*Must Labour Lose*? The 1959 election and the politics of the people

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**Abstract:** This article explores Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, and Rita Hinden’s 1960 publication *Must Labour Lose?* in order todemonstrate that contemporary debates around British identity and political culture are nothing new. The concerns about political, party, and national identity in this book clearly prefigure 2016 debates about Britain, not least because a specific question—how to vote—became a conversation about a broader set of ideals. This article explores how *Must Labour Lose?* constructed an image of British politics in 1959. It interrogates its silences around racial identity and argues that we must read race into this book and others like it. And it concludes that research like this enables a much wider understanding of the British electorate than simply how they voted.

**Keywords:** Britain, Brexit, Labour Party, Mark Abrams, Race, Richard Rose, Rita Hinden

The 1959 election is often puzzling to my students when we encounter it on my courses about the “swinging” sixties or the history of the Labour Party. Labour’s loss in 1951 is explicable: austerity politics rebuilt the economy after the war but were not popular with the electorate, and a welfare state will always read as dangerously untrammeled socialism to a portion of the political right. Winston Churchill’s return makes sense to them, as much for its dramatic narrative potential as for its political coherence. 1955, too, is an election result that they can understand: the Labour Party was riven with internal squabbles between the Bevanites and the Gaitskellites, and barely held together by the then 72-year-old Clement Attlee. The Conservatives, led by the glamorous Anthony Eden, had swept to a landslide victory in the warm afterglow of Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation two years earlier.

But 1959 does not hold together in my students’ analysis. The 1956 Suez Crisis should have shaken British faith in the Conservative Party, the traditional choice for the voter who cared about Britain’s place in the world and the strength of the British pound. Instead, Eden’s misguided attempt to punish Gamal Abdel Nasser for the nationalisation of the Suez Canal had destroyed Britain’s reputation, destabilized the “special relationship” with the United States, and created an economic panic that drained tens of millions of pounds from Britain’s reserves; the prime minister had been forced to resign and was ignominiously replaced by Harold Macmillan. At the same time, the ordinary British voter lived in more comfort than ever before, largely because they had benefited from the creation of the welfare state under Attlee’s Labour government. Labour had a new leader in Hugh Gaitskell, which should have put a decisive end to the infighting of the previous years as one faction came out on top. Voters should have been hostile to the bumbling Conservatives and grateful to the newly effective Labour Party. Surely?

But Labour did not win in 1959. Instead, the Conservative Party increased the number of seats it held for the second time in a row, and Macmillan took his party back into the House of Commons with a majority of one hundred members. Meanwhile, Hugh Gaitskell’s Labour Party was left on the sidelines, bruised and baffled, having lost constituencies that had become thought of as solidly Labour: Keighley, Newcastle upon Tyne West, The Hartlepools. So why did Labour lose? And what does this tell us about the British electorate and about Brexit politics now?

One response to this moment that I have explored with my students was a slim, red-jacketed paperback, published in 1960 by Penguin, called *Must Labour Lose?* Its three authors—Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, and Rita Hinden—set themselves the task of unpicking what had happened at the election in order to understand the consequences for the Labour Party and perhaps also for British politics and society. As the title indicates, their analysis did not come from a place of optimism; indeed, Hinden began her conclusion by stating: “This book asks the question ‘Must Labour Lose?’ On a first reading . . . the answer would appear to be ‘Yes, it must—at least in the near future.’”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Many within the wider Labour movement felt the same; the election was taken as proof that the party must change if it were ever again to win political power. Of course, the necessary direction of change depended very much on the existing political inclination of those having the discussion.[[2]](#endnote-2) It was not a *unifying* moment of trauma, but an event that could only be read through the various factions and their existing schemas for imagining the world. The book *Must Labour Lose?* comes from a specific position in this debate—Rita Hinden and the magazine she edited, *Socialist Commentary*, were associated very much with the right of the party—but the book was not straight polemic. Based on detailed, nuanced research, there is a balance between individual perspectives in the coproduction of the text. In combining analysis with argument, it falls somewhere between postmortem and prescription.

