

Part Two



‘A party not unlike the Democrats’: Labour, the left and encounters with America from the New Deal to the New Frontier

Richard Carr

On 14 September 1959 Roy Jenkins began, in his famous timbre, to dictate a brief letter. With Britain set to go to the polls in a few weeks there was certainly much to report. Prime Minister Harold ‘Macmillan has at last cleared up our doubts about the date of the election,’ he told his correspondent. ‘And I think we can therefore now make firmer plans.’ Jenkins had had a busy decade, and his Penguin book *The Labour Case*, which outlined a detailed and moderate agenda for government, had made a real splash earlier that summer (the *Guardian* at least found it ‘lucid and persuasive’).¹ As his pen pal noted elsewhere, Jenkins was by now ‘one of the most prominent coming figures [in the Parliamentary Labour Party and] would seem to be a certainty for a high cabinet post’ should Labour win power. In September 1959, however, Jenkins’ aforementioned plans were not those of high office. For the future reforming Home Secretary, the odds ‘on this wretched Government winning again ... still look pretty heavy’. As such, it was already time to discuss ‘a nicely timed consolation prize’: a speaking tour of the American East Coast. Jenkins’ ‘gloomy’ views of the contemporary climate were, he noted, ‘for private consumption only’. But he had no real fears they would be passed on. For the recipient was his friend, the noted Harvard economist John Kenneth (J. K.) Galbraith.

Jenkins wasn’t wrong – Hugh Gaitskell’s Labour would indeed be defeated in October 1959, with Harold Macmillan’s Conservatives extending their parliamentary majority by twenty seats. But his letter was indicative of more than just good political antennae. This chapter outlines its wider relevance: the

¹ *Guardian*, 16 September 1959.

political connections between American Democrats and prominent figures in the UK Labour Party. There is, of course, a wider, well-trodden story here. In terms of transnational dialogue per se, the travels of Labour figures in Soviet Russia, or their relationship with the German SPD have been ably explored by historians such as Jonathan Davis and Stefan Berger.² The Commonwealth has also proven an inspiration of sorts, particularly the practical examples of Labour in government in New Zealand from Michael Savage to Jacinda Ardern.³ Indeed, Hugh Dalton and Ernest Bevin were but two Labour politicians to make the trip to the Antipodean world in the 1930s – whilst Tony Blair and Gordon Brown sketched out much of the agenda for what became New Labour on the same arduous journey several decades later.⁴

But for reasons of language, economic might, and wider twentieth-century diplomacy, America has held a particular place of importance for British progressives. In more modern times, whether it be Joe Biden's borrowing of a Neil Kinnock speech, Gordon Brown's affinity for the Kennedys or the Blair-Clinton 'March of the Moderates' (which I have discussed elsewhere), many elements of the Labour-Democrat relationship have been outlined by academics and political journalists alike.⁵ This is probably a phenomenon nudged along of late by an enduring fascination with *The West Wing*, *Veep* and *House of Cards*. Ed Miliband's plea to his advisors that they should 'let Miliband be Miliband' formed something of an apogee here – even if his leadership never quite hit the heights of Jeb Bartlett.

Culture aside, some of this transatlantic intrigue has been generational. As the sociologist Karl Mannheim noted, political and social norms are not just innate, but often framed by some common early experience. This might include dramatic collective circumstances such as service in a war, but it can also be more mundane levels of shared exposure to particular stimuli in early adulthood. And for most would-be politicians, certainly in recent decades, this has meant university study. By way of example, Bill Clinton encountered two of his future senior colleagues (Robert Reich and Strobe Talbott) in the same year

² Jonathan Davis, 'An Outsider Looks In: Walter Citrine's First Visit to the Soviet Union, 1925', *Revolutionary Russia* 26, no. 2 (2013): 147–63; Stefan Burger, 'Organising Talent and Disciplined Steadiness: The German SPD as a model for the British Labour Party in the 1920s', *Contemporary European History* 5, no. 2 (1996): 171–90.

³ On the Commonwealth, see e.g. Glen O'Hara and John Stewart, 'The land with the Midas touch': British perceptions of New Zealand, 1935–1979', *New Zealand Journal of History* 52, no.2 (2018): 42–65.

⁴ See Gordon Brown, *My Life, Our Times* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), 81–2.

⁵ Richard Carr, *March of the Moderates: Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and the Rebirth of Progressive Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

of Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, whilst his personal lawyer (David Kendall) had taken the same path two years earlier. Two decades later, Ed Balls and David Miliband took in university life in Boston, whilst Douglas Alexander was a few hours south in Pennsylvania. As well as later parliamentary and congressionally funded research trips, modern transatlanticism certainly owes much to such early moments. These encounters helped foster direct personal connections, but they also elevated the ideological importance of the country in which the future politician was temporarily resident (Wilson's devaluation of the pound, for instance, really did put more pounds in the young Bill Clinton's pocket). To paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, Britain and America may well be 'far away countries', but they are not nations of whom their political class 'know nothing'.

