MAKING THE WEATHER: THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF LABOUR LEADERS

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Abstract

This paper examines the ideological movement within the conference speeches of Tony Blair and Harold Wilson, filling a gap which exists within political research on addresses to conference. Analysing over 70,000 words of speech transcript using a content analysis framework, it uncovers surprising similarities in the presentation of conference speeches between the periods examined. Addressing these similarities, it contextualises the limited influence of conference against the opposing power of the leadership, and demonstrates the continued importance of rhetoric and presentation in politics. It argues that the conference speech has been persistently used to project intentions to the public, and that the reaction of conference has been effectively controlled by a powerful leadership. It argues that political leaders can ‘make the weather’; presenting their agenda effectively to satisfy both conference and the voter.

Introduction: Party Communication

Rhetoric is the central tool in the politics of persuasion. It offers insight into the convictions of the speaker, and bridges the gap between public understanding and political intention.

Speeches are specifically designed for outward projection: as Schnaffer notes, speeches are “in the majority of cases…meant for the wider public” (Schnaffer, 1996: 201). Finlayson & Martin write that by this virtue, speeches are “a purely ‘political moment’: a point of connection between political institutions, citizens and politicians” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:452). They remain an important form of communication between politicians and people.

Party rhetoric is formalised on several occasions in the political calendar; including the party leader’s address to the annual conference. The ideological direction of a party will certainly have implications for the content of the conference speech, yet it is the way in which such
ideology is presented that is interesting; as Finlayson and Martin explain, how the leader “thinks propositions can and should be forwarded” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:451). Put simply, the subtlety of language sets political rhetoric apart, revealing the nature of the party as the leader wishes to present it.

It has been noted that there is no “clear picture of the evolution of the British conference speech” in political studies so far (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:455). However, a study of the conference speech may offer a detailed record of ideological intention. The gap between the study of politics and linguistics remains large, and to understand language as a part of political research, a rigorous analysis process must be followed, which also allows for the subtleties of rhetoric to be communicated.

This paper will apply a content analysis framework to a set number of conference speeches. It will examine the ideological progression of the speeches, and compare this to historical accounts of party behaviour to gain contextual perspective. Analysis will allow for an examination of the key arguments surrounding the presentation of conference speeches, and determine how the results can contribute to a discussion of the Labour Party and how it communicates. It will contextualise the authority of conference against the opposing power of the parliamentary leadership. Although public opinion is considered, analysis focuses on the internal relationship between the leadership and its party, and the communication between them.

Examining conference speeches from the first terms of Labour Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Harold Wilson will also allow for a comparative analysis of different periods in the party’s history. This work does not aim to provide a chronological or contextual comparison of Tony Blair and Harold Wilson. Instead, these two leaders are the subjects in a quantitative analysis of rhetoric, examined by mapping the ideological positioning of over 70,000 words of conference speech transcript. Comparative analysis will offer broader explanation on the development of the conference speech, and provides opportunity for an examination of the influence of conference.

**The Labour Party Conference**
Annual party conferences remain key events in the British political calendar. Traditionally, the Labour Party Conference is regarded as a decision-making forum; as Minkin writes “in principle the Party’s policy was determined at an annual conference of delegates representing the affiliated organisations” (Minkin, 1980:3). However, Minkin adds that the conference is more just a forum for debate; it embodies the egalitarian and participatory ideals enshrined by the party (Minkin, 1981:xiii).

This arrangement duly reflects the traditional decision-making structure of the Labour Party, which Rose describes as “dualistic in direction: both the party in Parliament and the extra-parliamentary party claim a voice in policy-making” (Rose, 1984:58). This dualism has, as Shaw notes, created ‘two sovereignties’; the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the National Executive Committee (NEC), which is answerable to Conference (Shaw, 2004:278). The power struggle within this dualistic structure is well documented, and Meg Russell’s description of conference as ‘amongst the party’s greatest weapons’ reflects its record of influencing the leadership (Russell, 2005:11).

Party history is littered with disagreement between the two factions, particularly concerning the dominance of the parliamentary leadership. The compatibility of leadership and conference was first brought into question seriously in 1961 when Gaitskell defied conference’s defeat of the unilateral disarmament platform (Kavanagh, 1987:157). This, as Shaw notes, was the beginning of a breakdown in traditional ways of managing conference which continued into the late 1960s (Shaw, 2004:278).