Of course, there is another loss—one that occurred more recently in British political history—that many of my students struggle to comprehend. Their generation, especially those with a university education, voted mostly to remain within the European Union; my undergraduates now, mostly too young to vote in 2016, are dismayed that their preference goes uncounted.[[3]](#endnote-3) And the Brexit referendum has of course had countless postmortems, and numerous prescriptions have been written.

Labour was hit hard by this referendum, which was called to try to dampen resistance within the Conservative Party. Labour’s leader during the campaign, Jeremy Corbyn, was suspected by many Remainers of being only partially committed to the European Union as a political concept. More seriously, after the vote, Labour had to reckon with many of its traditional supporters having voted to Leave, largely because of a feeling of being “left behind” that subsequently caused them to flirt with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) or even the Conservatives. The 2017 election seemed initially to prove that this analysis was overblown, as Labour pulled back enough support to force a hung Parliament, but then the 2019 election showed support for the Conservatives in the former “red wall” of constituencies in the Midlands and the north of the country. These constituencies contained many former Labour voters who appeared to have been driven to vote for Boris Johnson’s party solely because of a desire to “Get Brexit Done.”

To read *Must Labour Lose?* is to realize that these anxieties are nothing new. The conceptual concerns about political, party, and national identity in this book clearly prefigured 2016 debates about Britain, not least in the way that a precise and specific question—how to vote —became a conversation about a broader set of ideas and ideals. And the book shows British politics to be richer, more complex, and more nuanced than any Remain/Leave, Labour/Conservative, Haves/Have Nots, Us/Them split could capture. Looking at the aftermath of these electoral surprises and the attempts to unpick them shows how complicated this story is.

The magazine *Socialist Commentary*, under Hinden’s instruction, commissioned the research that eventually led to *Must Labour Lose?*; Transport House, Labour Party Headquarters, had been asked to sponsor the project but had refused.[[4]](#endnote-4) The research was a “small sample survey,” and was motivated by the questions that Charles Booth, one of the fathers of social research, saw at the center of his work: “Who are the people of England? How do they really live? What do they really want? Do they want what is good? And, if so, how is it to be given to them?”[[5]](#endnote-5) Did the people want the Labour Party, or what the party represented? And how could they be induced to vote for what they wanted or needed?

Mark Abrams, President of the World Association for Public Opinion Research, compiled a questionnaire, “twelve pages of foolscap,” that was used to interview 724 people between 12 January and 29 February 1960, only a few months after the 1959 election (unusually held in October).[[6]](#endnote-6) The sample was drawn from fifty constituencies, taken at random from across Great Britain, and selected to provide an apparently representative slice of the country in terms of age, sex, income, and occupation. Interviewees were 18 and over, and so—with the voting age being set at 21 until 1969—some were too young to have voted in 1959; this was intentionally so, as the survey was concerned ‘not only with present trends’ but also with future voting behavior. The sample was split across party support: Conservative, 48 percent; Labour, 35 percent; Liberal, 10 percent; and a further 7 percent who were recorded as “don’t knows.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

The questionnaire explored the voters’ image of the Labour Party—was it the party of the welfare state? the protector of the underdog?—its policies, and its leader, Gaitskell. People who had most recently voted Labour were asked about this choice, but so were people who had voted for Labour historically but not in 1959, and those who were historically supportive of the Conservatives or the Liberals (or, indeed, no party at all). The questionnaire asked about voters themselves—their occupations, their homes, and their ideas about the future—and included a revealing section where respondents were asked to ascribe traits to typical Labour and Conservative voters and to explain what type of person might vote for each party.