That said, this chapter argues that there are two ways the transatlantic progressive story should be extended. Firstly, it has not only been moderate Blair or Jenkins types who have sought to learn from their American cousins. Whilst it is true that the generally smaller-state, decentralized and lower-tax nature of American democracy has made it easier for the centre or right of the Labour Party to think in a truly transatlantic sense; figures on the Labour left have not been shy about adopting best practice from US figures they approve of, either. We shouldn't let diplomatic *contretemps* – such as Wilson (correctly) not sending British troops into Vietnam in the 1960s, or Foot (incorrectly) kicking up a major fuss about giving a state visit to Ronald Reagan in the 1980s – cloud this long-term story. In short, whilst we deal with some moderates in what follows, they are not the only travellers we will encounter.

Secondly, the above caveats aside, we should consider that the tale goes back further than sometimes acknowledged. Advances in the speed and comfort of long-haul travel certainly made it easier to hop on an airplane in the 1990s than taking a boat (or boat-plane) had been in the 1930s, but the point was that there *were* such earlier progressive pioneers. If nothing else, arriving on a steamship to New York was certainly more glamorous than cramming into the economy aisles of a flight to Dulles. As such, those seeking the renewal of Labour from all sides of the party's spectrum have sought to learn from America, and for a far longer period than sometimes acknowledged within institutional folklore. We shouldn't go overboard – the wider goal for the British left was always to win power itself, and degrees of interest in America fluctuated to the extent it could help deliver that. But nor were Britain and America just 'two countries divided by a common language' – at least when it came to politics.

To frame its argument, this chapter considers three such cases: John Strachey's relationship to Roosevelt's New Deal, Mary Agnes Hamilton and

her changing belief in the need for military interventionism and Roy Jenkins (and other moderates) from the 1950s to the Kennedy era. In the first two cases, their American travels have either been ignored by the standard accounts of Labour history and transatlanticism – including Henry Pelling – or significantly downplayed.⁶ The latter postwar story has been given more airing, not least lately by Ilnyun Kim, but even there, there is more to say. Certainly, such visits were impressionistic, and America was but one influence acting on some complex politicians. But, as we will see, it was clearly a significant one – providing rhetorical inspiration and practical ideas in equal measure.⁷ If nothing else, the staggering success of the Democrats – winning seven of nine presidential elections from 1932 to 1964 – meant there was a broad range of experience from which to draw.

John Strachey and a renewed faith in democratic governance

In a crowded market, few politicians had a stranger 1930s than John Strachey. Having first been elected to parliament in 1929, Strachey left the Labour Party alongside Oswald Mosley to form the New Party in 1931 and lost his seat in the National Government landslide that autumn. Though he and Mosley shared the idea that Keynesian economics could arrest the economic slump, the latter was falling in love with the totalitarian regime of Italian strong-man Benito Mussolini. This led Strachey to break with Mosley, later denouncing him as an example of *The Menace of Fascism*.⁸ As Mosley went right, Strachey went further left – applying for Communist Party membership in 1932 (though rejected by the CPGB on the grounds that he was ideologically unreliable) and helping Victor Gollancz form the *Left Book Club* in 1936. He would eventually find his way back to Labour, winning Dundee in 1945, and later briefly served as secretary of state for war.

⁶ Henry Pelling's classic *America and the British Left* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956) mentions Strachey's trips in passing, but neither of the other two.

⁷ See e.g. Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain! A New History of the Labour Party* (London: Bodley Head, 2010) where we learn the (admittedly excellent) fact that Strachey had chocolate cake and creme de menthe for breakfast when at Oxford, but not that he regularly visited the States in later life. Roosevelt and the New Deal do not figure at all. Likewise, Pugh, and Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961) does not mention Mary Agnes Hamilton at all. Jenkins' American jaunts have fared better, not least in Ilnyun Kim, 'The Party of Reform in the Doldrums: The Convergence of Anglo-American Political Progressivism', *Modern Intellectual History* 1–24 (2020).

⁸ John Strachey, *The Menace of Fascism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933).

It is, however, Strachey's keen observation of American politics in the 1930s that interests us. His contemporary contacts give something of a flavour: Earl Browder, the general secretary of the American Communist Party, was one regular correspondent. Another was the English film star Charlie Chaplin, whose left-leaning sympathies eventually led to his exile from America in 1952, but who in the mid-1930s, shared such an affinity with Strachey that the pair worked on a script together for a movie about Napoleon. In the end, Chaplin made the capitalism critiquing *Modern Times* instead, which Strachey was 'quite sure ... will be the biggest thing you've done'.⁹ In short, Strachey, despite his failure to join the communist party itself, was clearly a figure of the far left – associating with radical leftists and Marxists alike.