This power struggle continued long into the premiership of Tony Blair, whose internal reforms further quelled the power of conference. Shaw agrees that by this point, power was in reality “centralised in the hands of parliamentary leadership” (Shaw, 2004:278). However, Russell’s assertion that Conference is an “important site of negotiation between the leadership and the party” demonstrates the leadership now manage rather than appease delegates’ interests. (Russell, 2005:11).

**The Significance of Conference Speeches**
The Leader of the Labour Party’s speech to conference; traditionally called the Parliamentary Report, is the highlight of conference proceedings. The traditional purpose of the conference speech is to lay out the political goals of the leadership in a ‘report’ format within a limited amount of time, to an audience of the party faithful.

However, there is evidence to suggest that there is much more at work, and the myriad of underlying purposes are perhaps more revealing. Indeed, Finlayson and Martin write that conference speeches are “fundamental to the ongoing affirmation and reaffirmation of party culture and identity” and “an opportunity for authority to be constructed and manifested” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:448). They also note the significance of assembled media who transmit the speech to a far larger and broader audience than party delegates. As a result, the leader must deal with “immediate relations in the hall, the relationship of the speech to wider debate and the institutionalised genre of the speech itself” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:455).

Political rhetoric is often epideictic; that is, made by a politician acting as a representative of a larger organisation (Schnaffer, 1996:203). Schnaffer argues limits what the speaker “can do and say, and how” (Schnaffer, 1996:203). Indeed, speeches are carefully vetted before their public consumption. However, the speech of a politician representing a political body may still contain evidence of the body’s ideological movement or ideas. As Finlayson and Martin note, party political speeches can offer access to “the more general ideological assemblages at work across a party” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:449). Klebanov et al agree that “political documents such as party manifestos or political speech are interpreted as expressions of the underlying ideology” (Klebanov et al, 2001:2). This demonstrates the value that conference speeches can have for political analysis, particularly when attempting to track the ideological movement of parties over time.

Political speeches are not, as Schnaffer writes, a “homogenous genre” (Schnaffer, 1996:203); they are designed for specific purpose, audience and occasion. Indeed the address of the Party leader at conference holds a symbolic role and has developed an important publicity function; not only outlining the aims of the party, but couching them within performance rhetoric that appeals to its audience. Through media attention, the potential audience is even larger: Fairclough writes that “many significant political events are now in fact media events” and
that within these events “the communicative style of leaders is now recognised as a crucial factor in political success or failure” (Fairclough, 2000:4).

These points demonstrate the value of political rhetoric. When attempting to investigate rhetorical forms, the conference speech seems to hold great potential. It occurs at a regular interval in the political calendar, in a set format. In the changing scope of leadership and political rhetoric in British politics, it is a relative constant. There is also an opportunity to compare it to another declaration of party intention; the manifesto.

Conference Speeches and Manifestos: A Common Aim?

It is common to associate the conference speech with the party manifesto document; they are often regarded as similar structures (Klebov et al., 2001:3). The conference speech aims to set out the aims of the party to conference in the same way that an election manifesto sets out ideas to the public.

There are other similarities; conference speeches and manifestos both appear at particular times; annually and before an election respectively. They follow a relatively set format and detail the party’s fundamental intentions. They are produced whether in or out of power, and both may act as indicators of party’s ideological direction. Defining the nature of the manifesto document, Minkin writes that “in theory the General Election Manifesto was a means of carrying the radical input of the extra-parliamentary Party into an election mandate” (Minkin, 1980:327). It is arguable that the conference speech acts similarly; verbally outlining the aspirations of a political party in a manner suitable for general consumption.

However, differences do exist between the two documents. Even at election time, the conference speech and manifesto do not say exactly the same thing. A manifesto may only set out policy goals in black and white: good political rhetoric may enhance it with conviction or even change the nature of the message itself. Time is also crucial to conference speech; content must be condensed to under an hour of delivery, reduced to less than thirty minutes by the time of Blair’s leadership. There are fewer limits on the content that can be included in the manifesto.
Overall, the conference speech may offer a more colourful explanation of party intention. Goals may be prioritised within the conference speech, or some omitted. The ideological positioning of the political manifesto may change over time to attract support, but in the conference speech it is the presentation of such positioning is important; how the party “thinks such propositions can and should be forwarded” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:451). A manifesto lays out the political intentions of a party, but the speech may be presented to make these intentions more appealing, more in tune with the will of the conference hall, or indeed the voter.