The text was published first in 1960 as four pieces across the four summer issues of *Socialist Commentary*, before being compiled as a Penguin Special. Matthew Grant has identified between 1958 and 1984 a trend in British publishing to ask questions about “the state of the nation,” and the books published in this series tended to “strike an introspective vein” and wonder “where Britain as a nation was going in the future.”[[8]](#endnote-8) But he has also cautioned against reading the Penguin Specials particularly in this context; they were far more wide-ranging than this, including work on China, Russia, nuclear conflict, communism, immigration, and the history of league football.[[9]](#endnote-9) What is clear is that the Penguin Specials were intended to provoke discussion around a variety of important topics. The Specials were launched in 1937 with Edgar Mowrer’s *Germany Turns back the Clock*; on the back cover, the new series was described as comprising “books of urgent topical importance.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In the 1930s and during the war, the books were a commercial success, sometimes selling 100,000–250,000 copies in their first month; after the war, the series was somewhat neglected until it was reinvigorated in 1960 by the editor Tony Godwin.[[11]](#endnote-11) The Penguin Specials have been characterized as emblematic of a particular class of public opinion and constitutive of elite and popular attitudes.[[12]](#endnote-12) Dean Blackburn highlights how the books were believed to have pushed the electorate sufficiently leftward to deliver Labour’s landslide 1945 victory, and were able in the early 1960s to “construct a centre-left discourse that was able to reconfigure the terrain on which the political struggle was fought.”[[13]](#endnote-13) In this context, *Must Labour Lose?* was published.

The book was divided into three parts. Mark Abrams wrote the first section, setting out the survey findings in four chapters: the first explored the images of political parties in Britain, the second examined the questions of nationalization and Labour’s connection to organized labor, the third considered prosperity and affluence, and the fourth detailed the opinions of young voters. These latter three chapters all represent areas of particular concern within the Labour Party. The second section was written by Richard Rose, a young public policy pioneer, who had recently acquired his doctorate and held a fellowship at Nuffield College, Oxford (“the home of British election research”).[[14]](#endnote-14) His contribution, also four chapters, put Abrams’s writing into context. The first explored the British party system, the second examined how elections are won and lost, while the third and fourth examined “misunderstanding” and then “understanding” voters—the former by critiquing the “fallacy of rationalism” and an overreliance on ideas of class to explain political identity, the latter by describing typical identities among Conservative, Labour, and Liberal voters and the British nonvoter.[[15]](#endnote-15) The final section was given over to Rita Hinden, an experienced Labour Party organizer and political author. Her section was entitled “The Lessons for Labour,” although the introduction to the book clarified that she was “of course, aware that other people might draw other conclusions from these statistics” (it is notable that neither male author had such a caveat added to their work).[[16]](#endnote-16) Hinden’s work contained five short sections—“The Socialist Tradition, A Class Party?”, “The Problem of the Public Sector,” “The Search for Unity,” and a conclusion responding to the earlier analysis and providing some hope to those who wished to see a future Labour victory. The book then contained, as an appendix, the questionnaire used to interview the ordinary members of the public. The whole thing ran to 127 pages and was sold for two shillings and six pence.

My copy, somewhat improbably, is a withdrawn book from the Salem branch of the Oregon State Library; it appears to have been checked out only once, at the end of August 1961.

The 1959 election had been fought along clear ideological lines, irrespective of assertions of “social democratic consensus” in this period.[[17]](#endnote-17) Labour’s manifesto, *Britain Belongs to You*, focused on ending poverty, particularly in old age; abolishing selective education; building hospitals and making council houses available; expanding leisure and youth services; and nationalizing steel and long-distance haulage, before potentially other industries. The manifesto critiqued Macmillan’s famous exhortation that the British people had never had it so good and presented policies aimed at reducing inequality in the pursuit of a more equal affluence: “None of us, however lucky or well-off we may happen to be, ought to feel comfortable in a society in which the old and sick are not decently cared for.”[[18]](#endnote-18) The manifesto also included a long critique of the Suez Crisis, a condemnation of the arms race, and finished on a stirring critique of the existence of two worlds, “one white, well-fed and free, the other coloured, hungry and struggling for equality.” Foreign policy, and even more so Britain’s role in relation to the late empire and the new postcolonial world, were thus central to Labour’s campaign and its image of itself and of Britain.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The manifesto was generally well received; in fact, some of Labour’s anxiety at their 1959 defeat might have come from the dashing of raised expectations. The campaign had gone well until Gaitskell made his famous promise that Labour spending plans would not require a rise in taxes, and the Tories pounced with claims that he was irresponsible, lying, or both.[[20]](#endnote-20) It is possible that some of Labour’s angst was not much more than disappointment, and the feeling that victory had been—as Bevan said, when he heard of Gaitskell’s promise—simply “thrown away” by Gaitskell’s rash words.[[21]](#endnote-21) (The visceral response of unsuspecting Remainers in June 2016 might be attributed to similar misapprehensions about the likely outcome of the vote.)