To further such credentials, he visited the States several times. As well as staying with Chaplin in Los Angeles, Strachey's 1934–35 US trip was marked by major political controversy. Having sailed to New York, he was subject to the usual questions by US immigration services. However, his answer of 'no' when asked if he was 'a person who believes in or advocates the overthrow ... of the government' landed him in hot water – and temporary arrest – as his US speeches veered in an increasingly anti-capitalist direction. Immigration officials thus picked up on Strachey's rhetorical flourish that he was 'a Communist drummer selling Marxism instead of pills',¹⁰ though many in the American press recognized that in reality he was no 'agitator', and mostly addressed 'middle and upper class audiences interested in the opinions of an Eton and Oxford educated "radical"'.¹¹ Strachey was something of a prototypical troll and criticized, as the *Springfield Leader and Press* noted, 'fascism and the capitalist economists and ... the New Deal' in turn.¹² He would eventually pay a \$500 bond, get out of his temporary arrest, and leave the country. 'Everyone treated me swell', he told reporters before boarding his Cunard liner bound for Southampton. 'And I will soon be back.'

Whilst this was true, his next visit, in October 1938, went more or less the same way. Detained at Ellis Island on the now very familiar accusation that he was a communist, Strachey set about correcting the proofs of his next book to pass the time. All this was good publicity, as Strachey riffed on the authorities' supposed evidence: 'If [having] an article in the *Daily Worker* makes me a communist,

⁹ See Richard Carr, *Charlie Chaplin: A Political Biography from Victorian Britain to Modern America* (London: Routledge, 2017) for more.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, 17 March 1935.

¹¹ *The Baltimore Sun*, 14 March 1935.

¹² *Springfield Leader and Press*, 13 March 1935.

doesn't one in the *Spectator* make me a Tory?'¹³ But the furore also ensured that his most recent text, *What Are We To Do?*, would be widely reviewed in the American media.¹⁴ As such, for this supposed revolutionary (and indeed his publishers), controversy created cash.

The reality was arguably more interesting. In its review, Virginia's *The Times Dispatch* was amongst many to note that Strachey's views were shifting. Whereas Strachey argued that Roosevelt's first term had been 'devoted to saving capitalism and big business', his second offered far more hope for the American worker: 'We have had the Wagner Act applied, farm legislation in favor of tenants, and finally wages and hours regulation.'¹⁵ Many agreed. The future cabinet minister Richard Crossman, then an Oxford don, wrote to Strachey to tell him that, 'Having finished *What Are We to Do?* this morning, I find it difficult to see where a right-winger and a communist differ, if they are both under 40 and realize the fact of declining capitalism. The general tone and policy of your book seems to be completely correct.' As his biographer Hugh Thomas thus observed, 'It seems obvious that in 1938 Strachey was beginning quietly but explicitly to move away from Communist ideology.' In this move, 'Keynes and his followers, Roosevelt, [and] patriotism ... were interconnected'.¹⁶

Though the ignominy of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact would prove to be the death knell of his communism, Roosevelt and the New Deal were Strachey's lifeboat back to respectability. FDR's attempts to redistribute purchasing power, to Strachey, were worth 'supporting to the uttermost'.¹⁷ Surveying the stranglehold big business had had for so long on the American worker, Strachey increasingly felt by 1938 and 1939 that there was no point in making perfect the enemy of the good. Roosevelt was a reformer, on the right side of the argument, and so one should support him wholeheartedly. Though Strachey wanted the president to go further, it had become increasingly clear that, 'What the reactionaries cannot stand about Mr Roosevelt is ... that for the first time for many years, they have encountered serious opposition to their own dictatorship!'¹⁸ Economist and Labour leftwinger Harold Laski, whose own belief in Roosevelt had seen him encourage Strachey to temper any earlier barbs towards the president, watched on approvingly.¹⁹

¹³ *The Gazette* (Montreal), 12 October 1938.

¹⁴ John Strachey, *What Are We to Do?* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938).

¹⁵ *The Times Dispatch*, 9 October 1938.

¹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *John Strachey* (New Ypniugi, New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 175–6.

¹⁷ John Strachey, *Hope in America* (New York: Modern AgeNew, 1938), 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹ On Laski, see Pelling, *America and the British Left*, 143–5.