These differences raise interesting questions for political research. In his analysis of political speech, Norman Fairclough notes the way in which rhetoric can convey “certain values which can powerfully enhance the message” (Fairclough, 2000:4). Fairclough’s argument is that the shaping and prioritising of messages within party aims can be mapped out through language rather than through written pledges. Indeed, he writes “A successful leader’s communicative style...conveys certain values which can powerfully enhance the political message” (Fairclough, 2000:4).

The assembled audience must be taken into account in a way that is absent from manifesto writing. Heritage and Greatbatch argue that “a speech to party conference may be usefully analyzed as a series of political messages...for which the speaker seeks the attention, understanding and support of the audience” (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986:112). In order to gain that support, the nuances of rhetoric may allow a politician to make light of one area of the manifesto, or to couch an unpopular section in more favourable rhetoric. Now, even the audience of the conference speech has changed; no longer addressed simply to those in the conference hall, but to the potential audience watching through the assembled media. The leader’s speech is well covered; the public prominence of the leader and the media interest that surrounds them as a figurehead, particularly if they are also prime minister, guarantees a level of media interest. This publicity further establishes the conference speech as the main opportunity in the political calendar for parties to receive considerable media attention for their political intentions.

The extent to which manifesto intentions translate to the policy announcements made by the leader on the conference stage is unclear. This lack of clarity is partially due to a gap in
available research on political rhetoric. While there have been significant attempts to quantify the ideological positioning of election manifestos in the post-war period (Budge et al, 2001, Budge & Laver, 2001), there is not a similar analysis available for speeches. Perhaps this is because, as discussed, speeches do not follow a homogenous ‘type’ or format. For example, it would be difficult to draw conclusions from an analysis of speeches made by different members of a party in different settings, in reaction to separate events. As a result, as Finlayson and Martin point out, there is no real “clear picture of the evolution of the British conference speech” in political studies so far (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:455).

However, there is existing research on the quantification of ideological positioning in manifestos. If conference speeches and manifestos do hold similarities, as it has been argued here, then this research may hold potency for new conference speech analysis. One body which provides a particularly clear overview of this kind of work is the Manifesto Research Group (MRG).

**The Manifesto Research Group**

The MRG are a group of political scientists who have developed a content analysis framework which can be applied to the text of party manifestos, in order to estimate policy positions. They have mapped the policy preferences of party manifestos from fifty four nations in their Comparative Manifesto Project, including an analysis of British party manifestos for the three main British parties; and part-analysis of others, since 1945 (Budge et al, 2001:3-5).

It is possible to estimate the ideological ‘position’ of these manifestos by taking the data from the MRG content analysis framework and applying it to Laver and Budge’s ideological scale of left wing and right wing policy preferences. This scale produces a Left/Right ‘score’ for each manifesto (Laver & Budge 1992:5) (Appendix II). The graph overleaf details the Left/Right scores of each Labour party manifesto since 1945, based on MRG’s findings.

**Figure 1.1**
Amongst the information that can be extrapolated from this graph is a revealing comparative point on Wilson and Blair. The graph indicates that Harold Wilson’s Labour Party Manifesto of 1963 was the most ‘right wing’ manifesto presented by a prospective first term Labour government up to that point (Budge & Laver, 2001). The manifesto of 1997, presented by Tony Blair, again shortly before Labour took power in 1997, was the next to claim this record (Budge & Laver, 2001).

For an analysis of conference speeches, it may be advantageous to make use of the MRG framework, which clearly maps the progression of manifesto documents. The similarities between speech and manifesto documents mean that this framework could lend well to speech analysis, and the results could then be compared to the manifesto data above.

However, it is important to analyse speech appropriately. When considering rhetoric as opposed to written documents, it is the way in which ideological positioning is presented that is important. Again, as Finlayson and Martin explain, how the party “thinks propositions can and should be forwarded” shapes the speech (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:451). It is this
discrepancy that will be interesting. The complexities of speech analysis will now be assessed, before any framework application.

**Analysing Speech as part of Political Research**

Speeches retain an important political function, and in order to investigate them usefully, the obstacles posed to their examination must be considered. Riffe et al have noted difficulties in the analysis of rhetoric because of its transience (Riffe et al, 2005:65). Many speeches; particularly in some of the time periods covered by this paper, are not adequately recorded. However, the conference speech exists as an example of what Riffe et al describe as “a preserved form of verbal communication” (Riffe et al, 2005:65) making it a positive source of comparative analysis.