If the 1959 election had simply been lost because of a poorly fought campaign, though, the party might have been less existentially concerned by the result. As it was, many feared that British society had changed so fundamentally since Labour’s creation that the party could no longer win elections based on its founding premise: the existence of class struggle and the need to fight to uplift the workers.[[22]](#endnote-22) In his *Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm identified a “Golden Age” between 1950 and 1970 for much of the world, but this golden glow of affluence (as identified by J. K. Galbraith in 1958) cast Labour activists into anxiety, as they feared that economic prosperity—enabled, ironically, by the policies of the Attlee government—had dissolved the natural, innate connection between the working classes and the Labour Party.[[23]](#endnote-23) As Hobsbawm wrote: “Of course most of humanity remained poor, but in the old heartlands of industrial labour what meaning could the *Internationale*’s ‘Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers’ have for workers who now expected to have their car and spend their annual paid vacation on the beaches of Spain?”[[24]](#endnote-24)

*Must Labour Lose?*, then, was an attempt to understand whether Labour could hope to appeal to the working classes—as well as other voters—in this new affluent society. The question of the title was existential; the unspoken subtitle was “now and forever more.” I find it impossible now to read these anxieties about the loss of an electoral campaign and the uncertainties about what this means for a political future outside the context of the Brexit referendum. The Labour Party that lost voters in 2019 in its supposed heartlands to a right-wing campaign run by a dishevelled aristocrat has had a similar existential crisis: what is the party for, if it cannot hold onto these voters, and how can the party survive in a world where class is apparently meaningless? The questions about identity that were explored in *Must Labour Lose?* are questions that are still relevant today.

The introduction to the book seeks to reassure the reader that the survey is not intended to force the party to design its manifestoes based only on “what the people want”; Labour was not to be encouraged to change its policies regardless of its principles in order to get into power, but instead to understand why the electorate had rejected its policies, in order to understand “where the *obstacles* to their policies lie.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Many politicians were opposed to these sorts of surveys largely because politicians preferred to believe that they alone had “special insight” into what the people wanted. This was especially true for the Labour Party, in which too many professed “some dogma of revelation about what the workers *must* want,” or otherwise “some intuitive bond between themselves and the whole of the working class.”[[26]](#endnote-26) The book had little patience for this tendency on the left toward speaking *for* the people without listening *to* them.

This establishes a key theme in *Must Labour Lose?*, the sense that politics seemed to be slipping away from traditional class narratives as understood by Labour politicians; the old divisions of working-class Labour voters and elite Conservative voters could seemingly no longer be leveraged in Labour’s favor at the ballot box. Richard Rose, in “Understanding Voters,” identified particular archetypes among British voters. Among them were some clearly classed identities: the “deferential Conservative” who was naturally drawn to vote for the party of “the upper classes, the titled sons of peers, the baronets, and the sons or sons-in-law of the rich and ancient” who were presented as Conservative candidates; and the Labour voter who was driven by a sense of “class conflict,” who saw British politics “as essentially a question of the workers against the rest.” (The survey quotes Raphael Samuel’s survey of Clapham and Stevenage, with one voter saying “I take my hat off to the Conservatives. I recognise them as gentlemen. The Labour Party are only men”).[[27]](#endnote-27)