In 1940, Strachey's *Programme for Progress* went a stage further. Selected as the Left Book Club choice for January that year, Strachey argued that the real goal for the masses should be out and out socialism, but, pending the electoral success of this, there needed to be a programme that ameliorated the excesses of capitalism. And here, again, he turned to FDR. 'The vital lesson to be derived from the rich experience gained by the progressive forces during the two Roosevelt administrations is, then, the familiar political precept that boldness always pays.' In short, 'The New Deal did the right things, but not enough.'²⁰ It was thus the job of the American left to 'supersede [the New Deal] with another progressive programme, cast in the same general mould, but built upon incomparably more secure political and financial foundations.'²¹ *A Programme for Progress* urged 'the extension of public enterprise, low interest rates on loan capital, increased social services, including monetary allowances to individuals, and redistributory taxation; [and] there would also be a state controlled banking system and strict public control over foreign exchanges.'²²

As Hugh Thomas noted, whilst Strachey's earlier bestseller *The Coming Struggle for Power* had made some people communists, *A Programme for Progress* made them Keynesians.²³ Anthony Crosland, writing years later, found it all 'incomparably more modest' than the short-term economic programme put forward by Labour in 1937. The New Deal was 'the rich store of experience' from which Strachey was drawing, and to some degree this put him on the centre or right of British progressive opinion at the time.²⁴ This was quite the shift. As Strachey later told Hugh Gaitskell, 'I became a communist supporter in 1931, because I saw no way through the dilemma that the moment a democratic socialist policy began to be implemented, the economy got into crisis ... and so democratic socialist governments were bound to [be] impotent.' However, 'Keynes and your own group – Douglas [Jay], Evan Durbin and yourself, and the experience of the New Deal, had converted me by 1940 to the view ... that a way through did exist.'²⁵ Here, then, the very atypical Strachey followed the path of others. As Theodore Rosenof later noted, 'Whilst radicals on both sides of the Atlantic tended initially to dismiss the New Deal as a mere holding operation for capitalism ... by the later 1930s the tendency increasingly was to see the

²⁰ John Strachey, *A Programme for Progress* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), 254.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²² Thomas, *John Strachey*, 187.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

transition in long-range terms and to view New Deal reforms as useful both in themselves and as transitional devices.²⁶ A progressive Democrat in the White House might not always lead to Valhalla, but it was a damn sight better than the available alternatives.

Mary Agnes Hamilton and the flight from pacifism

It was not just attitudes to the economy that could shift upon contact with America. Mary Agnes Hamilton had entered parliament at the same 1929 election as Strachey. Unlike the future minister however, she would only serve a single term – being one of many Labour MPs unseated in 1931 and never returning to Westminster. A former suffragist and arch pacifist, she had helped draft the constitution for the anti-war Union of Democratic Control (UDC) in 1914. During the Great War, she had felt that, ‘War was for the entire world so frightful a disaster that nothing could justify it: a “just war” is a contradiction in terms.’²⁷ An accomplished novelist, much of this went on to shape her literary work. Though one American reviewer found her 1916 *Dead Yesterday* slightly plodding, they did note that, ‘A feature of its chapters is the boldness with which England’s policy and her substantial right to enter the war are questioned.’²⁸ Later, her 1930 *Three Against Fate* ably documented what another dubbed ‘the suffering and loss and degradation that follow as a result of war.’²⁹

Hamilton visited the United States every couple of years from the 1920s onwards. Some of this was to sell her novels, make decent fees on the lecture circuit and establish political connections. But it also served as a means to stress test her own opinions on future diplomacy. Through the 1930s she began to shed her pacifism – coming out in favour of sanctions backed by force against Italy, after Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. As Hitler’s armies marched through Europe, she became, in the words of Hugh Dalton, ‘quite anti-German as opposed to her attitude in World War One.’³⁰

Indeed, during a boat trip across the Atlantic in early 1938, Hamilton began to further review her pacifist views. As she later noted, ‘I sank with shame as I

²⁶ Theodore Rosenof, ‘The American Democratic Left Looks at the British Labour Government, 1945–1951’, *The Historian* 38, no. 1 (1975): 98–9.

²⁷ Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), 67–8.

²⁸ *Evening Capital News*, 2 December 1916.

²⁹ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 29 January 1930.

³⁰ Via Janet Grenier’s ODNB entry for Hamilton at <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-39455> (accessed 13 September 2021).

reviewed mentally the policy of British governments since 1931 and their refusal to see what we did not want to see – the meaning of Hitler and Hitlerism.³¹ The country she was about to enter, however, was scarcely more pro-war. 'In 1938, opinion in America was perplexing,' she recorded.³² Indeed, with pro-appeasement voices like ambassador to London Joseph Kennedy feeding back the idea that the British couldn't beat the Nazis, and various of *Hitler's American Friends* on Capitol Hill lapping up this message, nine in ten US citizens wanted nothing to do with any European war – even after the Nazi invasion of Poland.³³ The 'America First' Committee – a phrase Donald Trump would later come to repopularize – numbered 800,000 supporters at its height, including film stars like Lillian Gish. Isolationism was in – as other British speakers in the US during this era, such as Conservative MP Alfred Duff Cooper, would see for themselves.³⁴ As such, FDR was largely hamstrung by a Congress where four Neutrality Acts ever decreased his room for diplomatic manoeuvre.

