyndman also did in his speech. He hoped that those tactics would help to first mobilize more workers, which would then finally elect sound socialists to parliament. That were, of course, people like Maclean and Hyndman.

But not only the behavior of the MPs was problem. Maclean, together with many others in the BSP, saw the Labour Party, as 'the expression of narrowly conceived trade union interests' and 'hostile to socialism'. Luckily and crucial for his decision to nonetheless pursue the electoral road, Maclean argued, this was only a temporary condition and it was possible for the Labour Party to move towards a more socialist program.[62] In late 1910, he wrote to *Justice* that 'it is possible for us to be on the right path but moving in the wrong direction.'[63] He considered the House of Commons as a path that the socialists could use to – eventually – enact their political program. By participating in elections, the Labour movement was doing the right thing, Maclean argued. Indeed, in November 1910 he wrote to Justice about how this 'temple of time-servers' was to be the stage of class war when he wrote about the alternative Tom Mann provided as a representative of the syndicalists:

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[61] *Justice*, April 15, 1911.
[62] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 33.
[63] Letter, *Justice*, November 12, 1910.

> Tom Mann does right to insist on this [fighting the class war, red.] as work for the organised workers, after they have organised industrially for fusion of unions already existing, and the absorption of those as yet unorganised. But the supplementary effort of parliamentary representatives I hold to be necessary, and here it is that a real Labour Party could fight the class war effectively in the "temple of time-servers".[64]

Not only the potential of the use of parliamentary methods was a reason for optimism. Maclean criticized the parliamentary Labour Party, 'the Labour Party is a miserable caricature of a party', he wrote on July 30, 1910,[65] but he was convinced of the fact that it was nonetheless going through a development. Where the Labour Party turned 'right', in modern political terms, making it almost indistinguishable from the Liberals, Maclean wanted to direct them much further to the left. His biographers argue that Maclean was even on the verge of entering the Labour Party to change it from within when Hyndman decided to found the BSP.[66] For the time being, he decided to support his old leader to try to combine constitutional methods with Marxism.

Maclean also expresses this line of thinking at the time of the coronation of King George V. His criticism illustrates what exactly he meant with his positive evaluation of the House of Commons. In May 1911, he wrote to *Justice* that

> some inside, as well as many outside, [the BSP] may desire to know why our protest against the mockery of the coming monarchical mummery should take the form of a demand for more freedom for the masses instead of a direct demand for the establishment of a republic.[67]

Here, Maclean admits that there was a difference between the ideals of the BSP and what it actually decided to do. He focussed on what the exiting political structures were and what they could do for them. In the first place, Maclean argued that the monarchy had no actual power, but that it mattered who was able to influence and control it. In this case, that were the propertied classes: 'the real political enemy of our class is not the king, but the propertied class that, out of the plunder taken from us, is prepared to spend the sum needed to maintain the royal family.'[68] Crucially, their power over the king, he said, was vested in the institute of the House of Commons. And that institute, with good will, could

> settle down for three or four days, or, rather, a few minutes on each of three or four days, for the

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[64] Letter, *Justice*, November 12, 1910.
[65] 'Why a Labour Party? Come Out!' in *Forward*, July 30, 1910. Published in Nam Milton, ed., *John Maclean. In the Rapids of Revolution. Essays, articles and letters, 1902-23* (London 1978) 37.
[66] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 33-40.
[67] *Justice*, May 13, 1911.
[68] *Justice*, May 13, 1911.

passing of a one-page Bill granting the vote to all men and women; granting the money needed to pay the expenses of parliamentary elections and the salaries of members of Parliament; granting proportional representation, the initiative, referendum and recall; and granting a few other detail needful to put all classes on the same political level of opportunity. Time and money can be spent on royalty. Our demand must be that time and money must be spent on the commonality.[69]

Maclean's response to the coronation of King George shows how he wanted to put his acceptance of the British political structures into practice and why. He wanted parliament to 'put all classes on the same political level of opportunity.' Clearly, he considered this possible and this is what he meant by wanting Labour's MPs to be 'moving in the right direction'. They should use their powers to transform British society. In that way, his involvement in the industrial unrest of these years was primarily an attempt to *prevent* a militant revolution.

For that purpose, he also wanted his fellow socialist to become involved with the activities of the trade unions and co-operatives to make them politically effective on the BSP's terms and to prevent them from falling into the hands of the syndicalists. Syndicalism, according to Maclean, was a virus of only thinly disguised anarchism.[70] Indeed, Maclean remained careful to distinguish support for strikes as a means of raising consciousness from a belief in the syndicalist idea of industrial struggle as the only mechanism of social transformation.[71] In the end, he advocated the primacy for political action, while accommodating the reality of militant industrial action in his political ideas. He even considered it a very useful addition to the socialist toolbox of revolutionary action and he supported the tendency of BSP members to be members of different organizations such as trade unions, trade-councils and co-operative societies. They had to make sure, though, that these would eventually become organized along true socialist lines and that their members would view British parliament as the place to bring forward a socialist society.

John Maclean, who would later be one of the leaders of a revolutionary movement that did attempt to topple the British institutions, was still relatively optimistic about those same institutions during these years of industrial unrest. His biographers have explained the discrepancy between his earlier and later career as a result of growing personal conflicts between Maclean and Hyndman. The historians of the Labour movement have explained this development as a result of an ever-present but at this time only underlying commitment to internationalism, bound to surface soon. However, Maclean's attitudes towards the House of Commons during these years, what he considered the institute to be and how he valued it, show that when one want to trace his career from this point onwards, it might very well be fruitful to describe the development in those attitudes to explain his political decisions.

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[69] *Justice*, May 13, 1911.
[70] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 57-61.
[71] *Justice*, January 27, 1912.

Will Thorne: 'I am not bothered at all with whom I associate'

According to his contemporary G.D.H. Cole, a prominent socialist himself, William James Thorne (1857-1946) 'was a big man, very strongly built, and capable in his younger days of great feats of physical endurance.'[72] That was despite, or maybe thanks to, the fact that Thorne had been working since the age of six in his native Birmingham. In the 1860s and 70s he worked in his uncle's barbershop, then as a rope maker, at a brick and tile maker, as a plumber's mate, metal roller's assistant, nut and bolt tapper, builder's labourer and as a brick maker's assistant.[73] Coming from a poor family with a heavy-drinking father and later an even heavier drinking step-father, Will Thorne gained his education mainly in adulthood with the help of fellow socialists he befriended, among them Ben Tillett.

Thorne was involved in organisations of almost all currents of the Labour movement: he was a member of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the SDF and the BSP of Henry Hyndman as well as the trade unions. Thorne tried to initiate his first strikes in the mid-1880s, when there were not even unions yet for the less skilled workers like him, and his biggest success was undoubtedly the 1889 Dockers' strike. There, the union he had founded, the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, played a pivotal role. As a result, his organization grew and in the early 1910s, Thorne was still one of the most influential trade union leaders. [74] In 1884 he joined the SDF, which was the start of his political career. Apart from being a propagandist for the socialist cause, he was elected as a member of the West Ham town council in 1891 and as a member of the House of Commons from 1906 onwards. As a result, Thorne was one of the most recognizable faces of socialist 'political action' in the years before the war.

That Thorne chose to improve the workers fate through the existing political structures and methods came as no surprise to Cole. Thorne was according to him most of all a highly successful member of the movements he supported. There is no suggestion of any original ideas coming from Thorne, and neither did the initiatives he took seem unique – they could have been the works of any other member of either the SDF, the Labour Party or the trade unions. The Labour Party and the trade unions became successful and so did Thorne, in the words of Cole, through an 'immense capacity for hard work', 'honesty' and 'devotion to the union's cause', without 'aspiring political leadership.'[75] But, there was more. Later research shows that Thorne's career was not as unambiguous as initially suggested. In 1906, for instance, Thorne had preferred to avoid the Labour label to, instead, stand as a 'socialist' of the SDF.[76] Ramsay MacDonald had pressured him into standing as a Labour candidate –

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[72] G. D. H. Cole, 'Thorne, William James (1857–1946)', rev. Marc Brodie, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004).
[73] Cole, 'Thorne, William James'.
[74] Radice, *Thorne*, 63.
[75] Cole, 'Thorne, William James'.
[76] Radice, *Thorne*, 51.

and perhaps the offer of substantial material support for his campaign helped.[77] Interestingly, Thorne did issue a distinctive socialist manifesto for those elections, which MacDonald allowed as long as he would win the seat for Labour. If one also considers Maclean's statements on the Labour Party as representative for the position of the BSP, it is clear that Thorne had an atypical position within both the BSP and the Labour Party. He was presented by Labour as one of them, while the same Labour Party was often vehemently attacked by many in the BSP who presented Thorne as one of their own too.

Will Thorne did not try to hide his loyalty to the Marxist organization he had joined first, the SDF. He emphasized his believe in the idea of the occurrence of a class war through the manifesto mentioned above, and he continued to express his sympathies for the revolutionary part of the movement on the pages of *Justice*. For instance, Thorne found it necessary to write to *Justice* in early July, 1911, after John Maclean had criticized the Trade Union Congress for sending official delegates to the coronation of the new King. Will Thorne, he assured, had voted against such an action.[78] In the House of Commons Thorne consequently asked the government whether they could arrange that contractors would be obliged to pay their workers on the day of the coronation. Since it was an official holiday, the government would pay its workers for the day off, and Thorne demanded that the workers he represented would in no way be worse off because of this holiday imposed by the ruling class.[79] However, if one compares this to what Maclean wanted Parliament to do in order to improve the workers' position surrounding the coronation mentioned in the previous paragraph:

> the passing of a one-page Bill granting the vote to all men and women; granting the money needed to pay the expenses of parliamentary elections and the salaries of members of Parliament; granting proportional representation, the initiative, referendum and recall; and granting a few other detail needful to put all classes on the same political level of opportunity.[80]

it is clear that Thorne's approach was much more modest. He did not expect the House of Commons and his members to change society as such, but to deal with some immediate troubles the workers experienced. Nonetheless, the years of industrial unrest would test Thorne's commitment to the constitutional ways of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Industrial peace?

It was still no time for 'industrial peace', he wrote in *Justice* on October 21, 1911.[81] Thorne was very

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[77] Radice, *Thorne*, 58.
[78] *Justice*, July 8, 1911.
[79] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Coronation' , HC Debates, May 10, 1911, vol. 25, cc 1190-1192.
[80] 'Democracy and the coming coronation', *Justice*, May 13, 1911.
[81] *Justice*, October 21, 1911.

careful to warn readers and his union for accepting offers from the government and employers too soon. Like Maclean, Thorne was convinced of the fact that political and industrial action could complement each other in times of industrial unrest.[82] The workers had not yet taken enough advantage of the situation of industrial unrest, he believed. But how did Thorne want them to do that? In the early 1910s and in fact in the decades before, Thorne was known for his pragmatic attitude towards militant action among other trade unionists. In times of economic depression it was harder to negotiate with employers and he would advocate industrial action instead of peaceful negotiations. Once it was possible to reach agreements on wages and conditions, he would be ready to cooperate with the same employers.[83] During this episode of industrial action and economic difficulties he consequently supported the strikes. Nevertheless, he was also very clear about where he drew the line with regards to industrial action. At the Gasworkers' Congress of 1912 he, just like Maclean, criticized the option of syndicalism:

> My old colleague, Tom Mann, is now trying to persuade the wage earners not to have anything to do with Parliamentary action. I have always been in favour of direct action on Trade Union lines, because the immediate grievances of the wage earners can be dealt with, but at the same time I am not prepared to allow the employing classes to keep and have control over the political machinery; the combined forces of Labour, and the political working-class movement, marching forward together, can, in my opinion, do a great deal more for the wage earners of the country than can be done if we only concentrate our energies to direct action.[84]

This illustrated Thorne's approach to both industrial and political methods, although it was far from unambiguous. When it came to dealing with the industrial unrest, he said he was in favor of direct action 'on Trade Union' lines. It was, of course, difficult to argue otherwise as the general secretary of his union at a yearly trade union congress. The other remarks nonetheless point into the direction he wanted the 'trade union lines' to change. Indeed, what these 'trade union' lines were, was far from fixed and neither was the political method that should accompany it. Thorne had joined the BSP for a reason, he wanted to combine his trade union activities with an effective method to take control of the 'political machinery' as he calls it. The BSP wanted to achieve that, as we have learned from Maclean, by mobilizing the working class and developing their class-consciousness. In that way they would elect the right people to enter politics. That was necessary because with trade union action as it was used at the time, Thorne said, only 'the immediate grievances of the wage earners can be dealt with'.

That implies that there were also bigger, longer-term, grievances. Judging by his Marxist inspirations, those were found in the predominance of the capitalist political structures of Great Britain. Thorne wanted to change those, and indeed, at the Trade Union Congress of the same year, the

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[82] Radice, *Thorne*, 47-51.
[83] Ibidem.
[84] Quoted in Radice, *Thorne*, 67.

general meeting of the British trade unions, Thorne argued that 'the object of all wage-earners should be the collective ownership of the land, railway, and the means of production and transit.'[85] For now we can thus conclude that Thorne decision to join the established political institutes was motivated by the perception that these could be used to change these 'bigger grievances'.

Will Thorne in the House of Commons

Surprisingly, in his speeches in the House of Commons, however, this Marxists ideal was hardly ever present. In parliament, Thorne mostly spoke about immediate grievances and hardly ever about party politics or ideology. Nonetheless, his statements still reveal his attitude towards the institution. In April 1911, the House debated on the merits of a minimum wage, for instance, Thorne said that

> if the cost of living has gone up and if the working classes have had no corresponding increase in wages, it must follow that they are now in a worse position than before. I am one of those who believe that this House of Commons should be used for the purpose of improving the conditions of the working-classes.[86]

He clearly argued that the industrial action was justified and that the complaints of the workers were legitimate, but he looked for constitutional methods to relieve their distress. This could be further illustrated by another debate in 1911. When Thorne explained his expectations of what the existing political structures could achieve when he argued in favor of 'universal free state insurance.' Moreover, and that is why this debate is particularly relevant for understanding the motives that influenced Will Thorne's political choices, he continued by stating is his opinion on the process of getting there: 'I am not bothered at all with whom I associate, as long as we have a good object in view, and therefore, I do not take my stand on this matter entirely as a party politician.'[87] As a result, one can conclude that whereas Maclean saw parliament as a possible instrument for revolution, Thorne's statements only shed light on how wanted to use it for more practical needs.

Thorne did argue that 'the time will arrive when there will be a complete change in this House and we shall have a majority of Labour men and Socialists.'[88] At that point his aims might perhaps become more ambitious. Thorne, however, did not argue that this would happen quickly. And Thorne's membership of the BSP and his own admission that he was aiming for the collectivization of the British economy might suggest that this positive evaluation of constitutional methods would not remain. Certainly when one imagines that, in the first place, during the war the British government

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[85] Quoted in Radice, *Thorne*, 69.
[86] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Minimum Wage' , HC Debates, April 26, 1911, vol. 24, cc 1881-1924.
[87] *Hansard 1803*-2005, 'Clause 4. – rates and rules for contributions by employed contributors and their employers' HC Debates, July 10, 1911 vol. 28. cc31-167.
[88] *Hansard 1803*-2005, 'General Minimum Wage', HC Debates, April 26, 1911, vol. 24, cc 1881-1924.

could no longer relieve the workers of their immediate grievances. Secondly, there were other developments to come in the form of resurging industrial unrest and the Russian Revolution that could offer new ways to get to his collectivist society.