But there were many other identities, too: the Conservative voter motivated by “economic self-interest,” who voted for “brass, not class,” and the Labour voter motivated by “gratitude” toward the party that had delivered the welfare reforms of 1945–1951. Labour voters might be “altruistic” and motivated by a sense of moral duty to the poor; however, Rose felt that Conservative voters who claimed to be altruistic tended really to mean “patriotic.” Similarly, if Labour voters were “ideological,” it was in their desire to turn “almost every social and political issue, be it the jailing of a nationalist in Africa or the construction of a new caravan site in the borough, into a question of Socialist principle.” If a Conservative voter were “ideological,” they were “an unusual animal” who probably suffered abuse from their fellow Conservatives.[[28]](#endnote-28)

In 1959, the general popular sense of who voted for each party—assessed by giving those surveyed a list of qualities and asking them to mark which party’s supporters they felt aligned most closely to them—was remarkably stable across parties, as described by Mark Abrams:

Both [Labour and Conservative supporters] see Labour as identified with the working class—especially the poor and the labouring working class; and at the same time, many workers, irrespective of their politics, no longer regard themselves as working class. Conversely, the electorate sees the Conservative Party as the Party of middle-class people and young people, the party that attracts men and women with realistic ideals, and which offers prosperity to all and opportunities to the ambitious. Both groups consider the pursuit of enduring world peace to be the most important task facing politicians today; and both groups feel that Conservatives are just as likely as the Labour Party to bring this about.[[29]](#endnote-29)

This was clearly a problem for the Labour Party. Among those surveyed, young people seemed even more likely to rate the Conservatives highly based on general feeling, a “complex of barely conscious Conservative sympathies” identified by Abrams that might create significant problems for Labour in the future.[[30]](#endnote-30)

All of these ideas prefigure contemporary debates about Brexit and its aftermath. Voters on both sides of the Brexit issue might easily conceive of their own votes and the votes of other people as ideological, altruistic, patriotic, or motivated by the pull of economic self-interest. There is also a current anxiety that the electorate no longer identifies with Labour, and that the party cannot win elections without fundamentally changing its identity. But there is a broader sense in which this resonates, too: a choice on a ballot paper indicates something innate about the voter’s character, outlook, and identity. Rose identified another category: the “accidental voter” who votes Labour because he distrusts people with moustaches like Macmillan, or votes Conservative because a nice young Tory had offered her a ride to the polls. But there is a strong sense that most people’s political engagement in this period was motivated by something more conscious than this, something more explicit, and something more connected to their sense of self.

Identity in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s can only be understood through the prism of race and racial identity, particularly ideas about Blackness and Whiteness and their relationship to Britishness. Increased migration to the metropole lead to intense discussion of whether Britain as a polity could incorporate racial difference.[[31]](#endnote-31) In this context, and following a new imperial history approach, British identity must be read through race and through empire and its dissolution. The Empire Windrush had arrived from the Caribbean in 1948 in the same year that the British Nationality Act guaranteed British citizenship to colonial subjects across the globe. In 1962, these rights began to be curtailed by Macmillan’s government. Labour produced their anti-immigration white paper in 1965; Enoch Powell warned in 1968 of “Rivers of Blood”; all the while, the formal empire was shrinking as new nations seized their independence. But race and empire are curiously absent from *Must Labour Lose?*

The survey was compiled to provide a representative sample of the population in terms of age, sex, income, and occupation. But race was not mentioned, and there is no discussion at all of the race of the survey participants. Is the reader to assume that they were all White? Many British readers of the time probably would have made that assumption. And yet a representative sample of the population in this period should have included voters with heritage from the Caribbean, from East and West Africa, and from India and Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The issue of race arises only in terms of the object of potential political policies, not in terms of the subjects being questioned. Those surveyed were asked to assess various statements insofar as they applied to either Labour or the Conservatives, such as “would make the country more prosperous” or “really respects British traditions.” One such statement was “believes in fair treatment of all races”; Labour voters overwhelmingly believed that this statement applied to Labour (43 percent) over the Conservatives (3 percent), although 43 percent believed it applied to both parties equally. So there is evidence that Labour supporters saw the principle of antiracism as a virtue associated with their party; but the thoughts and actual experiences of people of color and their political lives went unheard. Similarly, in summarizing the potential appeal of Labour’s policies to the electorate (in response to a question that asked voters what they would have been pleased and displeased by, had the party won the election) Rita Hinden celebrated the fact that “very few disliked Labour” for its “leniency to coloured people.”[[32]](#endnote-32) But the experience of those “coloured people” themselves is not interrogated; neither is the idea that a voter might actively approve of this policy.