The gap between linguistic and political research remains large. As Van Dijk notes, “despite some studies on political language, discourse and conversation analysis has...had little to offer to political science” Van Dijk, 1994 in Schnaffer, 1996:200). Finlayson and Martin note that note that political rhetoric offers a ‘rich seam’ of information for those who wish to “interpret and explain the interplay of traditions, innovation and ideology...in British politics” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:446), but that the limitation of linking the two disciplines is hindered by the lack of “a systematic approach from the perspective of political studies that seeks to relate...political speech to political activity...more broadly” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:446).

Indeed, a straightforward word-based analysis may not appreciate the subtleties of political rhetoric. Some words may be interpreted too plaintively and without the necessary contextual relevance. For example the mention of Royal Mail may refer to any number of political ideas: a recent debate over privatisation, or unemployment. Political ideas may also be couched in themes of a different nature in order to reduce their impact on the audience. For example, in Tony Blair’s conference speech in 2000, he pledged that the party would improve schools and hospitals, but underlying these pledges was his methodology for these changes; namely greater private sector funding and independence for some hospital trusts (Blair, 2000).
It is clear that this type of research requires a sturdy method of analysis, which also remains sympathetic to the idiosyncrasies of speech and allows for the contextual knowledge of the researcher. Here, Klebanov et al suggest lexical analysis as a “promising technique to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative analyses of political texts” (Klebanov, 2001:1), which would retain this sympathy. Although not designed for speeches, one such lexical study is the MRG’s manifesto framework.

**Content Analysis of Rhetoric: A Critique of MRG**

The MRG coding framework is a type of content analysis, used to study manifesto texts. Content analysis involves the breaking down of text into meaningful units; words, phrases or otherwise, and examining each unit. When performing content analysis, Klebanov et al note that the researcher should conceptualise text as “unstructured data to be subsequently transformed into structured data...that can be further analysed by various statistical methods” (Klebanov et al, 2001:2).

Compared to other methods, the framework is found to be useful. Indeed, when compared to the other methods of content analysis; expert surveying and computer tallying, Volkens found its results to be “empirically plausible and theoretically consistent” (Volkens, 2007:110). Budge et al add that the MRG framework offers ‘clear, visual presentation’ (Budge et al, 2001:62). Other methods do not provide such a comprehensible framework that links all results in meaningful synpaper.

Some political scientists have found value in the use of computer tallying although this is based on the frequency of words related to a certain category in a statistical test and can only produce a quantitative analysis (Lowe, 2002:1). For example, the word ‘school’ would be automatically placed in a category related to education, regardless of context. The MRG framework allows for a higher level of personal interpretation and therefore qualitative analysis. As Volkens says, it allows for “contextual knowledge on policies…beyond the respective text to decipher its meaning” (Volkens, 2007:117). Therefore, the coder may interpret a sentence depending on its true intention. Although this increases the margin for human error, it allows for contextual knowledge and reason, giving the MRG framework a depth of contextual interpretation missing from a word-based content analysis. Schnaffer
agrees that speech analysis should “relate linguistic structures to larger contexts of communicative settings and political functions” (Schnaffer, 1996:204).

This evidence suggests that the MRG framework is a promising way of examining political rhetoric. Budge et al agree that “the method can be applied to a wide range of different materials and research questions” (Budge et al, 2001: 26). Indeed, Fairclough’s work on the speeches of Tony Blair holds methodical similarities with the MRG framework, and demonstrated the value of language in political analysis (Fairclough, 2000:3).

What is meant by Left and Right?

The MRG presents an ‘ideological’ framework of categories (Appendix I). Some of these are then determined as ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ wing by Laver and Budge’s independent scale (Laver &Budge 1992:5) (Appendix II). The ideological score calculated is put onto a scale of ‘Right’ to ‘Left’, from +100 to -100, with +100 being the ‘Right’ wing end of the scale.

This process may be regarded as prescriptive; the scale limits the researcher’s ideological interpretation of particular structures. However, the opportunity for independent analysis offered by the coding framework is far greater than any of the other methods discussed. The categories deemed to be Left and Right wing, including ‘positive welfare state expansion’ and ‘conservation of the national way of life’ respectively, are also considered to be relatively sound. Moreover, the ideological scale is in keeping with the MRG’s manifesto data mapping. This provides consistency between the results, and therefore allows for an accurate comparison.

The Use of 3D Scaling

Some authors have discussed the efficacy of the three dimensional (3D) scale in their work (Laver et al, 2003:95; MacLean, 2004:1). It has been argued that in an era of complex political decisions and multi-faceted debate, contemporary political thought can not be mapped out on a two dimensional ‘Left to Right’ scale similar to that used by MRG (MacLean, 2004:1).
However, because qualitative content analysis has not been applied to rhetoric before, it was considered best to remain within the parameters of the MRG’s specified coding framework and ideological analysis. The coding framework offers an examination of contemporary political ideas sufficient for this analysis. Including new 3D elements to this research would have involved the random adoption of new criteria, complicating the comparison of ideological movement across different time periods. This would have made it impractical to compare conference speech results with the MRG’s own manifesto mapping.