Ben Tillett: 'There is a Labour Party yet to find its soul and to be of great use'

Ben Tillett's life (1860-1943) paralleled that of Thorne in many respects. His background was equally troubled as that of Thorne. Born in Bristol, his father was a hard-drinking labourer too and he grew up in poverty. Where Thorne joined nearby factories and workshops, Tillett served a few years in the Royal Navy while still a child. When he settled in London in his early twenties, he worked as a shoemaker and a dock labourer before becoming an active trade-unionist. But where Thorne's career was stable and efficient, Tillett's has been described as erratic due to his 'autocratic behaviour' and an 'inefficiency as an administrator.' He experienced financial difficulties for the better part of his career, and was often 'emotionally depressed and physically debilitated.' He had an 'increasingly sybaritic lifestyle' which resulted in 'little personal sympathy' from his colleagues. He suffered from 'recurrent ill health', and was an often 'unpredictable, infuriating, and embarrassing colleague.'[89] Alternatively, one could say that he was a man with 'a talent for plain speaking.'[90]

Ben Tillett was, in the first place, a trade unionist. He was one of the leaders of the 1889 Dockers strike which made him a figure of national prominence and ever since that moment he negotiated with the employers on behalf of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside, and General Labourers' Union. From very early onwards, however, he coupled his trade union activities to a socialist agenda. He was a member of the ILP in the 1890s and he was present at the meeting that set up the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. Throughout his career, therefore, Tillett was concerned with the methods to improve the conditions of the working class and the role of the state therein. Ben Tillett unsuccessfully stood for parliament in 1892, 1895, 1906. He stood for those elections as an independent Labour candidate, a member of the ILP and a member of the LRC respectively. After 1906 he left the ILP and joined the SDF for which he fought the elections of 1910. He was, again unsuccessful. As a result, Tillett had been involved in almost all types of labour or socialist organizations available by 1910.[91]

His experience with all these organisations and elections had a big influence on his relation towards the British political structures. It offered him the opportunity to compare the different approaches and parties and their benefits to the working class as well as to him personally. Consequently, after 1910, there was a notable change in his position. From that moment onwards he

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[89] D. Bythell, 'Tillett, Benjamin (1860–1943)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004; online edn, Jan 2011).
[90] Schneer, *Tillett*, 1.
[91] Bythell, 'Tillett, Benjamin (1860–1943).

started calling himself a revolutionary socialist. He advocated an industrial war, called the workers 'wage slaves' and declared a fight against capitalism and capitalists.[92] His old allies in the ILP ostracised him, which only enhanced his reputation among the more militant socialists, an image that he carefully cultivated.[93] Indeed, from around that time, he considered parliamentary labourism as inadequate. It the years that followed, he was closely involved in the industrial unrest and he tried to repeat his achievements of the 1889 strike. Whereas he used to favour the intervention of the government in such conflicts, he now became known as the advocate of exactly the opposite. The question is, of course, why? Why did he consider the parliamentary tactics as inadequate, a part from the fact that it did not provide him a seat in parliament?

Tillett and the parliamentary way

In a pamphlet Tillett wrote in early 1910 to commemorate the 1889 Dockers' strike he explained the contribution of himself and the men around him to the workers' cause. It is clear that at the time of writing, the industrial unrest was not as urgent as in the few years to follow, but his skepticism about how the Labour Party's attempts to improve the conditions of the workers through the House of Commons were working out, was already visible. And neither was he happy with the trade unions, whose bureaucracy prevented it from accomplishing much. He wrote that, finally 'our [the unions'] relationships with the employers, if not cordial, are at least business-like, so that there is much to be glad of.'[94] But there was much to be done: 'There is a Labour Party yet to find its soul and to be of great use. There is the Trade Union Congress, destined to be more than a voting orgy.'[95]

Clearly, Tillett was aiming for much more than the mere opportunity to be able to negotiate with the other political classes – through trade union legislation or parliament. The pamphlet ended:

> We must not rest until the cause of poverty is removed, and the abolition of the capitalist system is complete. May the next twenty-three years of Union's life mean a great upheaval. It can, and will. If we are not spared and other hands take up the work, at least we leave a heritage all the greater because it promises grander work for the time coming. Yours for the revolution and fraternally, Ben Tillett.[96]

In 1910, however, Ben Tillett seemed positive about the fact that this change of the capitalist system could be achieved without much institutional change. Tillett did claim to be 'for the revolution', but the pamphlet shows how he also supported the existence of a Labour Party, although it needed a 'soul'

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[92] Schneer, *Tillett*, 132-133.
[93] Ibidem, 146.
[94] Ben Tillett, *A brief history of the Dockers' Union: commemorating the 1889 Dockers' strike* (London 1910) 37.
[95] Tillett, *A brief history of the Dockers' Union*, 45.
[96] Ibidem, 47.

to function properly. In a pamphlet published at about the same time, specifically aimed at criticizing the achievements of the Labour Party politicians, he wrote that 'the floor of the House of Commons ought to be the best fighting ground, in both a class and economic sense, outside of its political possibilities.'[97] In other words, not only political reform could be achieved through parliament, it was also the arena to settle economic conflicts and fight the class struggle.

Nonetheless, Tillett became increasingly frustrated with the rewards of political action and went on to illustrate how, in the early 1910s, the British Labour movement was far from unanimous in its attitudes towards the British political institutions. Why did he start to doubt? In essence, he agreed with Maclean. 'How the politicians bungle', he would write in *Justice* on April 15, 1911. On June 15, 1912, he wrote a large article on the transport workers' strike, stating that: 'We are fighting to have our agreements honoured by the employers, and for the payment of wages filched from the workers.' Both the House of Lords and Commons were doing nothing that was helping the workers. The latter included Labour MP's, such as Thorne, and Tillett was especially disappointed by their behavior and achievements.

The option of syndicalism

The biggest difference between Thorne and Maclean, on the one hand, and Tillett on the other when it came to their relation to the existing political structures was the latter's involvement in the short syndicalist episode of the British Labour movement. Indeed, to understand the political choices Thorne, Tillett and Maclean faced during these years, it is crucial to further explore the option of syndicalism. Or, the existence of an 'industrial group', as one historian has called them, that entered the BSP and would refuse to subordinate itself to the 'political' group.[98] Syndicalism, which was within the BSP primarily represented by Tom Mann, was the exact opposite of what Hyndman had called for. Nonetheless, it also claimed it was the representative of 'true' socialism in Britain.[99] At first, Mann cooperated with the SDP to create the BSP and he favored a mixed approach: economic or industrial organization was 'the right arm' of the workers' movement, with political action being the left one.[100] However, he would quickly become dissatisfied with how the new party was developing and left. In the next years, practically all his allies would follow him out of the BSP. What did Mann advocate? The first thing to do was rather uncontroversial: to unite the existing unions of different industries.[101]

That was something Will Thorne, Ben Tillett and John Maclean would all agree with, since it was seen as a step towards working-class solidarity. But for Tom Mann that was only the beginning,

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[97] Ben Tillett, *Is the parliamentary labour party a failure?* (London 1908) 10.
[98] C. Tsuzuki, *H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism* (Oxford 1961) 177.
[99] Thorpe, *A history of the Labour Party*, 28.
[100] *Justice*, September 10, 1910.
[101] Schneer, *Tillett*, 146.

he wanted a general strike as soon as possible and after that, a revolutionary coup. The new society would have an industrial parliament in which the workers were united and represented through their trade unions.[102] Hyndman and Maclean on the other hand, 'stood for an orderly change of society' and they most of all rejected the sometimes violent rhetoric of the syndicalists.[103] Will Thorne was even less inclined to press any changes to the bigger structures of society.   Around 1911, Tillett was well known to be an ally of Tom Mann. He was also Mann's 'only lifelong friend',[104] and, according to his biographer 'personified the aggressive class consciousness of the syndicalist movement.'[105] He delivered 'dramatic and violent orations' and tried to initiate national strikes.[106] That did not work out, but the fact that Tillett within his trade union and the British Socialist Party advocated such a policy reveals that he had much less faith in negotiating with the government, or in using the existing structures to improve the conditions of the working class.

Syndicalism has been characterized as a mood, as opposed to a well-thought-out ideology. A mood which could illustrate the discontent and fears of the working-class.[107] This has led people, such as Tillett's biographer, to conclude that Tillett's decision to support the current was the result of either ideological ignorance or because it could serve his personal interests. However, the characterization of syndicalism as a 'mood' also leads us to what this thesis has been focusing on. Indeed, once it had forced class-enemies to react, many of its adherents were content to negotiate and abandon the idea of an instant revolutionary takeover. One historian has argued that they did not have another option, since apart from 'a revolutionary general strike, syndicalism had nothing to offer in place of the collaborationist logic of collective bargaining once the particular strike was over.'[108]

But it was not only a lack of something. Tillett knew that his union would and could not support a long series of strikes and that a general strike was extremely difficult to organize, but he also knew that his syndicalist rhetoric could be an effective part of the negotiations with the government. Primarily, because the syndicalist rhetoric could mobilize people for industrial agitation and union-membership, as Schneer also admits.[109] That increased the likeliness of successful industrial action and once the strikes had been effective, or the threats of militant action brought employers and authorities to negotiate, Tillett was prepared to advance the working class's interests in more peaceful ways. This was also recognized by others, either positively or negatively. James Larkin, an Irish trade unionist, was highly disappointed by the fact that Tillett was not as willing to order his union to hold

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[102] Schneer, *Tillett*, 149.
[103] Tsuzuki, *Hyndman and British Socialism*, 179.
[104] C. Tsuzuki, *Tom Mann, 1856-1941: the challenges of labour* (Oxford 1991) 2.
[105] Schneer, *Tillett*, 150.
[106] Ibidem, 162   .
[107] Tzuzuki, *Tom Mann*, 163.
[108] J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A history of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Brighton 1983) 93
[109] Schneer, *Tillett*, 170.

sympathetic strikes even though he had given the impression that he would do so.[110] Will Thorne defended Ben Tillett when someone in the House of Commons accused him of inciting industrial unrest and anarchy when he asked: 'Is the hon. Member aware that where Mr. Ben Tillett has been in London there has been absolutely no disturbance at all?'[111]

Was Tillett not a convinced syndicalist after all? The point is that such considerations had less to do with his decision than people often expect. It were his attitudes towards the British institutions that explain why he tried to steer the Labour movement away from them. As was mentioned in the introduction that did not mean he would completely abandon constitutional methods, it was not a matter of 'either/or'. Tillett's adherence to syndicalism, even if it was only its rhetoric, could thus not be explained by ideological and personal motivations only. His biographer, Jonathan Schneer argued that this whole episode was the result of 'flaws' in his thinking, when he wrote that 'Tillett adopted those parts of Mann's program that suited his own needs and temperament.'[112] He notes how Tillett 'indicated no specific path for the strikers' and seemed to most of all enjoy attacking the government.[113] And indeed, Tillett did not leave the BSP when Mann did. But Tillett's idea of how the ideal British society should look like, was not the prime reason for both his adaptation of syndicalism and his decision to prefer a constitutional method before and afterwards.

Conclusion

In 1911, Ben Tillett, Will Thorne and John Maclean all decided to support the creation of the British Socialist Party and in that way confirmed their commitment to the political course of Henry Hyndman: the primacy of political over industrial action. Or so it seemed. A closer look at their motivations shows that they were ambiguous in their support for the Labour Party to join the political institutions of Great-Britain to change the fate of the working class. The question is, of course: why? During the years of industrial unrest and the formation of the British Socialist Party, it were their attitudes, as defined in the introduction, about the political institutions that completed the puzzle of motivations for their political choices. It was not only a question of whether the concept of something like a House of Commons was 'right' or 'wrong', it was a question of what they considered the House of Commons to be in the specific historical context of those years, and whether they liked it or not. They acted accordingly to approach or reject the political structures. Indeed, whereas Thorne and Maclean were mildly positive in their valuation of the House of Commons, Tillett represented a current that was much more critical. Both these positions were not fixed and even among two people who chose the

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[110] J. Newsinger, '"The duty of Social Democrats in this labour unrest": Justice, the British Socialist Party and the Dublin Lockout', *Saothar* 38 (2013) 51-60: 56.
[111] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Employment of military', HC Debate, 22 August 1911, vol. 29. Cc 2282-2378.
[112] Schneer, *Tillett*, 170.
[113] Ibidem, 163.

same political method for now, a conflict could arise. As Toye has described, people could agree on what political arena to use, for the time being at least, but how the British political institutions should be used, and what they were *for*, was open to debate.[114]

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[114] Toye, 'Perfecly parliamentary?', 3.

Chapter 3: A political and industrial truce, 1914-1917

By 1913, the situation in Europe had already become increasingly tense. The 'German menace' appeared to become a danger to the stability of the British Empire and thus threatened the British working-class too. At least, that was how some saw it. In the debate on internationalism and nationalism, on armaments and pacifism, all three men were actively involved and they witnessed how majority of the Labour movement agreed an industrial and political truce with their sworn adversaries: the Liberal and Conservative Parties and the employers. While that was happening they were still part of the same movement and even members of the same party, the British Socialist Party. At the eve of war, however, that party was not yet the success its members had wanted it to be. Henry Hyndman opened the annual conference of 1913 on a rather pessimistic tone:

> It was hoped that the British Socialist Party would give a stimulus in the immediate future to consolidation [of Marxist socialism], and that other sections would follow in its wake. Unfortunately, experience had not proved that to be true. They could not say in the last twelve months that they had made anything like the progress which justified that expectation'[115]

The troubles of the BSP were representative for the questions the wider Labour movement faced. In the first war-years, there were still disagreements on political and industrial action. Historians have argued that people expected the industrial unrest to continue, were it not for the July crisis of 1914.[116] Instead, the amount of strikes dropped. In 1913, there had been 1459 strikes. In 1914, 673 and in 1915 the annual total fell to 672.[117] The outbreak of war, however, only rebranded the debate. In the form of the war-debate, the Labour movement continued its troubled approach towards the British political structures. A fierce debate between 'internationalists' and 'socialist patriots' posed a direct challenge to what people and organisations considered as 'socialism' and the preferred methods attached to it.[118]

To the surprise of many, then and now, the majority of the British socialists decided to support the war-effort and so did the British working class. In the hundred years since, there have been countless historical debates on why the supposedly anti-war socialists decided to obey the calls to support their nations. A slightly smaller contingent of historians has researched why not everybody

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[115] *Second Annual Conference of the British Socialist Party* (Londn 1913) .
[116] Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, 84-89.
[117] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 106-107.
[118] J. M. Winter, *Socialism and the Challenge of War. Ideas and Politics in Britain, 1912-1918* (London and Boston 1971).

joined the wave of patriotism. Indeed, in Britain and across Europe there were still those who believed in the power of international socialism to disrupt or even stop the war. If one advocated the latter, a critical stance towards the British political structures and institutions was almost inevitable since the government attempted to use all their resources and powers for the war-effort.

In 1914, the fear for Germany was present in many layers of the British population, and among the working class and its leaders too. In the years before the war, Germany's navy grew and its economic power increased. Many Britons – and the members British government in particular – feared that both would one day overshadow those of Great Britain. However, there was not a natural appetite for war in Britain. The cabinet itself, the newspapers, but also radicals and Marxists were only convinced to support an actual conflict once it seemed inevitable, primarily because the inevitability was coupled to the sense that the war would be fought for a just cause.[119] But for a long time, many argued that a conflict was far from inevitable. There was a big anti-war demonstration at the 2nd of August on Trafalgar square, London, and as early as the 9th of August, 1914, a big anti-war demonstration was held in Glasgow to call for an armistice and protest against rising food prices. The BSP was present at the demonstration at Trafalgar Square, and so were Will Thorne and Ben Tillett.[120]

Quickly, however, even the Marxist and internationalist BSP was split over the matter.[121] In January 1915, *Justice* published a letter which was signed by a host of veteran Labour activists. It included some general remarks on the negative effects of war, but also illustrated the degree to which the signatories were prepared to support the war-effort. Germany was to blame, and 'the whole of the trade unions of Great Britain and the working-class organisations of our free Colonies recognise that the war must continue until the present Prussian menace to peace and freedom is effectively removed'. Only then could a 'sound Socialism be built up'. Meaning that

> peace is not desirable, or even arguable, until Belgium and France have been completely freed from their ruthless invaders, and until Germany, the unscrupulous aggressor, has been forced to make ample compensation for the wreck and ruin she has wrought.