Empire, too, is only glancingly present in the text. For instance, to demonstrate how “values can change” in politics Hinden cited Britain’s “attitude to colonial freedom,” which had been “revolutionised within a generation”: a rose-tinted attitude to British decolonization that can be explained through her long association with the Fabian Colonial Bureau and other similar groups.[[33]](#endnote-33) The issue of aid is explored at several points within the book to be used as one marker of class, party, and generational differences on key British electoral issues. In the survey, half of voters for both the Conservatives and Labour believed that aid should be given to “underdeveloped countries,” but a larger proportion of the working classes disapproved of this policy than the middle classes. When the middle classes were asked to justify criticism of aid they were likely to argue that “the British people’s first responsibility is to themselves,” whereas the working classes “were more prone to . . . a general dislike of foreigners.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Young people were more likely to be “generous” in this regard than other generations, and more likely to do so from either charitable sentiments or because of a general concern to reduce inequality between nations.[[35]](#endnote-35)

An imperially informed reading of the text pushes us to interrogate the silences within it—to think critically about how and why race was made oblique in this questionnaire. It also situates the question of aid to “underdeveloped countries” firmly within an imperial framework, despite the fact that the book does not explicitly make this connection (decolonization is not mentioned, in fact, at all). But race and empire were, of course, not silent presences in Brexit. They were deafening, shouted in the Leave campaign language of “swamping” by migrants and the demands for Britain to go “back” to some mythic moment both of Whiteness and greatness, and in the explicit demands for Britain to declare “independence” from the European Union, which had colonized Britain as Britain had colonized so much of the world (one of these colonizations was to be deplored, the other celebrated). And in 2020, the Conservative government rolled up the Department for International Development into the Foreign Office; long derided by the right as the concern only of bleeding-heart liberals, overseas aid has become an explicit tool of foreign policy.

By omitting explicit discussion of racial identity and racial difference, and by framing empire only as a space where White people can perform their ideologies about the world, *Must Labour Lose?* reinforces and reconsolidates a kind of presumptive White civic polity; the readership of this book is presumed to be White, and so is the electorate of Britain. Whether or not this is true of the former, it certainly was not true of the latter. The Leave campaign, too, in its invocation of the “White working class,” its assumptions about citizens’ relationship to Britain’s imperial past, and its conception of British identity built on a sense of fervent belonging (rather than on a studied ambivalence or an experience of hostile othering) also constructed a presumptive White civic polity; and indeed, voting Leave was very clearly associated with Whiteness. To read *Must Labour Lose?* is to remember that race and empire are building blocks of British politics and culture, but so are the silences around them.

Hinden, in her conclusion to *Must Labour Lose?*, acknowledged that Labour was “based on powerful traditions that are a mixture of strong beliefs and strong loyalties”; these acted, she argued, both as “cement” and as “dry-rot,” simultaneously cleaving the party together and apart. In the 1959 debate at a party conference about the removal of Clause IV, a Labour delegate had rejected the proposal with the outraged response that it was as if they were being asked to stop singing “The Red Flag.”[[36]](#endnote-36) The identification of many party members with the party was inextricably bound up with their feelings about the past, a past that was as much imagined as experienced, which drew on nostalgic invocations of what it meant to be working-class, socialist, and Labour.[[37]](#endnote-37) The presence of nostalgia in the debates around Brexit has, too, been hard to escape.