Despite her own long-held anti-war views, Hamilton knew she had to make a stand. In doing so, she mirrored the shift Labour had made in moving from the leadership of the pacifist George Lansbury to the more muscular form offered by (Major) Clement Attlee. In January 1938, at a debate in Pittsburgh, Hamilton therefore told her audience that, 'The Rome-Berlin Axis is a threat to the people of Europe and the world.' Admitting that the British Empire had also been spread through force in decades past, she told the three-hundred-strong crowd that it was now solely 'interested in the preservation of democracy'.³⁵ 'If you have a children's party and one little boy insists on making faces and succeeds,' she noted, 'He can go on provoking the rest of the children until they have to hit him back. That is the way with Germany and Italy.'³⁶ If some of America's 'best minds' were 'temporarily blinded' to the threat, it was all the more necessary to make her case.³⁷

This bristled not only with some of those in the audience, but also with her personal contacts. Referencing her friend Mary Blankenhorn, an American with whom she shared a love of Independent Labour Party [ILP] pacifist James

³¹ Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends*, 236.

³² *Ibid.*, 240.

³³ Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States* (London: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018).

³⁴ See Bradley W. Hart and Richard Carr, 'Promoting Britain's Fight: Duff Cooper's 1939–40 Lecture Tour and American Public Opinion During the "Phoney War"', *Historical Research* (in press, 2021).

³⁵ *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 27 January 1938.

³⁶ *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph*, 26 January 1938.

³⁷ Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends*, 242

Maxton, she noted, 'Mary and I have constantly disagreed, for instance her pacifism remaining absolute, pretty much until [the attack on] Pearl Harbor.'³⁸ Hamilton, however, knew the threat of figures like Senator Gerald Nye and the aviator Charles Lindbergh: seductive voices preying on a society where so many didn't want to risk future soldiers' lives, even against an enemy as repugnant as Adolf Hitler. During the war, Hamilton joined the British civil service, and subsequently became head of the US section of the Ministry of Information. Much of her work there, sometimes tacitly, sometimes more explicitly, was to try and convince the American public of the need to join the conflict.

As Stephen Wertheim points out, from its entry into the Second World War onwards, America would play a bigger role in global affairs than the Lindberghs and Nyes (or even George Washington) had intended.³⁹ In 1947, Hamilton would go on to give a speech that in many ways lauded this shift. Though she acknowledged that her old ideology of pacifism 'is strong [in America]: it has some queer bedfellows. But, unmistakably, [a] change has taken place ... the realization that America is a world power and carries world responsibilities has come to stay. The responsibilities are terrifying ... [but] they are inescapable.' For Hamilton, Pearl Harbor had 'ended an epoch ... and now the possession of the atomic bomb carried the demonstration a stage further.'⁴⁰ This meant engagement with global institutions like the new United Nations, a firm line with dictators, and, for Foreign Secretary and 'Labour's Churchill' Ernest Bevin, leading the charge for the creation of NATO.⁴¹ For the vast majority of Labour voices, including Hamilton, there was now no doubt: better Truman than Stalin. Exposure to the US political scene had only deepened such convictions.

Roy Jenkins and the moderates

The postwar era brought not only a new set of Anglo-American challenges, but, technologically, a much easier means of reaching the US: commercial air travel. As such, Hugh Gaitskell recorded in his diary in October 1950, 'I think it must be an event in anybody's life when he first crosses the Atlantic. I had been

³⁸ Ibid., 226

³⁹ Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy* (Boston, MA: Belknap Press, 2020), passim.

⁴⁰ Mary Agnes Hamilton, 'The Place of the United States in World Affairs', Fifth Montagu Burton, on International Relations (University of Nottingham: Nottingham, 1947), 8. Many thanks to the Churchill Archives Centre for providing a copy.

⁴¹ Andrew Adonis, *Ernest Bevin: Labour's Churchill* (London: Biteback, 2020).

trying to do this for a good many years.' On arrival, he noted, 'First of all perhaps one notices more than anything else two things.' The first was the significant African American population – far exceeding the numbers of black British residents only two years after the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*. But 'above all [there were] the cars – endless streams on the roads even on Sunday afternoons.' Though Gaitskell's bags ended up on the wrong plane and he couldn't get used to the time difference, this first trip to the US was a success. It was there that the final confirmation came through that, as expected, he would take over from Stafford Cripps as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gaitskell promptly tucked into a celebratory whiskey and went out dancing.⁴²