The letter ended with an appeal to the Labour movement as a whole: 'Comrades, do not be persuaded to vote for any resolution, incompatible with the main points dealt with, that may be submitted to you. Such a course could only help the enemy and imperil the growth of our Party in this island after the war.'[122] In other words, joining the war would not only mean defending the British nation, but also the socialist cause and the troubled BSP.

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[119] C. Clark, *Sleepwalkers: how Europe went to War in 1914* (London 2012) 190-205.
[120] F.L. Carsten, *War against war. British and German radical movements in the First World War* (London 1982) 28.
[121] Hodgson, *Fighting fascism*, 32
[122] *Justice*, January 28, 1915.

The reactions from the anti-war faction of the Labour movement flooded in and were also published in the *Justice*. Two weeks later, for instance, a member named Ward wrote:

> Prussian militarism has got on the nerves of some of the most prominent men in our movement to such an extent that it has become with them almost an obsession indeed, they would lead you to believe that the announcement of victory, with Prussian militarism slain for ever, would have such a soothing effect on the capitalists of this country towards their wage-slaves that we should see the unique spectacle of William Martin embracing Jim Larkin, Lord Devonport kissing Ben Tillett, and the dock and shipping owners of Liverpool giving a banquet with Tom Mann the guest of the evening![123]

Another two weeks onwards, Albert Hedge wrote:

> I have carefully studied all the clauses made in the appeal, and must conclude that every one of the excuses are those made by any astute Liberal or Tory political trickster, therefore, not worthy of the support of a Socialist organisation from a Socialist standpoint; further, I voice the sentiments of hundreds of members of the BSP in making an appeal to the readers of "Justice" to wash their hands of this international crime, and to wend their way back to the ordinary work of Socialists, thereby performing their proper functions as such.[124]

The disagreements among the members of the BSP were indeed fundamental and resulted in two fundamentally different political approaches during the first years of the war. However, in both the initial letter and the two responses, it was clear the matter of war was not only a matter of ideas such as patriotism versus socialism, but also a matter of how the war would affect the rise of the Labour movement.

John Maclean: 'The absurdity of the present situation is surely apparent'

There were different ways to oppose the war. The members of the Labour Party that were organized in the ILP in general opposed the war out of pacifism, the rejection of armed conflict altogether. There were Liberals who did not support the war – and most of all conscription – out of principle too, arguing that it was at odds with their idea of personal liberty. John Maclean and the majority of the BSP were also part of the British anti-war movement, but did not join the most prominent organ that lobbied for peace, the Union of Democratic Control.[125] They also refused to closely cooperate with the

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[123] *Justice*, February 11, 1915.
[124] *Justice*, February 25, 1915.
[125] H. Weinroth, 'Peace by negotiation and the British anti-war movement, 1914-1918', *Canadian Journal of*

ILP of Ramsay MacDonald and their opposition to the war was fuelled by neither pacifism nor radical liberalism.

Nonetheless, even among the Marxists there were different kinds of opponents against the war. Within the Second International, for instance, Marxist theorists spoke of 'bourgeois' versus 'proletarian' pacifism. Whereas the former was more friendly to the institutes of the capitalist class that governed Europe.[126] Maclean, together with the majority of the British delegation to the International, was initially a part of the former.[127] That was very much in line with his position described in the previous chapter where he advocated the use of institutes that were made by the 'bourgeois' or 'capitalist' class. Naturally, he would reject the label of 'bourgeois' since he argued that they could be used for the socialist cause too.

In his early years of socialist activity, John Maclean rarely dealt with the international aspects of socialism in public. He was known to be an advocate of international socialism in theory, but in practice he was almost exclusively focused on British affairs. This changed in the build up to the First World War.[128] By 1914, John Maclean was a leading proponent of the internationalist faction within the British Marxist movement. And while he supported Hyndman's approach to the industrial unrest, he criticized him and some others for stirring up fear about Germany.[129] Once the war had started, Maclean did no longer differentiate between those two aspects and he opposed Hyndman entirely. Not in the last instance, because his position on the merits of industrial action also started to change. In the summer of 1914, he clarified his position in *Justice*:

> Our first business is to hate the British capitalist system […]. The absurdity of the present situation is surely apparent when we see British Socialists going out to murder German Socialists with the object of crushing Kaiserism and Prussian militarism. […] Let the propertied class go out, old and young alike, and defend their blessed property.[130]

Ideological consistency versus radicalizing tactics

To Maclean's frustration, his appeals to what he considered as evident socialist principles were not effective. But instead of giving in, Maclean resorted to stronger measures. Both within the BSP, where a majority of the rank and file was opposed to the war-effort, as well as when dealing with the British ruling classes, their representatives and their political institutes. His prime concern was that the Labour movement and the Trade Unions opposed any industrial action against the governments' attempts to

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History 10.3 (1975) 369-392: 369-375.
[126] G. Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War. The collapse of the Second International* (Oxford 1972) 28.
[127] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[128] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 42.
[129] Ibidem, 48-49.
[130] *Justice*, September 17, 1914.

increase the British war-production – often at the cost of deteriorating conditions for the labourers. And what Maclean was even more afraid of, became a reality in the form of conscription. He argued that the cooperation of the working class in the war effort and their acceptance of the political institutes of Great Britain resulted in the workers being send to the trenches for a conflict that was not theirs.

On paper, the Parliamentary Labour Party opposed conscription too, even when the act to enforce it was put to them in 1916. Not long before the party had joined the government at the request of Lloyd George and at first, its ministers threatened to resign again. It was, however, soon clear that the party would not really resist the proposals. Ironically and to the frustration the anti-war faction of the Labour movement, conscription did cause a split within the Liberal Party and David Lloyd George replace Herbert Asquith as the party's leader and the British Prime Minister. The congress of the Labour Party, however, decided that it would not fight the measure once it was enacted by the government.[131]

In December 1915, John Maclean wrote: 'We have repeatedly expressed our perfect willingness to let those who benefit by capitalism enter the war, and slaughter one another to their heart's content.' Without those people, it would perhaps even be easier to make Britain a socialist society, he continued cynically: 'We have furthermore refrained from the attempt to prevent workers enlisting if they sincerely believed that Britain was entitled to enter the war. In fact, we usually insisted on them enlisting as the only logical outcome of their beliefs.[132] But, he wrote:

> it is an entirely different matter when an attempt to force conscription on us is threatened. We socialists, who believe that the only war worth fighting is the class war against robbery and slavery for the workers, do not mean to lay down our lives for British or any other capitalism.[133]

Maclean used to see the House of Commons as an institute that could bring the socialist revolution closer, if only the workers would vote for the – in his eyes – right people. That had not yet been the case before the war, he admitted. However, during the years of industrial unrest he supported the Labour movement's focus on entering parliament, coupled with industrial action. Now, the movement's obedience to what was decided in that institution, conscription in this case, had consequences that far exceeded the drawbacks of Labour's ineffectiveness before the war. The failure of the Labour Party before the war had resulted in a continuation of the status quo. The Labour Party's decision to ineffective challenge to the other parties in government during the war, on the other hand, resulted in countless victims among the working class. Maclean used to believe that patience and flexibility in building the socialist movement were crucial. But now, he wanted to act immediately:

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[131] P. Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack. Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Woolbridge 1988) 141.

[132] J. Maclean, 'The conscription menace', *The Vanguard* (December 1915) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 88.

[133] Maclean, 'The conscription menace'.

> Do not be paralysed by academic quack socialists, who insist that the only occasion justifying the strike is for the establishment of socialism. These men admit that the masses are still far from socialism. That means we must defer the strike to the remote future. See how absurd the position is, and act accordingly.[134]

Compare this to what Maclean said about the agenda of the syndicalists of the pre-war years and it becomes clear how he had shifted in his perception of what the merits of a reformist approach could be. Maclean calls for an immediate strike which would end the war and establish socialism, just as Tillett and Mann were calling for an immediate overthrow of the existing structures of society. Back then, Maclean was among the more moderate socialists who argued that it was not the time – yet – for an all-out revolution. He argued that the masses had not developed their class-consciousness to the degree that their decisions would result in socialism once they had the power. Now, John Maclean himself was no longer keen to wait and even though there is no sign that he was of the opinion that the workers as a class were sufficiently 'socialist' yet.

Settling for 'partial freedom'?

Maclean did not only distance himself from other socialists in an attempt to protect the workers from the war. His dealings with other organisations, such as the co-operative movement, also illustrate how Maclean changed his course. In the autumn of 1914, he wrote a paper titled *The war: its cause and cure*, and at a meeting of the Renfrewshire co-operative movement he summarized its contents for the audience. *The Scottish Co-operator* reported on the speech. One of the first remarks in the report illustrates that, ideologically, Maclean might not have been expressing new ideas, but that the way he wanted them to be enacted was starting to influence his political collaborations. In the previous chapter it has been discussed how he frequently praised the co-operative movement as an organization that could increase class-consciousness and he was actively involved in the Scottish branches.[135] In general, he was welcomed by those branches. Now, as the article reports 'the chairman intimated that whatever opinions might be expressed by Mr MacLean, the council was not to be held responsible for them.'[136]

Maclean continued nonetheless, and presented an analysis wherein he blamed 'capitalist rivalry' – the search for resources and markets – for the war. That was an unsurprising analysis; many working-class organizations argued that the capitalist structures of society stimulated unwanted conflict and inequality. The solution he presented was equally entrenched in his internationalist

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[134] Maclean, 'The conscription menace'.
[135] D. Howell, *A Lost Left. Three Studies in Socialism and Nationalism* (Manchester 1986) 163.
[136] John Maclean, 'The war: its cause and cure', *The Scottish Co-Operator*, 4 December 1914, in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*.

socialism. The workers should take over power in all the nations involved and install public ownership of land and the means of production. Eventually this should result in international cooperation and a universal brotherhood. In the words of the newspaper:

> In such a commonwealth it would become transparently clear that the making of munitions of war or the maintenance of a soldier class was sheer, absurd and barbarous economic waste. Consequently, armies and navies must vanish and war, the fiend, disappear.[137]

Before the war, Maclean had accepted that movements such as the co-operative societies were less concerned with such grand political schemes, and more with practical measures that could improve the workers' living standards. Maclean himself supported those tactics too. The response of the *Scottish Co-operator* showed how they were still not enthusiastic about Maclean's big socialist plans. But now, the basis for co-operation was gone. Maclean did not accept their limited goals anymore, just as he did not anymore accept the relatively limited possibilities of the British parliament to enact socialism.

In a *Vanguard* article published nine months later, it became clear how Maclean's aims had started to diverge from the organisations he previously considered to be his allies. He attacked the radicals, chartist, trade-unionists and co-operatives all at once, heavily criticizing them for settling for 'partial freedom'.[138] When he wrote about the deteriorating condition of the working class, he warned Lloyd George and his government:

> If he and his friends imagine the workers are going to stand that, without striking and fighting, they are woefully mistaken. [...] It is a capitalist war, so let the masters die for their precious property, and pay the war expense. If these capitalists imagine we are going to be forced to fight their battle and pay the piper as well, then they must be taught a lesson.

Again, Maclean advocates 'striking' and 'fighting'. The war had changed the context of society to such a degree that accepting the authority of the capitalist class and its institutes, even if it was temporarily and with the aim of a future socialist revolution, could get you killed.

Purifying the movement

Maclean did notice that his tactics were driving people away from him, that many found it difficult to support him when he opposed their more moderate responses to the reality of war. As a reaction, however, Maclean was not prepared to tone down. On the contrary, all of the statements mentioned above were not only a cause of the growing disparity between the anti- and pro-war factions around

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[137] Maclean, 'The war: its cause and cure'.
[138]'Our freedom is going', *The Vanguard* (October 1915) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*.

him, but also a reaction to that development. That was because Maclean was of the opinion that the anti-war movement was not failing to organize people because its political position was too radical, but because that radical position was too badly organized.

Maclean repeatedly called for tighter party-discipline and became increasingly frustrated by the behaviour of the Hyndman-faction. The latter resisted his attempts to make the statements of the Executive Committee and *Justice* more representative of the growing current of anti-war activists within the party. At the Annual Conference of the BSP in 1914, Maclean's resolution to elect the trustees and editor of the newspaper was rejected on the ground of the fact that *Justice* was not owned by the BSP. A technical excuse, which frustrated Maclean, since it was obvious that for the public eye, the paper was the BSP's mouthpiece.[139] *Justice* would remain in the hands of pro-war Labour and while accusing its opponents of 'putting patriotism ahead of their socialism' in 1916, Maclean and the anti-war faction of the BSP founded their own paper, *The Call*.[140]

John Maclean, his biographers have argued, was in shock because international working-class brotherhood had been an illusion and as result distanced himself from the people, like Hyndman, who supported the war-effort.[141] Maclean's change of course, however, was not only influenced by ideological motivations. Previously, Maclean was prepared to combine strong and unambiguous ideological convictions with a willingness to cooperate with other movements – and even opposing factions. The only requirement was that he had the idea that this would, eventually, help him achieve his goals. Maclean supported the co-operative movement, trade unions, workers' committees and other forces which he considered effective in mobilizing the working class. He then aimed to educate the workers organized in those organisations to make sure that they would swap their limited goals for the object of creating a socialist society through parliament.

After the outbreak of war, Maclean severely limited the different types of organizations he was willing to work with (or who were willing to work with him). Furthermore he wanted to supress any dissent within the BSP and was prepared to expel factions that did not agree with what he considered the only true interpretation of socialism. His increasing dogmatism would have resulted in a stronger commitment to the parliamentary road if his attitude towards the British political structures would have stayed the same, but at the point where this chapter ends, Maclean changed his position completely and argued for a 'revolutionary solution' to the war.[142]

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[139] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 68-69.
[140] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 127.
[141] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 72.
[142] McHugh, J., 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.

Will Thorne: 'We will get the workmen to act more reasonably than some of them seem to do at present'

Not coincidentally, the people who supported the war-effort also increased their commitment to the existing British political institutes. Maclean, Tillett and Thorne had to decide whether they would join the political and industrial truce, whether they supported recruitment and later military conscription. That were measures that implied a large degree of authority of the government over the workers. Maclean's case has illustrated how the circumstances of war and a socialist ideology could result in a negative attitude towards the British political institutions. Before the war, Thorne's position resembled that of Maclean. He presented himself as an advocate of both direct and political action. And although he was concerned with immediate grievances, Thorne also had the ideal of a collectivist society. His position towards direct and industrial action seemed to have originated from his perception of what the best ways were to pursue those goals.

During the war, Thorne had to decide whether to continue this double strategy. Interestingly, the debate had a different dynamic. Previously, Thorne had argued that direct action was the least revolutionary of his two strategies. Now, as Maclean's statements prove, direct action was the more revolutionary method. The question is whether that made Thorne more or less inclined to support industrial disobedience. Indeed, how revolutionary was Will Thorne, in 1914 still a member of the nation's most prominent Marxist organisation?

Will Thorne in the House of Commons

Will Thorne realized the dilemma outlined above. He knew that he had a reputation that made some to expect that he would not join the government's war effort. If only because he was one of the attendants of the big anti-war rally at Trafalgar Square in August, 1914.[143] Surprisingly, Thorne almost immediately supported the Labour Party when it joined the war-cabinet and the Trade Unions in their 'industrial truce' with the employers. Six months after attending the anti-war demonstration, Thorne was one of the signatories of the pro-war letter that was mentioned in the introduction too and in that way illustrated what caused Maclean's disillusionment with the Labour movement. Before assuming that Thorne too was swept away by the wave of patriotism that hit Britain, is necessary to analyse what he said about the matter himself. Why was it 'not quite so necessary' to be a 'revolutionary man', as Thorne said in the House of Commons in December 1916?[144]

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[143] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 101.
[144] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Ministries and Secretaries Bill', HC Debates, 18 December 1916, vol. 88, cc 1159-1192.