But Hinden was clear that the party needed to look forward if it ever wanted to be reelected. Her first chapter, on “The Socialist Tradition,” argued that Labour should not destroy “the source of its vitality” by overthrowing its founding inspiration.[[38]](#endnote-38) But key shibboleths—especially nationalization and class struggle—were no longer appealing to the British electorate. Hinden argued that moving away from these tenets would allow the party to “remain true to the best of its own traditions, but applied to the conditions of today.”[[39]](#endnote-39) This meant focusing less on “a higher standard of life” and more on “an improved *way of life*” for British people; recognizing that there were still people in poverty who needed to be reached, but also that many comfortable British voters might still vote for a socialist party if they felt it had something to offer the modern world.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Of course, Labour won a very slim majority indeed in the 1964 election, bolstered with a 1966 landslide. Whether the party jettisoned any fundamental principle to do so is debatable, although the modern, northern, classless leader Harold Wilson gained a reputation among many as “unprincipled.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Labour positioned themselves as the party of the future, invoking the “white heat of technology” to appeal to striving white-collar workers. But they developed a more complicated relationship with affluence, too. The “rediscovery of poverty” prompted by Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith’s sociological studies meant that Labour no longer feared that the country had become too wealthy to elect them to power.[[42]](#endnote-42) Instead, they fretted about a generation of children being left behind forever, as the work of charities like Shelter exposed the terrible living conditions of so many in supposedly affluent Britain.

*Must Labour Lose?* prefigures Brexit in many ways, including the construction of British political identity and the way that voting preference is drawn from more than rational thought; and the sense that political elites were losing their hold on voters and that previous norms were being questioned and shaken. Some of the issues—Britain’s role in the world, the idea of guaranteeing prosperity for all, the desire for a better quality of life—are the same still now. Perhaps the clearest parallel though is simply the existence of the book itself: the need to sift through the evidence and the desire to try to understand.

The most interesting questions, to my mind, were the ones that were not written up in the book. Question 4 asked “how did you spend your leisure time?” and broke down the responses: last weekday evening, and morning, afternoon, and evening on Saturday and Sunday. Presumably this was asked to get a more rounded idea of social class, but the idea of seven hundred accounts of how ordinary people spent their leisure time sitting in an archive is oddly touching. If this question had been asked after the referendum, how would people have accounted for their leisure time? Do people have more free time now, more material comforts, or in a world of email on mobile phones and zero-hour contracts is the line between work and leisure blurred or diminished? Similarly, in Question 22—right at the end of the survey—respondents were asked about their previous votes and future voting intentions. But tucked away within this question, 22(g), is a subquestion about how the husband or wife of a married respondent had voted. What would have happened had couples been sat down immediately after the referendum and asked this question? Would they all have known the answer? Would they have been surprised? And who is doing this careful work now, this collation of information about people’s political identities, so that historians in the future might be able to look back at 2016 and understand this political culture a little better?

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**Notes**

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1. . Mark Abrams, Richard Rose, and Rita Hinden, *Must Labour Lose?* (London: Penguin, 1960), 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Steve Fielding, “Rethinking Labour’s 1964 Campaign,” *Contemporary British History* 21, no. 3 (2007): 309–324, here 312, doi:10.1080/13619460600825873. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Almost three-quarters of 18–24-year-olds voted Remain in the referendum, and 68 percent of those with a university degree. Yougov, “How Britain Voted at the EU Referendum,” 27 June 2016, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Richard Rose, “Labour’s Forward March: Downward Path, Cycle or Random Walk?,” *Contemporary Record* 2, no. 4 (1988): 9–11, here 9, doi:10.1080/13619468808580998. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Abrams et al., *Must Labour Lose?*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Matthew Grant, “Historians, the Penguin Specials and the ‘State-of-the-Nation’ Literature, 1958–64,” *Contemporary British History* 13, no. 3 (2003): 29–54, here 30, doi:10.1080/13619460308565450. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Ibid., 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Edgar Mowrer, *Germany Turns back the Clock* (London: Penguin, 1937). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . “Penguin Specials,” Penguin Archive Project,

    http://www.bristol.ac.uk/penguinarchiveproject/research/specials/. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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