Such levity had a serious side for Labour moderates. Many, including Crosland, liked the atmosphere in America, and in some ways wanted to replicate it. The US was a country where, 'Social relations are more natural and egalitarian, and less marked by deference, submissiveness, or snobbery, as one quickly discovers from the cab driver, the barman, the air hostess, and the drug store assistant.'⁴³ Its comprehensive school system naturally appealed to Crosland's own leanings in that regard, whilst its recent history – 'twenty years of New Deal and Fair Deal, of anti-business bias and "creeping socialism"', followed by 'a Republican Administration still committed to social security' – broadly mirrored the now Conservative-led, postwar consensus in Britain.⁴⁴

With all this in mind, Roy Jenkins visited America for the first time in 1953. The cost of his trip was covered by a federal government scheme intended to bring 'young leaders' to the United States. Then in his early thirties, and having been in parliament for five years, Jenkins certainly qualified – and it was a wonderful opportunity to network. He met Harry Truman (of whom he would later pen a 1986 biography), and Hubert Humphrey. But it was a trip to Harvard that would prove most useful, connecting him to Arthur Schlesinger Jr and, even more importantly, the economist J. K. Galbraith.⁴⁵ As noted by his biographer John Campbell, these 'friendship[s] enabled him henceforth to feel at home in liberal circles on both sides of the Atlantic.'⁴⁶ Like Strachey and Hamilton before him, a literary background had helped give him an entrée into the American intellectual establishment.

⁴² See Phillip M. Williams, *The Diary of Hugh Gaitskell 1945–1956* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), 201–13.

⁴³ Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 249.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223–4.

⁴⁵ Throughout, for clarity, the Schlesinger in question is the future Kennedy aide son, and not his equally distinguished father.

⁴⁶ John Campbell, *Roy Jenkins* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014), 154

However, when teeing up the later 1959 tour, with which we began this chapter, Jenkins had some logistical concerns. The first was that a pair of return plane tickets to New York cost £330, and Jenkins planned to travel with his wife, Jennifer. Given the then MP's salary of £1,750, this was a significant outlay. The trip was also long and arduous, prompting Jenkins' waspish comment to Galbraith that the pair were 'planning to subject ourselves to the rigours of economic class travel across the Atlantic'.⁴⁷ A ten-hour flight, usually with a refuelling stop in Ireland or Newfoundland, meant a long stay was necessary to justify the trip. Galbraith therefore acted, in effect, as Jenkins' commercial agent, making preliminary soundings about television and radio appearances for his time on the East Coast. He also did the potentially unseemly work of asking American universities for more money 'for someone like Jenkins'. He probed potential hosts: 'Could you possibly raise your fee a bit?'⁴⁸

Jenkins' planned talks were general, though indicated his leanings. 'British Socialism – Modern Style' formed his 11 November address at Amherst, whilst 'The Future of the Labour Party' greeted Harvard audiences the following day. The nature of his audience, even in the well-informed surroundings of New England academia, precluded much of policy deep dive. But his American listeners got much of the same material he had rehearsed in an address to the Fabian Society earlier that month. 'Don't depend on a slump saving us,' he had told the Fabians. 'First, we don't want to be a party which can do well only out of misery. Secondly, it is not very likely to happen.' Equally, if the left was just about nationalization – the desire, as he noted, to 'pop more and more industries into the bag' – it would face repeated electoral ruin.⁴⁹ Certainly not everyone agreed with this. For the Bevanite Richard Crossman, revisionists like Jenkins were getting it wrong. Rather than Labour being 'the anti-establishment party', Jenkins and his allies had in mind becoming 'an alternative team of management inside the establishment – a party not unlike the Democrats in the United States'.⁵⁰ This of course was not a compliment, and followed the broad *Tribune* view, summarized by the historian Peter Jones, that: 'The Labour government should reassert its independence and demand that the Atlantic alliance is put on an even keel.'⁵¹

⁴⁷ Jenkins to Galbraith, 14 September 1959, John K. Galbraith papers, JFK Presidential Library, Boston, Box 39.

⁴⁸ Galbraith to Neumann, 10 July 1959, Galbraith papers, Box 39.

⁴⁹ *Guardian*, 5 November 1959.

⁵⁰ Richard Crossman, *Labour in the Affluent Society* (London: The Fabian Society, 1960), 3.

⁵¹ Peter Jones, *America and the British Labour Party: The 'Special Relationship' at Work* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 96.

Internecine battles within Labour aside, one candidate who understood the broad message that there were limits to what the state could do was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Indeed, he would famously go on to urge his fellow citizens, during his inaugural address: 'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.' Backed by figures such as Schlesinger, Kennedy was always likely to take something of a mixed approach to economic management. In his 1949 book *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger had approvingly noted that Britain had, through the 1945 Labour government, 'already submitted itself to social democracy; [and] the United States will very likely advance in that direction through a series of New Deals.'⁵² In a *New York Times* column the previous year, Schlesinger had expanded his definition of 'the vital centre' to include 'all those-non-Communist Left, Center and moderate Right – who believe in political freedom and in the democratic control of economic life.'⁵³ It was this latter big tent approach that marked JFK's world view. After all, as Kennedy declared in 1962, the reality was that the most important government concerns were 'technical problems, administrative problems' that did 'not lend themselves to the great sort of passionate movements which have stirred this country so often in the past'.