One thing did not change. Will Thorne submitted large quantities of questions on wages, food prices, rents, pensions and other arrangements that could relieve the problems of the poorer classes. With the unions accepting an industrial truce and promising not to disrupt the war-industries, this was now the way to relieve the workers of their immediate grievances. Indeed, there was one overarching theme in his contributions which was also very apparent in the pieces he wrote for *Justice*: it was the national governments' responsibility and, crucially, ability to improve the workers' conditions. While doing so, they were of course closely watched by the representatives of the working class, like Thorne, who were ready to change things when necessary.

In April 1914, still before the war, Thorne wrote in *Justice* that 'the rules of the House' needed a 'completely revolutionising' change after other MPs had succeeded in stalling a debate on the workers abuse by government contractors to the point that it was abandoned.[145] And he remained very suspicious of the influence of the companies that were hired by the government who he thought were aiming to take advantage of the situation. As he explained in early august 1914: 'what did the contractors do during the Boer War? They robbed everybody.'[146] Similarly, Thorne was sure to point out that army recruits and their families should be treated well and receive the benefits they, in his eyes, deserved. He would even ask the government to make sure that the standards for recruits were such that more men could join the army and thus have a chance of paid employment.[147] Later, on behalf of hundreds of new recruits in his own West Ham borough, he appealed to the Under-Secretary of War to ask why they did not receive their separation allowances.[148]

The government could count on the workers' productivity if they would be treated right by the authorities and the employers that worked for them: 'At an early stage of the War we closed down every strike, and, in some cases, the men returned to work on conditions which were worse than those which obtained when they went out', he said in the House of Commons in March 1915, and he continued:

> I would suggest that the Government should start by giving an advance of wages to those who have not had an advance, and in that way give a good example to employers who have not advanced wages. […] If employers would adopt reasonable terms, we will get the workmen to act more reasonably than some of them seem to do at present. The Government have the power to put an end to the exploiting methods of ship-owners, and I think they should put their power into operation.[149]

Revolutionaries like Maclean argued that the best way to improve the fate of the workers during the war was by joining protests that took place on the streets or at the workplace. Not only would the

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[145] *Justice*, 16-4-1914.
[146] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'War in Europe', HC Debates, August 3, 1914, vol. 65, cc. 1848-1884.
[147] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Recruits (Number obtained) HC Debates, September 16, 1914, vol. 66, cc 2941-2941.
[148] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Army Estimates, 1915-16', HC Debates, February 18, 1915, vol. 69, cc. 1328-53.
[149] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Success of Allies Assured', HC Debates, March 1, 1915, vol. 70, cc 589-623.

circumvention of the British political institutions be more effective in the short term, it would also increase the chances to make Britain a socialist society at a later point by decreasing the chance that the socialists would be pacified within British bureaucracy to die for the capitalists' cause. Will Thorne disagreed. Even in the unique circumstances of war he considered the opportunities to improve the conditions of the workers the biggest when the battle was fought in parliament. According to two historians who wrote a 'Marxist history' of the Labour Party, Thorne was, by now, 'a sad contrast to the new unionist fighter of 1889'.[150] However, as this interpretation uses definitions of Lenin himself it is unsurprising that Thorne was relatively moderate according to them. It is, in fact, worth asking whether Thorne had completely let go of his goals to change the British political structure and whether he was indeed ready to unconditionally accept them.

Revolutionary and/or reformist

Not quite. Thorne expected something in return and that was more than just reasonable wages, decent food rationing and a general improvement of working and housing conditions. Thorne did not explicitly talk about demolishing capitalist structures and at least temporarily accepted the relationships between the British state, the workers and employers. Nonetheless, it was clear that what Thorne called the 'co-operation of all classes of workpeople to secure the maximum output of munition work',[151] should have further reaching political consequences too. In a debate on local elections and authorities in the summer of 1916 he used the workers' involvement in the war to argue for an improvement of their political rights, arguing that 'if they are fit to fight they are fit to vote.'[152] Indeed, although the British government claimed to defend democracy against a German aggressor, only forty percent of the male population had the right to vote. As a result, many of the soldiers who were fighting could not vote.

Whereas even the Conservatives considered it reasonable to enfranchise those men, the Labour Party was particularly keen on an extension of suffrage. Not in the last instance because they expected those votes to go to them.[153] When in late 1916 the creation of a Ministry of Labour was confirmed, Thorne saw this as the result of the cooperation between Labour and the government. Cooperation, to Thorne, did not mean obedience but a chance to negotiate on equal terms and that benefited the cause of the British working class. Something like a Ministry of Labour, a revolutionary, non-constitutional Marxist approach would never have achieved.[154] In the same debate Thorne provided a valuable insight on why he had decided to abandon his revolutionary allies during the war. Most interestingly,

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[150] T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: a Marxist History* (London etc. 1988) 59.
[151] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Munitions Act (Leaving certificates)', HC Debates, March 15, 1917, vol. 91, cc 1276-1277.
[152] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Parliament and Local Elections', HC Debates, August 14, 1916, vol. 85, cc 1447-1464.
[153] N.F. Gullance, *"The Blood of our Sons". Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (New York 2002) 170-173.
[154] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Ministries and Secretaries Bill'.

he talked about the Minister of Labour, John Hodge, another Labour politician. While doing that, he made sure to distinguish himself from Hodge who was a trade unionist without a clear socialist ideology:

> The right hon. Gentleman who has been given charge of the new Department is one whom I have known for many years, he does not appear to me to be the kind of revolutionary man that I may have been considered to be in days gone by—although that has not been quite so necessary since the War as it was previous to its breaking out; but, after the War is over, it is possible that I may be just as revolutionary as ever I was, and it may be that I shall have to bump up against my right hon. Friend, as I had to bump up against him in the old days. Reference has been made to conciliation between Labour and Capital, but that will all depend upon the employers of labour and how they act. If they go back to their methods of the pre-war days, then you may rest assured that we will have the same troubles in the future that we have had in the past.[155]

In other words, the war had not only changed the position of the workers who *en masse* decided to defend their nation. It did not only convince the trade-unions to agree to an industrial truce and the Labour Party to agree to a political truce. Thorne argued that the war and the response of the workers had influenced the behaviour of the government and the employers too. If they 'would go back to their methods of the pre-war days', Thorne would not hesitate to start trouble again he claimed. But so far, halfway through the war, the Labour movement's entrance into the British political structures had mostly benefited them.

That explains why Thorne, in direct contrast to Maclean who argued that workers were worse off due to their obedience, conditionally increased his commitment to political methods of the ruling classes, at the cost of his loyalty to industrial action which was now considered as more revolutionary. Finally, the fact that he sided John Hodge with the 'government' and emphasized that the Minister of Labour was not a revolutionary man like Thorne used to be, is also significant. In that way, Thorne could still present himself as more than only a trade unionist, but as someone who combined his support for the war-effort with higher ideals.

Lost for the cause of Marxism?

'If they go back to their methods of the pre-war days, then you may rest assured that we will have the same troubles in the future that we have had in the past', Thorne said in the quote mentioned above. The question is, how realistic this option was, how embedded was Will Thorne in the political structures of Great Britain? Before the war, he focussed on multiple political arenas. He performed in parliament, with the trade unions at the workplace and with the Marxists of the BSP somewhere in

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[155] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Ministries and Secretaries Bill'.

between. Due to the industrial truce and Thorne's departure from the BSP, only parliament was left. And even there, Labour was increasingly cooperative towards the government, culminating in the government of national unity of 1916. The traces of what Thorne called 'the kind of revolutionary man that I may have been considered to be' were slowly becoming less and less visible.

The same went for another aspect of his political strategies. Will Thorne attended more Socialist International meeting before the war than any other trade union leader.[156] The First World War, however, proved to be a turning on that matter too. Once hostilities were declared, he argued that the trade unions should do everything to help the allied cause. He remained proud of his internationalism, but was very sceptical of the intentions of the German government. Of course, he would rather have peace, but Great Britain as a whole would be in danger if they decided not to fight the German armies. In 1917, Thorne even joined the West Ham Volunteer Force, and was given the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.[157] In the 1st volunteer battalion of the Essex regiment, to be specific.[158] Judging by his own statements, however, this was a sign of an only conditional willingness to accept the British domestic institutions as they were. At the point when Thorne accepted his position in the army, which by the way did not bring him to the front, the next episode of the era described in this thesis had already started. The new unrest and the Russian Revolution would provide Thorne with an opportunity to act upon his revolutionary threats and socialist ideals.

The role of patriotism

The mention of international socialism, however, also brings us to a final, and almost universally accepted, explanation for the growing disparity between Thorne and Maclean. Thorne, in contrast to his revolutionary counterpart, argued that the defence of the British nation was justified – even for socialists. He was, in one word, patriotic. Although that became more obvious during the war, Thorne had already advocate the British right to armed self-defence before the war. Even though Thorne proposed that the defence should be the task of a Citizen Army, and not of the existing traditional armed forces.[159] That already suggests that there were multiple forms of patriotism and indeed, the explanation for the Labour movement's division on the basis of patriotism should be critically examined.

Paul Ward, in his *Red Flag and Union Jack*, has described how patriotism and socialism could indeed be combined, even before the war. What Thorne argued for, he would categorize as 'radical patriotism': the love for one's country was an inspiration for politics, but the government and/or state were not synonymous with that nation. A love for one's country, in other words, meant that one

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[156] Radice, *Will Thorne*, 13.
[157] Ibidem, 71-73.
[158] Cole, 'Thorne, William James (1857–1946)'.
[159] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 75.

wanted to change the political structures for the better at the cost of existing institutions. This position was held by the majority of the Labour movement before the war. Crucially, Ward suggests that during the war, this changed into 'social patriotism'. That meant 'an inwardly focused patriotism, one that is oriented toward domestic social reform and implies some kind of new and improved Britain.'[160] By adopting the latter, which Thorne did together with the majority of the Labour movement, the perspective changed from separating the state from the nation to seeing the two as inseparable. That meant that significantly changing or even destroying the political structures could be regarded as unpatriotic. Crucially, it did not mean that people would also lose their socialist ideology.

Ward's book shows how patriotism and patriotic language had a clear relation to the Labour movement's position towards the British political institutes. But what this chapter tries to show, is that even without the idea of patriotism, there is an explanation based on the interpretation of the British political institutes that could explain Thorne decisions. His decision to abandon John Maclean was also caused by the fact that supporting them provided little benefits. The anti-war faction of the Labour movement refused to cooperate with the British government and did not accept its concessions, which they interpreted as palliatives that merely distracted the workers from their revolutionary duties. Thorne, on the other hand, took everything he could get out of the negotiations with the war-cabinet. Certainly, he argued that Britain was worth fighting for when the alternative was that it would be defeated by the Germans. But Thorne was primarily motivated to defend the interests of the working class in Britain.

Ben Tillett: 'This is a fight for world freedom and no less'

The defence of Britain and institutions could thus be justified by invoking their benefits for the British working class. Will Thorne, however, simultaneously argued that the work of the British Labour Party was far from finished yet. Just as before the war, he expected reforms in due time, while he momentarily defended the status quo. Institutes that were destroyed or left to the mercy of the authoritarian and militaristic German rulers could, indeed, hardly be reformed by the British Labour leaders. In that way, Thorne had an incentive to protect them and encouraged the British workers to do the same. The pre-war career of Ben Tillett, on the other hand, suggested that he would be less keen on defending those institutions. Until the eve of war it appeared as if he would stick to his position of vehemently attacking the British political institutes and only using them once he could negotiate on the terms he deemed right. When it started to become very likely that war would be declared, Tillett argued that this was not the fight the workers should be fighting. He participated in the anti-war rally at Trafalgar Square and, at that time, his position echoed that of John Maclean on the matter of international conflict: it was the class war the Labour movement should focus on.

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[160] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 4.

To be able to do that, Britian should stay out of the war and if the government would ignore the pleas of the workers, they should initiate a national strike to prevent the conflict. Not only in Britain, but in the whole of Europe.[161] Ben Tillett was far from a pacifist. Before the war he had, for instance, challenged the government to form an army of conscripts with the idea that the conscripts from the working class would then sabotage the government's attempts to suppress the industrial unrest.[162] As we have seen with John Maclean, opposition to the war could even change a 'model social democrat' into a feared revolutionary. Ben Tillett, who had expressed his support for syndicalism not long before, was bound to join him. Or so one could imagine. And Ben Tillett was certainly active during the First World War. He held speeches throughout the country, published a well-known pamphlet and frequently wrote articles. He even visited the western front to investigate what the conflict was really like. However, he did all of this in *support* of the war, and to defend the British political institutions. Together with Thorne, he was one of the signatories of the letter to *Justice* in support of the war-effort mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.

Tillett went on to become one of the most fanatic patriots of the British Labour movement. While expressing anti-German rhetoric, condemning any dissent against the war effort, calling for censorship of anti-war publications and attending recruitment rallies, Tillett completely changed his position towards the British establishment. In the historiography, this change has been explained by focussing on the same motivations that have up to now been used to explain his shift to syndicalism. It was a change in ideology, this time towards patriotism and nationalism. When looking at his own account on why he changed positions, it becomes clear that there was more than an emotional attachment to the British nation that made him accept the British political system. Tillett also consciously (re-)valued those structures and changed his attitude accordingly.

Discerning the real danger

In early 1917 Ben Tillett wrote a pamphlet titled *Who was responsible for the war – and why*. In there, he admitted how he had changed his position towards the war. Tillett also argued that he would rather have seen things turn out differently. In a way, moreover, that would have prevented him to support patriotic policies. He was now loyal to the British nation, but that had not been his first choice he wrote. On the contrary:

> I was one of those who, seeing the danger of a general European conflict ahead, would have used
> the international forces of Labour to prevent it by organising and establishing a universal strike of

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[161] Schneer, *Tillett*, 177-178.
[162] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 75.

the workers of Europe if the rulers declared war. Had such a strike been carried out in all the countries it would have made war impossible.[163]

The universal strike was an important part of the syndicalist agenda he had advocated before the war. Tillett realized that people had expected that this point of view would lead him to become an anti-war activist. Consequently, he had some explaining to do on the matter of why he nonetheless supported the war-effort. On the face of it , Tillett justified his patriotism and loyalty to the British nation the same way Thorne did. On one of the first page of the pamphlet explained how winning the war would a helping the Labour movement to achieve its goals:

> Despite our former pacifist attitude, the forces of Labour in England have supported the Government throughout the war. We realised that this is a fight for world freedom against a carefully engineered plan to establish a world autocracy. We are waging a war against militarism and in defence of liberty.[164]

Indeed, he repeatedly stressed that he and the Labour Party he was slowly reproaching did not abandon socialism, but that it had no other option. Just like Thorne he argued that the British workers would be worse of under German rule. And because it was apparently impossible to stop the war with the forces of international labour, it was absolutely necessary for Britain to win the war. He explained how the Labour movement could now help end the war instead:

> Up to the time the war began Labour had been non-militant. We are opposed to militarism still, and it is because we are opposed to militarism and the military spirit that we banded our forces to fight the military caste which was dominating Germany with the only weapon with which it can be fought.[165]

To try and convince the people within the movement who still believed in the power of international socialism to stop the war, Tillett argued that the German nation as a whole was a force of evil, including its workers. It was enough for him that they had refused to support his calls for an international strike before the war:

> At the time I thought that their attitude was influenced by fear of the military. I now think that it was influenced by their military spirit and by their belief in the coming German victory. It was no surprise to those of us who had observed the development of the military spirit in Germany when

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[163] Ben Tillett, *Who was responsible for the war, and why?* (London 1917) 5.
[164] Tillett, *Who was responsible for the war*, 3.
[165] Ibidem, 10.

at the outbreak of war the Social Democratic party in Parliament enthusiastically supported their Government.[166]

With that, he directly contradicted Maclean who tried to distinguish between the different classes in Germany. The pamphlet ends as follows:

> I recognise that the only way to defeat militarism is to be organised against it, but it is only by a nation having at its call the trained manhood of its people that it can hope to stand against the menace of carefully organised autocracy, planned to the last man for war and for conquest, such as Germany represents. This is a fight for world freedom and no less.[167]

In short, defending the authority of the British political institutions when they tried to enforce things as conscription, was now part of the Labour movement's quest for freedom of the working class. Tillett tried to convince the reader that such a course was, in these critical circumstances, part of the socialist agenda. In the introductory notes of the pamphlet, Tillett is described as 'one of the best-known and most prominent of British Labour leaders' and throughout he is trying to avoid being accused of surrender to capitalism. He argued that he chose to support the British government in order to prevent just that, because a defeat at the hands of Germany would mean a return to autocracy and traditional capitalism. That made the war a cause worth fighting for, even for a socialist. To be sure, he said that 'those few British Socialist delegates who have […] made themselves prominent as pacifists, and as opponents of England's present policy in the war, back up the Germans.'[168] He contradicted his former internationalist friends by arguing that the German rulers *and* the German workers were responsible for the war.