**Data Selection: Selecting Comparable Leaders**

With ideas in place about the best way to approach the research, it is important to consider the most useful units for analysis. For this study, the conference speeches of two leaders will be compared. Two subjects are analysed to ensure that the field of study is not too narrow. This research is not solely a contextual comparison of their leaderships, but to limit the number of uncontrolled variables present it is important to select leaders who are reasonably ‘comparable’.

It is practical to examine two leaders of the same party for the benefit of close comparison. There are several suggestions within relevant literature that a comparison of Labour Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Harold Wilson could prove fruitful (Dyson, 2005:25; Honeyman, 2008:1). Both Blair and Wilson led their party to victory after similar periods of Conservative dominance. Other factors; including personality, rhetorical style, each man’s relationship with conference and their electoral fortunes may also be usefully compared. These factors will be discussed in turn, with reference to the potential subjects.

**Personal Attributes**

When considering political outcomes, academics have placed most emphasis upon the environment in which a leader operates (King, 2002:93). Still, there may be room for personal influence. In her study on leadership Blondel notes that a charismatic leader is endowed with the ability to attract support, and has “potential immensity” as the source of ideas for collective action (Blondel, 1987:3). This demonstrates the importance that personal
attributes can have on political outcomes. Although not the only factor of analysis, it is arguable that the personal attributes of leaders have some effect on how the party is run, and how this is presented through rhetoric.

The positive effect of Tony Blair’s personal attributes is well documented. Coming to power shortly after the sudden death of John Smith, Lees-Marshment notes that for the Labour party of 1994, Blair was the perfect, centralised candidate who was “media friendly and centre left, with few links to the traditional Labour movement” (Lees-Marshment, 2003:10).

Blair took up what Panebianco notes as a crucial leadership role: establishing the importance of election victory amongst supporters, in order to encourage the idea that electoral success is paramount rather than focusing on the needs of the supporter (Panebianco, 1988:53). Essentially, Blair detracted focus from the ‘ideological dogma’ which Gould claims had enslaved Old Labour (Gould, 1998:13), and instead made electoral success the important factor. This shift in focus allowed for outdated policy to be fashioned in an electorally viable way.

As with Blair, the personal attributes of Wilson are also noted as an element of the party’s original success. Wilson was, as Morgan writes, the party’s “chief asset” from 1963 to 1966 (Morgan, 2004:44).

The political stance of the two leaders is also similar. Honeyman also mentions the centre-right political stance that the two leaders shared (Honeyman, 2008:3). In addition, Harold Wilson was similarly free from the ties of the Labour left wing. Eyre-Noel argues that he was “not an emotional believer in Socialism” (Eyre-Noel, 1964:58), and Honeyman adds that despite some Bevanite associations in the early 1960s, Wilson’s views were in fact “very central, leaning slightly to the right” (Honeyman, 2008:19). It is clear that there are personal points of comparison to be made between the two leaders which underline the case for their analysis.

Wilson also attempted to exercise control over a divided Labour party, particularly challenged by the threats of organised labour (Fielding, 2003:23). Like Blair, he sought agreement as a means of presenting a competent party ready for electoral success, over the
satisfaction of internal groups (Seldon & Hickson, 2004:175). In terms of his political influence, Honeyman notes that the general policy direction of Wilson’s first term government had the Prime Minister’s “fingerprints all over them” (Honeyman, 2008:8). Similarly, Hennessy’s ‘circles of influence’ diagrams place Blair (and few others) at the very centre of decision-making, also indicating a powerful central governmental role for the Prime Minister (Hennessy, 2000:494). Wilson’s ability to maintain personal influence will be interesting to examine.

There are also personality studies whose data links Blair and Wilson. Greenstein’s analysis of psychological ‘complexity’ in American Presidents (Greenstein, 2000:5), which concerns the methods of decision-making and “the extent to which leaders require information when making decisions” (Greenstein, 2000:5) was continued in Britain by Dyson. Dyson’s work on British Prime Ministers showed that in their first terms, Wilson and Blair had similarly low complexity scores with Wilson at 54.6 and Blair at 50.8 (Dyson, 2005:27). Blair and Wilson’s relative congruence within this study lends well to a comparative analysis of their leadership.