Jenkins saw much of this first-hand. During the tightly contested election against Richard Nixon, Jenkins had stayed with the Galbraiths in Vermont, and spent a day following JFK when he campaigned in New York. He further gave his views on the American scene through an October talk to Dartmouth students entitled 'A Britisher Views the American Election.'⁵⁴ This was certainly a turbulent time in US affairs – but it was no calm period on the British left either. At the Labour Party conference in Scarborough, motions calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament were passed against the will of (the now leader) Hugh Gaitskell, who famously declared he would 'fight and fight and fight again to save the party we love'. A leadership challenge from Harold Wilson soon emerged, with two-thirds of the party (including Jenkins) staying loyal to the incumbent. On 5 November 1960, three days before their own polling day, Americans read that, 'The re-election of Mr Gaitskell is reassuring – that the men and women who would constitute a Labo[u]r government have a large majority inside the party for common sense policies.' In short, as the *Pittsburgh Press* had it, 'Wiser heads seem to have prevailed.'⁵⁵

⁵² Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 153–4.

⁵³ *The New York Times*, 4 April 1948.

⁵⁴ *The Vermont Journal*, 6 October 1960.

⁵⁵ *The Pittsburgh Press*, 5 November 1960.

With JFK in the White House, there was the chance to make greater links with Labour's 'wiser heads' – including a visit to D.C. from Gaitskell in 1962. Early the next year Jenkins then made his own play – being sold to the president by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as 'the leader of the pro-Common Market wing of the Labour Party' – as well as a 'historian of some ability' who was 'intelligent and agreeable'. Perhaps with an eye to Kennedy's penchant for gossip, as well as his own hardly perfect marriage, Jenkins was also described as a 'good friend of [Conservative politician] Ian and Caroline Gilmour (reputedly a particular friend of Caroline's)'. Whatever the reason, it got Roy in the room. On 30 January 1963, Jenkins had a forty-minute, off-the-record conversation with JFK. Jenkins noted that Kennedy asked 'a series of rapid-fire questions about all sorts of subjects – economic growth, Europe and de Gaulle, the Labour Party'. His host 'interrupted the answers, [Kennedy] gave his own views, he followed up a weak or unconvincing reply by forcing one hard against the ropes'.⁵⁶

There was much to discuss. Hugh Gaitskell had died earlier that month (in tribute, Kennedy had the highest regard for his 'integrity, intelligence, and humanity') and the contest to replace him was well underway.⁵⁷ Wilson, Jim Callaghan and George Brown were all campaigning for the top job and, with a general election in sight, Washington was interested in the potential next prime minister. Here again Schlesinger's comments tell us much. On 8 February 1963, the day after Callaghan had been eliminated from the contest, and a few days before Wilson won the second round by forty-one MPs, Kennedy's advisor prepared some notes for the president. 'Our press', Schlesinger advised, 'will probably describe [Wilson's impending win] as a victory for the anti-American and extreme leftist wing of the party.' Given the *San Francisco Examiner* led its story with a picture of Wilson captioned, 'He'd withdraw from Polaris missile pact', this seems like a fair assessment.⁵⁸ But Schlesinger argued this was a 'premature conclusion'. Instead, he noted, 'Wilson has taken an anti-American line because he is the sort of man for whom politics is a game of musical chairs, and Gaitskell was already sitting in the pro-America chair.' It was just as likely therefore that Wilson would pivot back, and 'out-Gaitskell Gaitskell' in taking a conciliatory line towards the US.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Campbell, *Roy Jenkins*, 233.

⁵⁷ Kennedy note on Gaitskell death, via www.jfklibrary.org, document ref: JFKNSF-171-002.

⁵⁸ *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 February 1963.

⁵⁹ Schlesinger note, via www.jfklibrary.org (accessed 13 September 2021), 8 February 1963, ref: JFKPOF-065a-012.

In any event, once Lee Harvey Oswald took aim from the Texas School Book Depository, there would be no Wilson–Kennedy Special Relationship. In the House of Commons, Labour's shadow foreign secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, paid tribute to the fallen leader. Referring to a meeting he had had with the president in May, Gordon Walker remembered 'one of the most persuasive men that I have ever encountered'. His most important legacy was civil rights:

Kennedy set himself to complete the task that had been begun by Abraham Lincoln, of reconciling the races in America. He showed the same clear-sighted courage. He showed the same proud disregard for anxious political calculations. Cut off as he has been in mid-career, President Kennedy's assassination may shock into shamed silence the bitter men who sought to frustrate his race policies.