Within the dynamic of international and domestic conflict, Tillett had come to the conclusion that the British political institutions were not only worth fighting for, as Thorne argued, but that these institutions were the best possible one could, at the time, imagine. Certainly when one compared them to the alternative that was presented by the German autocrats. Tillett came to believe that it was not the defeat of the British ruling classes that would be best for the position of the British workers. Paradoxically, it was a victory of those ruling classes that would help the British workers the most. Defeating Germany and obtaining, or maintaining, British world supremacy would be the best safeguard against regimes that restricted the freedoms of labourers. Because in all cases, these regimes would restrict those freedoms further than what was the case in Britain. To complete this argument, he stated that British supremacy over other nations would be achieved by educating and training the

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[166] Tillett, *Who was responsible for the war*, 8.
[167] Ibidem, 11
[168] Ibidem , 6.

working classes: 'only a better treated lower deck would enable Britain to dominate the world.'[169] There were – for now – no hints to a possible return to revolutionary politics.

Partnership and reform in the reality of war

One historian has noted that there was an enormous difference between 'what people believed they were fighting for and the shattered, embittered world the war actually created' during and after the war.[170] People who joined the war-effort did so with expectations and perceptions that were different from the harsh reality of the conflict, and even less alike the eventual consequences of those four years of destruction. For Tillett, however, the difference between idealized patriotic perceptions and the reality of the trenches was one of the reasons to increase his support for the war. Thorne and Maclean were very much informed about the effects of war on the workers in Britain, but Tillett had visited the workers that experienced the war at the frontlines and in the trenches too. Certainly according to him, that meant he had a different experience of the reality of war and how disruptive industrial action could affect the working class' conditions. After he visited the front in the spring of 1915, Tillett joined the government in emphasizing how harmful dissent and a lack of fighting spirit could be for the troops in the trenches. Whether that meant that the interests of the British capitalists were at stake or not, 'Tillett believed that British troops must be supported simply because they were workers.'[171]

His reasoning was then relatively easy to follow: the most effective way to improve the conditions of the men at the front was to be able to supply them with the best weapons and munitions available and whatever else might be necessary. Any disruption of the war-industries would hurt the working class itself. Additionally, it meant that Tillett supported efficient recruitment to ensure that the men in the trenches would not be burdened more than necessary. Tillett still called himself a 'socialist revolutionary',[172] but to him, it was clear that if socialists wanted to defend the working classes that could only be achieved by a partnership with the government and the employers. A partnership that was, during the war, only possible if the socialist revolutionaries choose reform over revolution.

There were two final reasons for Tillett to avoid being associated with the anti-war movement during these years. Privately, Ben Tillett had accumulated large debts, while he still had an insatiable ambition to remain visible within the labour movement.[173] He needed political allies and recognition for both. Already in the spring of 1913, *Justice* repeatedly called for its readers to financially support Tillett saying that 'we must not allow him to be made a bankrupt: his work and reputation are far too

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[169] Quoted in Schneer, *Tillett*, 177.
[170] Hochschild, *To End all Wars*, xvi.
[171] Schneer, *Tillett*, 184.
[172] Ibidem, 188.
[173] Ibidem, 191.

important for us to risk the jibes and sneers of those who are anxious to vilify him.'[174] These explanations complete the spectrum of motivations that Tillett had for his decision to increase his commitment to parliamentary methods. Just as in the years before the war, there was an overarching concern with the position and conditions of the workers. But new circumstances made that another excursion to unconstitutional methods was highly unlikely for Tillett.

After the outbreak of the war, Tillett not only supported the government in its war-effort and opposed actions which would result in the disruption of war industries. He also visited the front in France, personally wrote Lloyd George to ask how he could help him and issued a series of virulent anti-German statements. There was hardly any evidence that Tillett was once an advocate of direct, extra-political action. There have been explanations that cite an 'ugly streak of chauvinism', as his biographer notes, that was present during the whole of his career. A historian has described how the Labour Party joined the war-effort, but how it also avoided 'excessive patriotism'.[175] Tillett's patriotism was, as has become, less moderate than that of the rest of the movement but so was his attitude towards the British political institutes. Often the first is said to have caused the second, but it is worthwhile to suggest that this was instead a dynamic, where the two influenced and reinforced each other.

Conclusion

It should also be noted that many supported the war-effort out of a wish that this would be the 'war to end all wars': a desire that this would be the last of the big European wars and that the balance of power would be settled permanently.[176] That was also a very rational decision, one could argue with the concept of attitudes in mind. Indeed, the idea that the First World War was a struggle to defend and spread ideas such as British values and democracy has in the hundred years since been prone to criticism.[177] Nonetheless, the case of two of the three socialists described here suggests that this might have been the case after all − albeit in a different way. Their defence of Britain was not in order to defend the old structures, but to defend the conditions and future of the working class. The Labour movement's war-time cooperation in the government and the fact that the government was starting to listen more carefully to the demands of the Labour Party fuelled the optimism of the likes of Thorne.

He responded by pledging his support for the defence of the British political structures, with the expectation that such a course would ensure that the emancipation of the working class would continue. At the same time and also because of the circumstances of war, he still argued that the House

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[174] *Justice*, February 15, 1913.
[175] Hodgson, *Fighting Fascism*, 31.
[176] C.A. Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women, and Britain, 1914-1921* (MacMillan 2000) 3.
[177] J. Meyer, 'Introduction: Popular Culture and the First World War' in: J. Meyer (ed.), *British Popular Culture and the First World War* (Leiden and Boston 2008) 11.

of Commons was the best place to try to relieve the immediate grievances of the workers. Meanwhile, he carefully cultivated his revolutionary credentials, just in case political action alone would not result in a gradual creation of a socialist society. No such warning was issued by Ben Tillett, who had left the BSP together with Thorne in 1916. However, his motivations also prove that the debate among socialists was influenced by a number of different factors. His pamphlet on the causes of the war shows that the perception of the enemy was crucial and that it could differ. In contrast to Maclean, he argued that German workers were part of the problem too. That made international socialism and thus the use of supranational institutions unviable.

John Maclean, on the other hand, had left his pre-war political flexibility and was now vehemently opposing the Labour movement's cooperation with the other political forces in Britain. In particular, he criticized institutionalized forms of negotiation. He believed that a more radical and uncompromising approach would be the best way to discipline the party and that it also would be the most effective way to push Britain towards socialism. When Tillett and Thorne left him, he was thus far from dispirited. The Labour movement joining the institutes of British politics was, at that time, negatively affecting the struggle for socialism. It risked the lives of the workers and the fate of the revolution. As such, these positions had a crucial influence on the fate of the British Labour movement between 1917 and 1924, when Ramsay Macdonald took office. But, perhaps, not exactly in the ways one would expect.

Chapter 4 : New unrest, the Russian Revolution and the aftermath of war, 1916-1923

At the point where the last chapter finished, midway through the war, the anti-war sentiments were gaining traction. The amount of killed or injured soldiers, stories about the horrors of war, the perception that there was no end to the hostilities in sight and economic hardship provoked a new wave of popular protest and industrial disobedience.[178] After the war, those sentiments remained. Ramsay MacDonald, for instance, was about to return to its leadership and he could thank, to a large degree, the prestige he gained by his anti-war position for that.[179] And since the end of the war did not immediately relieve the workers from their troubles, the unrest continued into the first post-war years.

Whereas the number of strikes per annum had been decreasing in the early years of the war to 672 in 1915, in 1917 it rose again to 730. The number increased to 1165 in 1918, in 1919 there were 1352 strikes and during the next year the British workers interrupted their work a staggering 1607 times.[180] There was even an attempt initiate a national strike which was smothered in the summer of 1921 on what has become known as 'Black Friday' in the history of the British Labour movement.[181] Again, the government responded strongly. After a hundred thousand people joined a demonstration in Glasgow, London despatched thousands of troops. Just as in the years before the war, activists and politicians disagreed on how to respond to both the activities of the workers and the government. The workers were encouraged by the two Russian Revolutions of 1917, during which the prospect of the actual execution of a Marxist revolution suddenly left the realm of fantasy or idealism as the Bolshevists put their interpretation of Marxism into practice.

If there ever was a time for a Marxist revolution in Britain, contemporaries said, it was during these years of industrial unrest and Soviet inspiration.[182] The three men were caught in the middle of the ensuing debates. First, Thorne had to decide whether he would act upon the threats he made during the war, was he to remain loyal to his revolutionary past when it now appeared that this might result in something more? Ben Tillett, thereafter, had some questions to answer too. For the self-confessed 'revolutionary socialist' the disappearance of the pressures of war, which motivated him to change his course in the previous years, meant that he had to find new arguments to justify his newly obtained

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[178] Weinroth, *The British anti-war movement, 1914-1918*, 386.
[179] D. Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis, 1922-1931* (Oxford 2002) 313.
[180] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 106-107, 129.
[181] N. Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45* (Ashgate 1995) 25-26.
[182] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 149.

position as a Member of Parliament – a position he was extremely reluctant to give up. Finally, this thesis will end with the man it also started with, John Maclean. Unsurprisingly considering what was described in the previous chapter, he was closely involved in the efforts to incite a Russian-style revolution. Not in the last instance because his native Clydeside was the stage of some of the most radical protests in Britain. But how far would he go in his attempts to overthrow the exiting economic and political structures?

Will Thorne: 'The majority of our party do not care whether it is Lloyd George or any other George who is at the head of the Government'

In 1918, Thorne was re-elected to the House of Commons. The anti-war critics from the ILP and the BSP had taken control of the West Ham section of the Labour Party, so he was forced to stand for the neighbouring borough of Plaistow.[183] Consequently, Thorne was acutely aware of the changing perception of the Labour movement's wartime cooperation among the Labour Party's rank and file. Even though the anti-war activists did not support him, he in fact did criticize the government's treatment of the workers. Gradually, it even seemed as if Will Thorne might reduce his support for the war-time government. According to his biographers Thorne viewed the industrial unrest of the later war-years as a new opportunity for the unions and the Labour Party to turn Britain into a socialist society.[184] That echoes the claim of Maclean described in the previous chapter, when Thorne was still convinced that strikes would only damage the socialist cause.

There was, however, one big difference. In contrast to Maclean, Thorne wanted to wait until the war was over. He might have voiced more criticism about how the workers were treated, but he wante to contain the forces of political and industrial protests until the Central Powers were defeated. As he said in the House of Commons:

> As far as I know, the majority of our party do not care whether it is Lloyd George or any other George who is at the head of the Government, so long as that Government prosecutes to a successful termination this War. That is all that is wanted so far as the Labour Party are concerned.[185]

Thorne did not say anything about other forces that could end the war, such as international socialism or general strikes, and it is clear he wanted the socialists to be careful in their attempts to disrupt the war-effort. As was described in the previous chapter, he argued that due to the war there was not a better method available to defend the workers' cause than to cooperate with the government, who

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[183] Radice, *Thorne*, 84
[184] Ibidem, 76.
[185] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'CLAUSE 19.—(Special Provisions as to Deficiencies and Losses of Shipping Concerns.)', HC Debates, July 3, 1917, vol. 95, cc941-1019.

would in their turn make sure that the employers would adhere to the made arrangements too. He had, however, warned the government that after the war had ended, he expected the more structural problems to be addressed too. If not, Thorne had threatened, he would return to his 'revolutionary methods.'

Industrial conflicts during the war

Although the rank and file of the workers might have started to become less satisfied, Thorne seemed genuinely impressed by what the government could achieve once it increased its grip on the British economy. Instead of seeing the British state as an enemy, Thorne started to perceive it as an ally in the struggle of the workers against the employers and landlords. A matter of big concern for the British workers was that while their conditions were deteriorating, there were certain companies that were profiting enormously from their involvement in the war industry. After a wave protests, the British government decided to put a limit on the profits of munition firms that supplied the British army. And in a debate on the distribution of food, in March 1917, Thorne seemed equally satisfied. He seemed to trust the government in when it came to solving industrial problems, since he realized that few organization could do that more effectively and he praised the minister involved:

> I sympathise very much with the hon. Gentleman who has charge of this Department. I think he has got about the worst position there is in the Government. He has been hammered at more than any Minister during the time he has been in the House. I quite recognise that it is very easy to knock down but it is a very difficult job to build up. I have been through the mill in other directions the same as my hon. Friend is going through the mill to-day. In the very early stages of the movement I used to hammer at other people and thought I could control and do things a great deal better than those in authority, but when I got into the position myself I found there were very grave difficulties in the way.[186]

Interestingly, Thorne admitted that he might have argued otherwise were it not for his experience in several industrial and political bodies. In that way, Thorne provided another example of how the acceptance of and participation in political structures could further increase the satisfaction with those structures. On a larger scale, this was also the dynamic at play when the Labour Party joined the government.

It was not that Thorne was unaware of the growing industrial troubles and the discontent among the British workers. In the House of Commons in July 1917, Thorne expressed his worries about the

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[186] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Civil Services and Revenue Departments estimates, 1917-1918', HC Debates, March 23, 1917, vol. 91. cc2157-216.

situation. His statement can be read as a warning to the government of Lloyd George not to ignore the industrial unrest. The tone, however, was very moderate:

> I am perfectly certain that there is great dissatisfaction in the minds of the workers in all parts of the country in consequence of the huge profits made by ship-owners and other people out of the circulation of commodities throughout the country. Unless something is done no one knows what might happen. A strike might occur at some particular firm because of the huge profits being made, and a strike of that character might flash like lightning throughout the country, I do not want to see anything of that kind, and some of us who belong to the workers' organisations—men working under shipping companies or in munition works—are doing our level best to prevent anything like a serious outbreak taking place, because I think that would be the very worst thing that could happen to this country in the present struggle.[187]

Thorne was clear about his own positions: strikes and national strikes in particular 'would be the very worst thing that could happen'. Nonetheless, he used his position in the House of Commons to warn the government that, even though 'some' of the workers' organisations were trying to prevent that, an outbreak of unrest was not unlikely unless something was done. The question was, of course, what Thorne's position would be once the present struggle, the war, was over and the scenario he outlined above became a reality. Certainly when we already know that Thorne's revolutionary consciousness was about to surface again.

Industrial conflicts after the war

With the introduction of the Representation of the People Bill of 1918 the electorate more than doubled in size from twenty-eight to seventy-eight percent of the adult male population. Many of the new voters were from the working classes and many Labour activists would have agreed with one historian who has called that Bill 'one of the most significant results of the war'.[188] The Labour Party expected that the new voters would vote for them, even though the first post-war election saw a dramatic victory for Lloyd George and his Liberal-Conservative coalition.[189] Labour also planned to take advantage from the return of war-veterans. It wanted their votes and tried to convince the former soldiers by advocating improved pensions and (re-)employment programs. Its political leaders also used the plight of the veterans to try and convince the Liberals and Conservatives about the necessity of increasing the government's role in welfare.[190] For all of this, they needed a strong position *within*

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[187] Hansard 1803-2005, 'CLAUSE 19.—(Special Provisions as to Deficiencies and Losses of Shipping Concerns.)'.
[188] Gullance, *"The Blood of our Sons"*, 7.
[189] Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924*, 25.
[190] D. Higbee, 'Practical memory: organized veterans and the politics of commemoration' in : J. Meyer (ed.), *British Popular Culture and the First World War* (Leiden and Boston 2008) 205.

the British political structures. Immediately after the war, furthermore, the party had left the coalition government, adopted a new constitution and restructured its organisation.[191] From now onwards, it planned to be a party that truly appealed to the masses.[192] In other words, they were ready to take on the Conservatives and Liberals in parliament.

The fact that the Labour Party had left the government again, offered Thorne the opportunity to present himself as less satisfied with the existing British political structures. He was further encouraged by the fact that at the conference of 1918, the members of the Labour Party adopted the famous 'Clause IV', which entrenched the socialist ideology in the party's constitution. The clause called for the common ownership of the means of production and 'the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service'.[193] Now that the Labour Party had returned to its old role Thorne changed his tone too. In contrast to his war-time statements, wherein he had a relatively benign perspective on the intentions of the government, Thorne increasingly argued that the workers' troubles were also caused by the class-loyalties of government and its executive institutes. That was, of course, no surprise. The primary reason for Thorne to argue that the government was also under the influence of the working class had disappeared now the Labour Party was in opposition again.

This could be illustrated by the statements he made when he spoke at length in a debate on a new bill that dealt with the occurrence of mass unorganized protest, or what the government called 'emergency situations'. Thorne complained that the bill could be used to intervene in – in his eyes – legitimate industrial conflicts. The law was too vague, he argued: 'If I were a Judge […] naturally I should take the interpretation according to the view of my own class'. In the rest of the debate he explained that not only the government was the enemy again, the time of friendly relations between the Labour movement and the employers was over too. He blamed the employers for their attempts to use the existing judicial institutes to stifle industrial disputes unfairly, and that it was about to set up the government to do the same. Indeed, the House of Commons was about to give the employers even more opportunities to thwart the workers. Thorne continued his attack on the proposal at hand:

> Ever since the Armistice we have seen what has been going on. We have seen that all the sympathy which existed during the War is absolutely brushed on one side now, in consequence of the attitude that has been taken up by certain employers in different parts of the country. […] Only about three months ago the organisation which I represent was called upon to meet the employers in connection with the gas industry. They were not prepared to give what we thought was fair and reasonable, and they absolutely refused to submit the case to arbitration. Our only alternative was

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[191] M. Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate. A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London and New York 2005) 8.
[192] K. D. Wald, 'Advance or Retreat? The Formation of British Labour's Electoral Strategy', *Journal of British Studies* 27.3 (July 1988) 283-314: 311-312.
[193] Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate,* 12.

to threaten a strike If this Bill had been in operation, what would have happened? The Executive Council who advised the men to come out would have been liable to imprisonment. [194]

This is exactly what John Maclean had warned for when, during the war, he argued that the acceptance of the authority of the British ruling class would result in growing suppression. The government, which was still largely in the hands of the capitalists, would sabotage the socialist project by choosing the side of the employers again. Thorne now seemed to realize that the government was perhaps not as friendly to working class too, now the necessity of their full cooperation was gone after the end of the hostilities. The way he did voice his anger about the fact that his war-time achievements were under threat, however, marks a clear difference between him and the people who were trying to arrange a national strike.

Instead of using the strikes and unrest as leverage to try obtain fundamental concession from the government, Thorne argued that the reasons for the protests were misunderstood. It has already been mentioned that there was a sense among contemporaries that there was a chance of a revolution in Britain, but Thorne came to the same conclusion historians have come since. Namely that the supposed revolutionary threat was used by employers and government officials as an excuse to enact repressive measure that would reverse the political reforms of the years before.[195] Thorne criticized the government for their fear-mongering about the revolutionary sentiments that were supposedly present among the British working class and blamed the influence of the employers on the government. In a debate on unemployment insurance, he said:

> It has been suggested that it is because the workmen and the employers cannot agree. I think the Government are merely shielding themselves behind that statement because there is an employer of labour on their own side of the House who has said he is quite agreeable to the concession being made. If you take off the Whips and let us have a free vote you will find a majority in favour of this proposal.[196]

Will Thorne thus used the industrial unrest in Britain to increase the Labour movements bargaining power within the House of Commons. To do so, Thorne did not only have to downplay his own revolutionary intentions, but those of the working class in general too. When reading his statements, one gets a sense that Thorne would have been happy for the war-time cooperation to have continued the way it did. However, due to the changing circumstances that was no longer possible. Thorne did not blame the workers for that, who he thought were right to protest. It was, on the other hand, the reaction of the government which he opposed. Paradoxically, Thorne, the Marxist, wanted to continue

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[194] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Clause — [Amendment of 10 and 11 George V, c. 30, s. 8.] HC Debates, June 27, 1921, vol 143, cc1853-900,
[195] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 13-131.
[196] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'NEW CLAUSE.— [Amendment of 10 and 11 George V, c. 30, s. 8.].

the Labour Party's accommodation of the British political structures while it were the government and the other parties that were sabotaging that and who were trying to keep the British working classes outside of those structures. Perhaps, because they were just as aware of the benefits the parliamentary methods could have for the Labour movement.

The example of Russia

The larger part of the British debate on the consequence of the Bolshevist coup took place after the war, but at the time the Russian revolutions took place, the war was of course still raging on. In early 1917, Thorne welcomed the fall of the autocratic Czar, together with the majority of the British labour movement.[197] However, in line with his commitment to the war-effort he also shared the sentiments of the government and the generals. The Russian Revolution worried the people in charge due to the confusion that persisted about whether the Soviets would decide to pull out of the war.[198] Thorne once again showed his commitment to the defence of Britain when he, between the two revolutions, visited Russia as a Labour delegate in order to convince the new government to continue its war-efforts.[199] Lloyd George had figured that the new rulers might be more sensitive to his pleas when they saw how British socialists supported the war-effort too and before his visit, therefore, asked Thorne 'to convey a congratulatory message and fraternal greetings to the new Russian government'[200] Thorne did not object to act as an agent of the British government. He had already argued that there could only be a lasting peace if the British and their allies would win and for that, they thought they needed Russia.[201]

Nonetheless, Thorne's activities after his visit to Petrograd shed light on more than only his desire to end the war on beneficial terms. His response to what had happened in Russia was twofold. On the one hand, he was slightly worried. He stressed the uncertainties of the situation and although he admitted that he approved of any democratization in Russia, he was afraid that the next steps would turn out to be more violent. On the other hand, he also used the Russian revolution as an example of what could happen if governments did not treat its population rightly during the war.[202] That was a message that was clearly aimed at Lloyd George and had the same purpose as his response to the industrial unrest: to make it clear the he would support the Labour Party's constitutional methods, but that he expected the other political parties to take the interests of the workers into account.

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[197] M. Durham, 'British Revolutionaries and the Suppression of the Left in Lenin's Russia, 1918-1924' in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985) 203-219.
[198] A. Suttie, *Rewriting the First World War. Lloyd George, Politics and Strategy, 1914-1918* (Palgrave MacMillan, New York etc. 2005) 181-183.
[199] Cole, 'Thorne, William James (1857–1946)'.
[200] Radice, *Thorne*, 79.
[201] D. Kirby, *War, Peace and Revolution. International Socialism at the Crossroads, 1914-1918* (Aldershot 1986) 159.
[202] Radice, *Thorne*, 79-80.

However, things notably changed with the second revolution in October 1917. 'Can the right hon. Gentleman say if there is any Russian Government, and, if so, how it was elected?'[203] he asked a member of the government in the House of Commons in February 1918. Whereas he had first visited Russia to find out what was going on, his knowledge of the Bolshevik coup was much vaguer. What was known about Lenin's methods, did not please him either. His prediction that things could become more violent, proved to be right. *Justice* illustrated the disillusionment of Thorne and other British socialists in early 1918. The paper had welcomed the March Revolution of 1917, even though it conceded that Russia was still far from being a socialist society. It openly doubted whether it might not have been too soon for a revolution.

For that, Marx had written, one needed an industrial proletariat. For a long time Great Britain had been the only country with a sizeable working class that would comply to that requirement.[204] In the early twentieth century, the industrial revolution had spread to the rest of Europe, but not to Russia yet. Those worries, however, were overshadowed by the second revolution. *Justice* called Trotsky and Lenin 'masqueraders of Socialists'. Whereas the first revolution might have been premature, this one was certainly too soon. What they did was 'sabotaging the Revolution' and Hyndman called them 'furious fanatics', 'thoroughly anarchistic […] autocratic, cruel and butcherly to the last degree.' The paper did its best to dissociate the Bolshevists from the revolution of early 1917.[205] The Bolshevist revolution was likely to fail due to Russia's underdevelopment and make all the efforts of the Russian Marxists before that in vain. That, in turn, would damage the cause of socialism worldwide.[206]

The important part about that analysis is, however, not the Marxist theory behind it but that the Bolshevists were called 'thoroughly anarchistic', 'fanatics' and 'cruel and butcherly to the last degree.' Before the war, it has been described, Hyndman had already supported an orderly transition to a socialist society and Thorne had agreed with him as he did so now. There had been little incentive to change that position during the war. In fact, many pro-war socialists were extremely glad with the collectivism of the war-time economy, which they considered as a peaceful step towards socialism.[207] The institutional framework to continue the socialist project was already in place and that only confirmed that any anarchistic influences were undesired.[208] Furthermore, as Thorne had argued in response to the industrial unrest too, the British working class was far from revolutionary. In a speech on August 16, 1919, Will Thorne said about the members of the Labour movement: 'To every form of

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[203] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Bolshevik Government (Wireless Messages', HC Debates, February 05, 1918, vol. 101, c2058.
[204] Renton, *Classical Marxism*, 12.
[205] M. Ruotsila, 'H.M. Hyndman and the Russia Question after 1917', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46.4 (2011) 767-787: 772.
[206] Ruotsila, 'H.M. Hyndman and the Russia Question', 773.
[207] Ibidem, 771.
[208] N. Thompson, Political Economy and the Labour Party: The Economics of Democratic Socialism, 1884-2005 (Routledge 2006) 57.

anarchism, whether it were called by its real name or were disguised as Bolshevism or "direct action", they as Socialists were resolutely opposed!'[209]

Along with the majority of the Labour movement, Thorne did ask for recognition of the Soviet government. There was still a sense of sympathy for the fact that the Russians had overthrown the autocratic Czarist regime and the large majority of the Labour movement support the 'hands off Russia' campaign that opposed the western intervention in the Russian Civil War. But for the majority, that was it.[210] The way Thorne addressed the question in parliament was telling. 'In the face of the guarantee given by the Soviet Government, does the right hon. Gentleman not think it wise at once to re-open commercial relations with the Soviet Government? […] Other countries are pinching all the trade.'[211] Thorne might have looked to Russia with a certain admiration, but not for inspiration. Additionally, he also looked for financial gains for Britain as a whole. That was a common perspective among the constitutional part of the Labour movement in Britain. A historian has noted that for them, Russia was 'either a bulwark of socialism or a faraway country whose internal policies were of little interest to the British labour movement.'[212] If one argued that the conditions in the Russian society had little in common with those in Britain, as Thorne did, presenting Russia as being a bulwark of socialism was primarily symbolic. In that case, its methods could not be exported and reapplied. As a result, both of these perspectives meant that there was little interest in the actual methods of the Soviets.

That did not mean that Thorne had changed his perception of an ideal Britain that would be based on a Marxist ideology. He was convinced of the fact that he was still helping the socialist cause. As he wrote in 1925:

> my endeavour is always to get disputes settled without resorting to direct action; but I recognise that the workers must never give up the strike weapon, which is their greatest power in the ceaseless class war. A study of the industrial history of England will show that practically all the improvements and reforms that have been gained by the workers has been by the use of direct action in some form or another, and I am certain that if the trade union movement abandons this weapon, wages and economic and industrial conditions would immediately worsen.[213]

Thorne argued that he was still committed to a 'ceaseless class war'. In practice, however, he had decided against a method wherein industrial action would challenge the existing political structures of Great Britain. Trade union activities would have only limited goals and his decision was vindicated by the fact that Labour significantly improved its electoral results at the elections of 1922, while the

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[209] Quoted in Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 132.
[210] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 130.
[211] *Hansard 1803-2005*, '' Trade agreement (Soviet Government)', HC Debates, October 26, 1920, vol. 133, cc1520-1.
[212] Durham, 'British Revolutionaries and the Suppression of the Left in Lenin's Russia', 215.
[213] Radice, *Thorne*, 217.

membership of the trade unions was stagnating. Coupled with the lack of success of the strikes, culminating in the failure of the general strike in 1921, that meant that both trade unionists and Labour Party politicians would from now on 'look to the political arena for progress'.[214] It is here that we can see how strong the Labour Party's entrenchment in British political structures to change disagreeable mechanisms was.[215] Or rather, could be. With Tillett and Maclean yet to respond to the industrial unrest and the Russian Revolution, there are two other perspectives to be discussed. One from a person that had supported syndicalism before the war and one from someone who argued for revolution during the war.

Ben Tillett: 'It is an extraordinary thing for me to say as a revolutionary Socialist'

It has been suggested that Tillett chose to join the war effort because he 'revelled' in the positive attention he received. His recruiting activities and his visits to the front earned him compliments of several prominent politicians and in 1917, he received the ultimate personal reward: a seat in the House of Commons. Interestingly, in 1918 he stood again as an independent Labour candidate, even though the Labour Party implicitly backed him.[216] That was because he did not just support the political cooperation between the Labour Party and the British political establishment, Ben Tillett campaigned on a 'militantly pro-war platform.'[217] Apart from his personal motivations, Tillett had other reasons to defend the Labour Party's war-time cooperation to help the war-effort too. There was, of course, his patriotism. But in the last chapter it has been described how Ben Tillett argued that the war was a cause worth fighting for because it was fought to defend the British political institutions.

While the war was still raging on, it bears no surprise that Tillett did not change his opinion on that matter, even when the industrial unrest reoccurred. What, however, would happen once Germany was defeated? Then, it appears, the British institution would no longer be threatened from the outside. Tillett's pre-war association with syndicalism showed that he was prepared to use civil disobedience to improve the bargaining power of himself and his union. Even Will Thorne mentioned the fact that there were fears that there were anarchists active within the British Labour movement and although it would be unrealistic to expect Tillett to return to his syndicalism, which was also accused of anarchism before the war, it was yet to be seen how Tillett would respond to the new circumstances.

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[214] Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 73.
[215] Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 426.
[216] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[217] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 105.

The domestic situation

In July 1919, Ben Tillett held one of his few speeches in the House of Commons. Just as he considered it necessary during the war, he tried to justify his position as a pro-war socialist. He admitted that 'it is an extraordinary thing for me to say as a revolutionary Socialist, but the War has saved this Empire. If Peace had continued for another ten years German shipping would have wiped us off the face of the earth.'[218] Although, at first sight, this statement seems highly contradictory and perhaps slightly strange, Tillett's previous statements and decisions can explain his sudden defence of the Empire and its commerce. British world supremacy, he already argued during the war, would be the best safeguard against regimes that restricted the freedoms of labourers.[219] In Tillett's eyes, the German fleet (he is unclear about whether he meant the naval or commercial fleet) was about to fundamentally threaten that superiority in 1914.