Such landmark actions aside, Gordon Walker recalled 'the man himself, his smile, his alert and probing mind, his electric energy, his assurance and, perhaps above all, his gaiety'.⁶⁰ British Labour, including Roy Jenkins who could barely sleep the night after the events in Dallas, was utterly distraught.⁶¹ After 1964, they would seek to deliver on some of the same civil rights agenda themselves – with Jenkins at the forefront of this charge.

Conclusion

From the early 1930s to the early 1960s, then, the relationship between the US Democrats and the British Labour Party was fundamentally recalibrated. In early 1932 it was accurate enough for Mary Agnes Hamilton to declare that 'the Labo[u]r Party in England ... is comparable to the American Socialist Party, and stands for many of the same principles'.⁶² It was not, in other words, necessarily a mirror of the Democrats. But as the global economic crisis brought FDR into interventionism and, then, the gradual remaking of the Democratic coalition steered that party away from the 'solid south' and its racialized politics, it became more and more possible to see the connections between Labour and its potential American allies. The political cover for the 1945 government to go 'bold', the ability for Labour to move away from an electorally unpopular and often undesirable elevation of blanket pacifism, and the vision of what the left could

⁶⁰ House of Commons Debates, 25 November 1963, vol. 685, col. 38.

⁶¹ See Jenkins' *Observer* obituary, 24 November 1963.

⁶² *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), 6 March 1932.

be about when the big economic questions seemed to have been solved, all owed something to interactions with US Democrats.

And such mirroring would largely continue. Dealing with the maelstrom of the 1970s, both Labour and Democratic administrations tried to use the tools of the state, including raising taxes, but could not arrest the decline of two advanced western democracies. They were then succeeded in office by tax-cutting leaders of the New Right, who allied economic populism to an emphasis on family values. Finally, progressives from Robert Reich to Gordon Brown worked out that the way to defeat Reaganomics and Thatcherism was to encourage private sector growth to create tax receipts for socially progressive ends, and to be seen to back an agenda of 'opportunity, responsibility, and community', rather than seem in hock to big government. In 1996 Bill Clinton (tactically) declared the era of the latter to be over. However, like Tony Blair, he also dramatically increased the role of the state in the tax credit system, delivered transformational new resources for education, and made huge strides in terms of the minimum wage. Progressives have much to learn from one another, and this essay has attempted to sketch out some important previous ideological junctures.

Given this, what lessons are there for today's transatlanticists? Firstly, as electorates begin to tire of political amateurism – and certainly politicians claiming they have 'had enough of experts' – cultivating some intellectual seriousness seems a reasonable start. Strachey, Hamilton and Jenkins all gained access to the American political scene as authors on topics quite distinct from the machinations of Capitol Hill. Touring the States for weeks is no longer an option in an age where the MP-constituency link has rightly assumed greater prominence, but our new world of daily videoconferencing opens up avenues for connections with like-minded forces in the US that, even in the last decade, seemed improbable. And, although writing a serious book is of course easier said than done, several current Labour MPs have already done a better job than our prime minister's efforts.⁶³

Secondly, for the left of the Labour Party, Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez can no longer be the only idols in town. John Strachey said things in the 1930s that even Jeremy Corbyn may have balked at, but he still had the good sense to consider the response to the depression by Franklin Delano Roosevelt as, on the whole, positive – and to learn accordingly. Good politicians cast their nets far and wide. In the 1980s, for instance, Neil Kinnock

⁶³ See e.g. Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: The MPs who Changed Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019); Nick Thomas-Symonds, *Nye: The Political Life of Aneurin Bevan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); and Chris Bryant, *The Glamour Boys* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

was in touch with everyone from Jesse Jackson to Gary Hart. Later, Tony Blair discussed his 'stakeholder economy' with Dick Gephardt whilst imbibing Bill Clinton's positions on law and order.⁶⁴ This raised – rather than diminished – their international reputations.

For Keir Starmer, forging links with sensible leaders in the democratic world cannot therefore come soon enough. Close allies of Labour's leader have been keen to argue that 'we're not the Democrats' – by which they mean a loose coalition of social liberals, big-city progressives and some trade unions.⁶⁵ Certainly, Labour must remain true to its own history. But such a history includes the track record of transnational cooperation, and the crafting of better policy, that has arrived when progressive forces on both sides of the Atlantic get together. Roosevelt and Kennedy showed British progressives that no truck should be with totalitarians. Clinton provided a blueprint for government that helped orient an agenda for three New Labour terms in office. And Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have shown that a plain spoken, direct message of hope can trump the incompetence of a populist. There are worse fates than becoming 'a party not unlike the Democrats'.

⁶⁴ Carr, *March of the Moderates*, 193.

⁶⁵ *New Statesman*, 9 September 2020.