The government, however, had more tasks than to defend the empire and it was when discussing those responsibilities that Ben Tillett addressed the industrial unrest. In a way, moreover, that resembled the approach of Will Thorne, who also argued that the government should have a big role in handling the unrest:

> I do not want us to allow the Government to escape its responsibilities. I do not trust either dock companies or shipowners. I have had to fight them for thirty-five years. I have never known a meaner bargainer than a shipowner; I have never known a more hard-hearted person than a dock director, and I have never met a more impossible person than either of them.[220]

His animosity towards the employers had, clearly, not been lost. For now, however, there was no sign that Tillett would return to his militant methods, since he expected the government to stand up for the British workers. Will Thorne had nonetheless already experience that such a response was not sufficient. Apart from the immediate post-war measures to extend franchise and the attempt to tackle the housing crisis, there was little that could be shown for to appease the workers. And the biggest test to their commitment to constitutional methods was yet to come. In the months before 15 August 1921, the Miners Federation of Great Britain had come into conflict with the employers and the government. Since the spring of that year, the mines were no longer under government control, a measure taken to support the war-effort. The employers wanted to use their reinstated liberties to decrease wages, to which the miners' unions objected. It did so with the impression that the miners were backed by other unions, most notably those of the rail and transport workers.[221]

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[218] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Clause — (Saving for Statutory Harbour, Dock, and Pier Authorities.)', HC Debates, July 1, 1919, vol. 117, cc818-57.
[219] Schneer, *Tillett*, 177.
[220] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'New Clause — (Saving for Statutory Harbour, Dock, and Pier Authorities.)'.
[221] Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions*, 25-26

Those three unions had, some years earlier, founded the 'Triple Alliance' to increase their bargaining power. Part of the deal they made was that in the event of a grave industrial conflict, the unions would start sympathetic strikes to pressure the employers and the government. But, when the government agreed to let the employers lower the wages and in that way called the union's bluff, the rail and transport workers did not strike to support the miners. All people involved realized the gravity of the situation. For the unions, the failure to act meant the, at least provisional, end of unified and national action by the trade unions. For the socialists, it confirmed their fears that there was still a lack of working class solidarity. As a result 'Black Friday' has become one of the most important moments in the history of militant industrial action in Great Britain. [222]

Ben Tillett also opposed the strike. He explained his decision at an executive council meeting of his trade union in August 1921, when he said:

> I am no less a revolutionary now than ever I was, but I am not a revolutionary in theory. I want brains put into business. […] During the negotiations I was anxious there should be a plan. I asked whether they had any sort of plan, and let me say with great regret, until the penultimate evening of the Alliance's decision whether to support the Miners and declare a National Strike, there was not a scintilla of organization to feed the miners or ourselves in the event of a strike.[223]

This was an interesting statement, certainly in relation to the accusations of Tillett's biographer that Tillett was someone who was happy to work without a plan during his syndicalist episode. Back then, however, and as the first chapter has concluded, Ben Tillett's decision to either support or oppose the British Labour movement's decision to enter the existing political structures was also based on a careful assessment of the merits of those institutes. In 1921, Tillett's ideology might have shifted to a more constitutional conception of socialism and his personal motives also played a part in his reluctance to support direct action. Again, however, his perception of what the British political institutions and their alternatives could at that very moment mean for the workers, was crucial. The Parliamentary Labour Party had provided 'a plan', it had decided how the House of Commons was to benefit the pursuit of Socialism. Without a plan, unconstitutional methods would not be effective to bring that ideal any closer.

A more sinister influence

In the statements above, Tillett did not connect the industrial unrest to the war and its consequences. Only the positive effects of war, the saving of the British Empire, have been discussed. However, just like Maclean and Thorne, Tillett was aware of the changing international dynamic. And in that

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[222] K. Morgan, *Ages of Reform. Dawns and Downfalls of the British Left* (London and New York 2011) 136.
[223] Quoted in Schneer, *Tillett*, 213.

instance, he was certain to present a continuity between his position during the war-effort and the way he approached British politics in the years thereafter. As late as February 1919, he would argue that he saw the hand of Britain's – defeated – enemies in the unrest. In The Times he wrote: 'There is seething discontent, but to have our grievances mishandled by a set of vicious anarchists in sympathy with, or in pay of, the Central Powers, would be the limit of stupidity and credulity.'

To call them 'vicious anarchists in sympathy with, or in pay of, the Central Powers' might suggest that Tillett was concerned with people who were under the influence of German militarism, which he had discerned as the biggest threat to the British political system during the war. But since the Bolshevists had taken over in Russia, Tillett had quickly diverted his focus. In a debate on the situation in Ireland, another big issue in British politics at the time, he warned the House of Commons that 'it is not merely German money that is succouring the Sinn Fein movement. A more sinister influence is being brought to bear.'[224] This was just days before the surrender of Germany which means that even before the end of the war, Tillett had already discerned the new threat that would replace the German danger. The 'sinister influence', of course, came from the Russian Bolshevists which the Sinn Fein leaders had approached for help. Tillett was not opposed to Irish independence, in the same debate he said that: 'If I had my way, I would take every soldier out of Ireland. I would leave Ireland to fight out her own destiny.'[225] The fact that he was ready to let Ireland leave the British Empire he had defended during the war, was at least partly prompted by his perception that it would stifle the Bolshevist infiltration of the British Empire. It would remove the incentive for Sinn Fein to ask the Russians for help.

Tillett, meanwhile, knew that Communism was also attracting sympathizers on the British mainland. In April 1919 he said in the House of Commons that whereas the British socialists were not Bolshevists, any mishandling of the situation by the government could benefit the communists:

> I tell the House that just as we are opposed to Kaiserism and Czarism, so we are opposed to Bolshevism, and if there is any tendency in that direction it will be a misadventure by the mishandling by this Government of the temper and temperament and spirit of the nation. […] The democracy and the industrial classes of this country are not Bolshevik, and there is no responsible trade union or Labour leader in this country who is at the moment opposed to the interests of his country.[226]

In a slightly different way, Tillett did the same as Thorne. He too argued that it was up to the government to resolve the distress of the workers and that they should not point to the Bolshevist threat as an excuse to crack down on the protests. But whereas Thorne was confident enough to claim

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[224] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Government of Ireland', HC Debates, November 5, 1918, vol. 110, cc1962-2069.
[225] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Government of Ireland'.
[226] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'CLAUSE 12.—(Penalty for Causing Disaffection, etc.)', HC Debates, April 2, 1919, vol. 114, cc1252-76.

that the British working class as a whole was not Bolshevist, Tillett could only guarantee that its leaders were not. That could, of course, be explained by the fact that Tillett himself was worried by the influence of Bolshevists too.

That resulted in a tougher stance towards direct action. Just over a year later, Tillett was one of the people that had to decide whether the unions would begin a national strike. That strike was perhaps the prime expression of the temper that Tillett here diagnosed the nation with. His statements on the industrial unrest and the revolution show how these two issues were intimately connected which each other, and with Tillett's interpretation of what the right path for the Labour movement should be. Tillett responded to the industrial unrest as a member of the political establishment and tried to neutralize it. Whereas Thorne used the pressures of unrest and revolution to bring a socialist political system closer, Tillett did everything in his power to prevent any alternation to the British institutions.

That did not mean that he did not understand the unrest, the temper, of the British workers. On the contrary, he illustrated how he shared the hatred of the employers. However, just as during the war, Tillett was convinced of the existing British political structures were more than suitable to channel those annoyances. Tillett even argued that he was still working on the socialist cause. In his article in The Times, written in February 1919, Tillett wrote that Labour movement should adhere to the same strategies as it used during the war:

> Labour has most to gain by a class loyalty, by patriotism, by love of country, and all that industry, power, wealth, comfort and happiness mean is wrapped up in patriotism […] Strikes, uncertainty of action, limited and vicious circles of action, can only result in greater gains to the capitalists.[227]

In other words, strikes, and uncoordinated strikes in particular, would harm Britain. And just as during the war Tillett argued that everything that was bad for Britain, was bad for its workers too. He confirmed that perspective when he spoke about Russia one more time. Interestingly, and just as Thorne, Tillett was later opposed to actual intervention and in favour of recognition of the new Russian regime. As long as Bolshevism would not be transferred to Britain:

> The Soviet Government can say: "The world is against us," that a community can always be a horror and a bleeding martyr. They can say: "We are opposed by all civilized nations, and Britain in particular." I trust that this House will reflect a common-sense view, and realise that the workers in Russia have no quarrel with us and we have no quarrel with Russia.[228]

He ended his speech with argument that might seem familiar to Will Thorne too, when he said that the workers were not the only ones who would sympathize with their Russian counterparts. He wanted the

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[227] Schneer, *Tillett*, 202.
[228] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Motion for Adjournment', HC Debates, June 7, 1920, vol. 130, cc147-88.

House of Commons to 'remember that the commercial men of this country will have no quarrel with Russia when they can make a profit out of them.'[229] All in all, Tillett wanted to separate the Bolshevist cause from the British domestic situation and leave Britain as it was. Democratic, and rich. In the rest of his live, he rarely mentioned his militant past.[230]

John Maclean: 'A forceful revolutionary fight is the logical next stage'

It was primarily from the moment that the implementation of conscription seemed likely, that the socialist opposition to the war became more determined.[231] Twenty thousand man would refuse the draft, of which more than six thousand ended up in jail where they were treated harshly.[232] Maclean ended up in jail for his activities too. In 1915 he was first arrested for organizing anti-recruitment meetings and in early 1916 he was pre-emptively arrested again. In May 1916, he was convicted for incitement after he had appealed to the workers to strike against conscription and received an 'exemplary' sentence to three years in prison. He was released on parole in June 1917 and continued his activities after recuperating. An arrest and conviction for sedition followed in April 1918 before he was again released after the war had ended.[233]

In the previous chapter it was described how and why John Maclean gradually switched from being a model 'social democrat' to someone who opposed negotiation with the government. This development continued and he was at one point considered one of the most important political prisoners in Great Britain, next to the Irish revolutionaries of Sinn Fein.[234] In 1918, Maclean's commitment to the British political institutions was almost non-existent, he explained: 'I have taken up unconstitutional action at this time because of the abnormal circumstances and because precedent has been given by the British government.'[235] In his eyes, the behaviour of the British government during the war illustrated how the workers would be better off without it. Earlier that year he had criticized the Labour movement again for even negotiating with the government: 'the establishment of industrial councils, industrial parliaments, or industrial guilds,' which some trade-unionist considered as an achievement, he argued, was initiated by the government to merely ensure the 'continuity of work or avoidance of strikes [and] increased output', but did not at all 'endanger the capitalist structure of society.'[236] The war-time cooperation had not given the working class more influence and opportunities to change society, but less. The structures were still benefiting the capitalist classes and

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[229] *Hansard 1803-2005*, 'Motion for Adjournment'.
[230] Newsinger, 'Justice, the British Socialist Party and the Dublin Lockout', 58.
[231] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 91
[232] Hochschild, *To End all Wars*, xvi.
[233] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[234] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 71.
[235] 'Speech from the dock' (May 1918) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 114.
[236] 'The war after the war', (1917-18) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 125.

the increasing unrest among the workers was being stifled by the structures of negotiation and cooperation that were created with approval of the Labour movement!

Following the Russian lead

But there was more. Year by year, Maclean's perception of how strong the British working class was, became more optimistic. Whereas Maclean used to argue that the masses were far from ready to participate in a truly Marxist revolution, he had interpreted the growing amount of strikes, the opposition to the Munitions Act and the agitation against housing prices as 'a major advance in working-class consciousness', as his biographers write.[237] In 1917, furthermore, he was encouraged to find a 'revolutionary solution to the war' by what had happened in Russia and he decided to make Glasgow the Petrograd of Britain.[238] Maclean was unambiguous in his initial response to what happened in Russia. In 1917 he said that 'the Bolsheviks in Russia have given the world the lead',[239] which he repeated in November 1919 when he wrote that 'the only course open to labour is the absolute destruction of capitalism, as is being worked out in Russia.'[240] The affection was mutual, in 1918 Maclean was appointed as the honorary president of the Petrograd Soviet and as the Bolshevik consul in Scotland by Lenin.[241]

Within the BSP, of which Maclean was still a member, people quickly realized that the provisional government that came to power in Russia in 1917 was not going create a Marxist society and they welcomed its overthrow by the Bolshevists later that year.[242] From then onwards, it would only get better they argued. In the eyes of John Maclean, the Bolshevik revolution was not the beginning of a dictatorship, but the start of a true working class, collective and cooperative government. A sentiment he shared with many others within the movement.[243] In short, and as is apparent from Maclean's statements above, he argued that since Lenin seemed to be successful, his approach would be the cure for the British workers' troubles too. The may sound as clear agenda, the problem was that once one had decided that the Russian Revolutions should be emulated, there were still different options available.

Maclean and the British Communists

In 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was founded as the BSP and its 5000 remaining members merged with the Socialist Labour Party, the Workers' Socialist Federation and

[237] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 82.
[238] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[239] 'The war after the war', 136.
[240] *The Call*, 27 November, 1919.
[241] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[242] Durham, 'British Revolutionaries and the Suppression of the Left in Lenin's Russia', 204.
[243] Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, 19.

other smaller socialist organisations. The members of the new party were full of optimism: the end of the war, the discontent among the workers and the Soviet revolution were seen as signs of a better world to come. The fact that the government and moderate socialists were so worried about the unrest, was a good thing. It meant that their political structures were under pressure and that the class struggle was about to continue after its wartime neutralization.[244] With this in mind, it is not surprising that Tillett and Thorne were slightly worried indeed: they were seen as the enemy by the communists. The CPGB, furthermore, was very Russia-focused. The first task for the party was the defence of the Soviet Union within British politics. For that purpose, it also received money from the Soviet government.[245] That loyalty also meant that where other socialist parties were still relatively open to conflicting ideas, the CPGB quickly became more dogmatic. In their perception, Russia was now the nexus of world revolution. Anyone who criticized it was accused of being a counter-revolutionary or a capitalist by the leaders of the party.[246]

Despite the attempt of dogmatism, there quickly emerged a conflict between the new generation of British Marxists and the older members. The first considered almost all older British socialist organisations and their members as too reformist and corrupted by British institutions traditions to be able to contribute to party based on Bolshevist ideas.[247] This was part of a wider battle within international socialism where the attempts to continue the Second International on more or less the same footings were unsuccessful. That was primarily because its reputation was destroyed after the organisation had fallen apart during the First World War. For many, the failure of international socialism to stop the war was a sign the movement needed a new form and a break with the past. Even its most vocal supporters were attempting continue their internationalism on a different footing, if only because the organization of the Second International had been so chaotic. In Britain, moreover, the relation with international socialism had always been difficult and it had been given a low priority.[248] To put an end to all those troubles, the Soviets planned for a well-organized Socialist International 'new style' which would later develop into the Comintern.[249]

The CPGB was a member of the latter and in line with the instructions from Moscow advocated a much less flexible form of cooperation among socialists. Another but related requirement for the CPGB's members was that they should accept a highly centralized Soviet-like party organization Ironically, John Maclean was part of the group of people who were considered as too reformist because of his history within the movement. And although he had argued for more discipline within the BSP before, he was also considered as too undisciplined and outspoken. Consequently, the fact

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[244] Beckett, *Enemy Within*, 9.
[245] Ibidem, 11-12.
[246] Durham, 'British Revolutionaries and the Suppression of the Left in Lenin's Russia', 215.
[247] Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions*, 21-23.
[248] Although newer accounts revaluate the role of internationalism as it was important without that organizational structure too. See E. McNeilly, 'Labour and the Politics of Internationalism, 1906-1914', *Twentieth Century British History* 20.4 (2009) 431-453.
[249] D. Kirby, *War, Peace and Revolution*, 48.

that Maclean was prevented from joining the CPGB, of course suggests that his own opinion on the matter was of secondary importance to explain his political 'decision'. At the same time, however, his doubts about Lenin's approach started to increase. He retorted the accusations that he was not a proper revolutionary by pointing out that the people in the CPGB who said they were attempting to overthrow the British institutions were loyal to new ones. In particular, he started to oppose the influence from Moscow and the London office of the CPGB on the Communist rank and file.[250] While Maclean still admired Lenin and his methods, he chose not to subject himself to the CPGB's leadership. A result of the strong link with Moscow, for instance, was that the CPGB stayed silent while the new Soviet state slipped into a state of dictatorship.[251]

After his rejection, Maclean continued his revolutionary activities outside the Communist Party of Great Britain. Two more times, he spent time in jail while he was trying to create his own revolutionary party. That party, which eventually took the shape of the Scottish Workers' Republican Party (SRWP) in February 1923, was fuelled by revolutionary internationalism. Now that he could freely decide on the ideology of his party, it also became obvious that his priorities were different than those of the CPGB. Inspired by the Irish Republicans, he started to profess a kind of revolutionary Scottish republicanism with the aim to challenge the British Empire.[252] It thus seemed clear that Maclean still wanted nothing do with the British political structures as they were. To be sure, the identity of 'his' Scotland was to be based on its socialist credentials instead of on a kind of nationalism. Nonetheless, to Maclean's regret, the times that he could inspire thousands of people like he did with his courses on Marxism were over.[253]

Back to parliament

However, there is also one aspect of his career which has received less attention even though it was equally important if one wants to characterize Maclean's attitudes towards the British political structures during these years. While he was working on his Scottish revolutionary party, Maclean was also slowly but steadily reshaping his relationship to the parliamentary methods of the Labour movement. At first, Maclean did so rather unconvincing. The Parliamentary Labour Party, despite all its ambitions, was largely ineffective from 1918 until 1922.[254] It was the biggest party in opposition to Lloyd George's government of Liberals and Conservatives, but still far too small to effectively alter the governments' policies as it had done during the war. Together with many others, Maclean was

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[250] Pierson, *Fantasy to politics*, 293-294; J. Newsinger, 'Recent controversies in the History of British Communism', *Journal of Contemporary History* 41.3 (July 2006) 557-572: 564.

[251] For a detailed response of British communists to that development, see: Durham, 'British Revolutionaries and the Suppression of the Left in Lenin's Russia' 203-219.

[252] J. D. Young, 'John Maclean, Socialism, and the Easter Rising', *Saothar* 16 (1991) 23-33: 23-24.

[253] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.

[254] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 152.

very unsatisfied with their policies and we have seen that he joined the calls for direct action and mass protests with his call to emulate the Bolshevists. He was not the only member to do so. At the Labour Party conference of 1919, a resolution that proposed that the party should support direct action was accepted by 1.8 million versus nine-hundred thousand votes, such was the dismay about the performances of the MPs.[255]

However, in the background, the relationship between John Maclean and the Labour Party was not as tarnished as his wartime career might suggest. The first clue is what happened as early as October 1918, when he was a prisoner in Peterhead prison. Maclean had started a hunger strike as soon as he entered the jail and while he was locked up, others started a campaign to call for his release. The harsh treatment he received had caused outrage among all echelons of the Labour movement and even the Parliamentary Labour Party was calling for his freedom. As a part of that campaign, the Labour Party adopted Maclean as a candidate for the constituency of Gorbals. After his release from prison, he thus suddenly stood as a candidate for the Labour Party (even though he did not win the seat).[256] And while the Labour Party had joined the campaign for his release out of a wider policy to change its pro-war image to something that was more in line with the general sentiment among the British workers, the affection did not only come from their side.

Once released, in November 1918, it took some time before Maclean started writing with the same frequency as before. But when he did, there were several publications in-between his more militant ones that reveal a newfound patience with the Labour Party and its approach. In *The Vanguard*, in November 1920, he wrote about the issue of unemployment and surprisingly, he argued that unconstitutional methods should no longer be the point of departure anymore. He argued that the British socialists should instead first 'mean to exhaust every constitutional method of safeguarding the unemployed of our class.' He warned the government of the growing class-consciousness when he continued that it should give in to the forces of labour because 'whatever happens after that we certainly will not be to blame', but Maclean also said that

> to rush work just now would mean split heads and a defeat for the Labour candidates. To use the misfortunes of the unemployed to increase those misfortunes is pitiable, but at the same time to defeat Labour is positively criminal. A Labour town Council will respond to our pressures more readily than a bourgeois one. If Labour fails then a forceful revolutionary fight is the logical next stage. Unemployment has not really begun yet, neither has the winter. There is ample time for desperate deeds before the winter is over if other and more "constitutional" means fail. [257]

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[255] Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, 130.
[256] McHugh, 'Maclean, John (1879–1923)'.
[257] John Maclean, 'The unemployed', The Vanguard (November 1920) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 206.

Regardless of his reputation, Maclean appeared to try and combine the revolutionary and constitutional approach and he concluded: 'only provocateurs would rush the situation at this juncture.'[258]

For someone who argued that the Labour Party had failed for quite some years and simultaneously called for a quick revolution, the statement above was rather surprising. Naturally, historians have tried to explain this shift. It was not the case that Maclean had lost his ideals, the socialist plans of his new party were as ambitious as ever. More likely is the suggestion that he once again tried to initiate cross-organisation cooperation to satisfy his ambitions which were stifled due to his political isolation. That caused personal troubles,[259] but also more political ones. Maclean's new adversary, the British Empire, could hardly be challenged alone and he had already formed a pact with the Irish republicans to cooperate.[260] Another, more practical but less romantic influence on Maclean's political decision to return to constitutional methods that has been proposed, was his repeated imprisonment. According to many contemporaries there were doubts about his mental capacities after he was released. Perhaps equally important: it is said that Maclean was disillusioned by the minimal effects his campaign and martyrdom (he refused to ask for clemency) in jail had.[261] It has now been established that the image of declining mental capacities mostly comes from accounts of his political adversaries.[262]

Indeed, it is argued here that his disillusionment with revolutionary methods stemmed from more rational political assessments. The statements above, for instance, echoes the ones Maclean made in the years before the war in some important respects. Then too, he argued that a force of Labour inside the British political institutions was a good thing. When he now wrote that 'a Labour town Council will respond to our pressures more readily than a bourgeois one' it difficult not to see the similarity with his earlier point of view that once the House of Commons would be full with revolutionary socialists, the Labour movement could effectively pursue the class war there.[263]

That Maclean was actually convinced of his new approach become obvious when in 1922 and 1923 there were new general elections and Maclean decided to participate again. His election addresses from those campaigns point towards the same conclusion. This time, he participated under the banner of his own party and it is thus good to note that Maclean revaluated the methods of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and not the organization itself. But just like he did in 1918, he stood for constituency of Gorbals and in an explanation of his election address in 1922 he asked all 'Scottish rebels' to 'concentrate on Gorbals for Revolution'.[264] He was not elected but in the next year, he tried again and encouraged the workers to vote for him because once parliament was full of revolutionaries

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[258] Maclean, 'The unemployed'.
[259] Howell, *A Lost Left*, 203-205.
[260] Young, 'John Maclean, Socialism, and the Easter Rising', 31-32.
[261] Ripley and McHugh, *John Maclean*, 93-95.
[262] Howell, *A Lost Left*, 185-186.
[263] *Justice*, November 11, 1910.
[264] 'Explanation of election address', (November 1922) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 240-242.

'such a Parliament would have to use the might of the workers to force the land and the means of production in Scotland out of the grasp of the brutal few who control them, and place them at the full disposal of the community.'[265] In 1923, he ended his election address in a way that also showed his faith in the House of Commons as a political institute. The tone was slightly more dramatic than between 1911 and 1914, but his position is clear: 'Every vote cast against me is one cast for world war and the further starvation of the world's workers. Every vote cast for me is for world peace and eternal economic security for the human family.'[266]

That Maclean switched back to the parliamentary way was, according to him, caused by the fact that he could once again use the House of Commons for the revolution. His Scottish revolution, to be more specific. It is, of course, also necessary to add some reservations about how voluntarily this decision was. It is clear that he had few alternatives, for instance. The CPGB did not want him, and he did not want the CPGB. Even worse, although the industrial unrest would last until the mid-1920s,[267] the failure of union solidarity could be interpreted as a signs of the fact that the class-consciousness of the British workers was not such a mobilizing force after all. Perhaps, it was not even there yet. As a result, the British political structures, Maclean thought, offered him more possibilities than the rigid bureaucracy of the Comintern or unorganized industrial agitation. Maclean himself was acutely aware of his shift back to the political road too and tried to explain it to his followers. In his own account, it had as much to do with his interpretation of what was workable, as with his ideology and personal interests. A new tactic was necessary and once again, in some of the last things he wrote before his untimely death, he argued that Parliament should once again be the battle ground for the Labour Party.

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[265] John Maclean, 'General election address, Gorbals' (23 November, 1923) in: Milton, *Rapids of Revolution*, 246-248.
[266] Maclean, 'General election address, Gorbals'
[267] Morgan, *Ages of Reform*, 134.

Conclusion: institutes of revolution, negotiation and conservation

The political positions of Maclean, Tillett and Thorne illustrate that in the years between 1911 and 1923, for these three Labour politicians and activists, the attraction of the non-constitutionalist road was never completely neutralized. At the same time, however, their decisions illustrate how even people who once said that they were completely opposed to the use of the British political structures would support the Labour movement's decision to join them – in the name of the Labour Party or any other organization that claimed to represent the workers. They did, however, need a phase of industrial unrest, a war, recurring unrest and an external revolutionary threat for that.

The case of John Maclean perhaps best illustrates the strange paths of the Labour movement. After he changed from being model social democrat into an internationalist revolutionary and a Bolshevist agitator, he became a Scottish Republican and then a candidate for the House of Commons. Nonetheless, with his attention for the effectiveness of the political structures and his pre-war career in mind, it becomes significantly less surprising that a 'revolutionary socialist' might stand for parliament instead of that he would join the Communist Party. Meanwhile, it is perhaps better to argue that John Maclean did not anymore oppose the British political structures instead of saying that he really supported them. He did not consider parliament as the ideal surroundings for a socialist, and describing his attitudes and perceptions explains why he nonetheless accepted them. We don't know if he would have been elected and were it not for his death, John Maclean might very well have used that institute to continue his revolution.

Before the war, Will Thorne committed himself to a openly Marxist party which even boasted a syndicalist faction among its members. During the war, he remained skeptical of how permanent the results of the Labour Party's cooperation would be. And although he was satisfied with the results of the industrial and political truce, he suggested that he might return to more revolutionary methods both during and after the war. That he eventually committed himself to changing the system 'from within' was a result of his intellectual development and personal experience in those institutions, but also of the fact that he was reassured that his worries could be addressed in parliament on a permanent basis. For Thorne, the House of Commons was not the only, but clearly the most important place to negotiate with what he still regarded as class enemies.

The image of Ben Tillett, finally, also needs to be adjusted slightly. It appears that neither his syndicalism nor his patriotism came from purely ideological motivations or aberrations in his personality. Rather, Tillett choose both positions because of reasons that much more prove the continuities instead of the discontinuities of his career that are so strongly emphasized by his biographer. It has become clear that he was very sensitive to situations of crisis and their effect on the

positions of both himself and the workers he represented. Each time, Tillett would assess the effects that joining the mainstream of British politics or the British nation would have. And each time, he would try to predict what the loss of those structures would mean. He came to the conclusion that, although he once argued for their destruction, the British political structures were the best ones he could wish for. He was adamant that he should help conserve them.

The question asked at the very beginning of this thesis was: why did the people in the Labour Party that had once rejected or criticized the existing political structures of Great Britain now decide to embrace them? The answer to that question is just as expected: differentiated. In the first place, the three men were a part of so many different organizations and supported so many policies, that it would even be illogical to only refer to them as members of the Labour Party. The 'Labour movement' has throughout the research presented here proved to be more applicable. More importantly, the development of the British Labour movement in the fifteen years before MacDonald took office shows how many factors need to be taken into account when trying to explain its positive valuation of the British political structures. Crucially, although ideologies and personalities play a role in the formation of those attitudes, the possibility to look at their attitudes without their acute personal needs and ideals provided the opportunity to complement the existing explanations for the development of the Labour Party and the movement connected to it.[268]

To be sure, even in 1924, the three men did not have to choose for *either* a permanently parliamentary method, *or* the unconstitutional road.[269] Indeed, the debate about how strong the Labour Party's commitment to the British political institutions would be, was far from settled at the time MacDonald took office. As Toye puts it, the Labour Party only saw Parliament as a '*potentially* class-neutral arena'[270] from the 1920s onwards. The focus on the attitudes of the three men, what they thought the institutes were and how they valued them, throughout the three periods of crisis in the 1910s and early 1920s underlines those observations. Moreover, they add to them. What was described in this theses was that apart from those more principle and absolute considerations that were connected to ideological and personal motivations, there was a constant re-assessment of the situation. The three continuously separated their individual interests and long term goals from a more rational consideration of the situation. In every new phase of crisis and conflict, they contemplated what exactly the British political structures were, what any loyalty to those institutions would mean, and how they would evaluate those results. That meant that frequently, ideological and personal motivations were overruled, although at other points the more rational approach would lose out. Indeed, the conclusion should be that the history of the political decisions of the Labour movement

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[268] Attitudes were defined as 'units of thought composed of a cognitive component (i.e. knowledge) and an emotional response to it (like, dislike, etc.)'. Those two factors combined result in an action towards the entity that is being evaluated.
[269] Toye, 'Perfectly parliamentary?', 10
[270] Ibidem, 20. My italics.

starts with the volatile and changeable political course of its members, instead of its supposedly shared ideals and desires.

Next to that, the motivations of the men or other people within the movement cannot be separated from the historical context, although the relation to that context is always ambiguous. In the years between 1910 and 1924 the British political system went through fundamental changes of which many were not even discussed in this thesis. Among other things, Ireland left the Union, the House of Lords lost its power to reject legislation and the franchise was significantly extended. The First World War, moreover, had changed the position of the state within society. Within the House of Commons, the Labour Party had replaced the Liberals as the second largest party. The war, unrest in the British Empire and the development of the United States into a global superpower had also changed the position of the British nation on an international level. The Russian Revolution and the fall of the Czar was, finally, only one further example of how the status quo of the nineteenth century was gradually losing its grip on modernity.

It might even seem surprising then, that the British Labour Party decided to approach the existing political structures that appeared under so much pressure during these years. In 1924 it was, furthermore, not only committed to participating in, for instance, the House of Commons on the basis of its program. Its whole organization had changed from a rather unorganised amalgamation into a national party which conducted massive and relatively disciplined electoral campaigns.[271] Although the party continued to encompass 'a wide range of traditions, outlooks, objectives and expectations' during the interwar years,[272] in the early 1920s, the Labour Party was no longer revolutionary and neither was most of the wider Labour movement. It did, of course, still profess ideas that were fundamentally different than the beliefs of the old status quo. As one historian said long ago: they still tried to challenge 'the whole range of beliefs and institutions on which established, conservative and bourgeois England was supposed to rest.'[273] But it would use the House of Commons to challenge those institutions and beliefs.

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[271] Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*, 1.
[272] Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate*, 217.
[273] Cowling, *The Impact of Labour*, 358.

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Illustrations

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