**Rhetorical Style**

When examining conference speeches, it is imperative to compare each leader’s rhetorical style. Blair’s command of political rhetoric is evident from many sources (including Fairclough, 2003:1). However, Wilson was also a prolific public communicator. Indeed, Theakston has written that “Harold Wilson and Tony Blair have been the two most effective public communicators among recent prime ministers” (Theakston, 2006:11).

Fairclough’s book on New Labour’s language argues that linguistics has become “significantly more important over the past few decades” (Fairclough, 2000:3). Franklin writes that New Labour was the first government committed to “presentation as part of the process of policy formation” (Franklin, in Fairclough, 2000:5). However, others argue that thirty years before, Wilson already had a firm understanding of the importance of presentation, demonstrated in his rhetoric. Theakston notes that Wilson was “a complete professional who mastered all tricks of the media and took great pains in his early years as PM at least, to cultivate the press” (Theakston, 2006:11). Seldon and Hickson agree that
Wilson also placed emphasis on political appeal and style (Seldon & Hickson, 2004:314). This mutual appreciation of stylistics and presentation links Blair and Wilson furthers the potential for analysis.

Fairclough does mention that the prominence of political rhetoric has developed over recent decades (Fairclough, 2000:3), which has implications for the conference speech. During Harold Wilson’s tenure, the speech was a much longer and more formal affair, still considered a ’Report’. The speeches of Blair might have a more theatrical element including performance rhetoric more in line with New Labour’s ‘blue sky thinking’, directed towards the voting public watching through assembled media. In this respect, the progression of the conference speech itself may present obstacles to the fair comparison of Wilson and Blair.

However, closer examination of Wilson’s conference speeches demonstrates that they are much more similar to Blair’s than would be expected, given the thirty year gap in their delivery. Eyre-Noel notes that Wilson’s 1963 conference speech was detailed with “colourful phrases and crushing argument” and that “every word and phrase...was carefully weighted” (Eyre-Noel, 1964:58,131). In 1964, 89% of those surveyed by the British Electoral Survey owned a television set (BES SN:2051). With the advent of television and the increased visibility of political speech, Wilson’s conference speeches may instead serve as an early example of the direction of rhetoric to the viewing masses, as Blair’s were. It is such similarities in rhetorical style and presentational focus that make for a strong comparison.

Relationship with Conference

Before Wilson, the deliberation of policy at conference was still a fundamental process: mostly, its decisions were agreed upon universally (Minkin, 1981:273). However, it seems that Gaitskell’s defiance of conference in 1961 opened up new opportunities for Wilson. After the ‘trauma of election defeat’, Minkin writes that the party, which held a traditional fear of personality in leadership, allowing Wilson more independence in order to shape the party for electoral success (Minkin, 1981:274).Wilson’s ideas on leadership did not factor in a powerful conference. His idea of a ‘good conference’ constituted a united approval of party policy set out by the leadership, and avoidance of discussions on party theology (Minkin,
Out to attract a broad range of voters, Wilson believed that the union domination of conference damaged the party’s electoral appeal (Minkin, 1981:274).

Once in government, Wilson became increasingly indifferent to the demands of conference; leftist backbencher Ken Coates MP wrote that Wilson “dismissed conference resolutions that repudiated government policy” (Coates, 1972:326), and that conference became ‘not harmful’ as a result (Coates, 1972:20). However, there is contrary evidence that Wilson faced a union body whose influence in the conference process was still of high importance. Minkin admits “anticipation of the reaction of the major unions and adaptation to their policy commitments were often integral factors in Party policy formation” (Minkin, 1980:318). An examination of the speech data may provide further insight into this debate.

Blair’s approach to conference is strikingly similar to Wilson’s. Blair was given similar political independence in his position after the disastrous election result of 1992, which Shaw argues opened the flood gates for Blair’s “sweeping reforms in the party’s internal structures” (Shaw, 2004:279); including the Partnership in Power reforms of 1996-7 (Shaw, 2002:125). Such reforms meant that the power of conference was limited, and demonstrated the “lack of any mechanisms by which Conference could enforce its wishes on a Labour government” (Shaw, 2008:125). The power of the party was muted, and Blair remained unconcerned by their threats. As Seldon notes, even though there were frequent complaints about New Labour from the union body, they remained “powerless to damage the government” (Seldon, 2005:282). Blair’s focus remained on the voters of Britain, and attracting support from all strata (Seldon, 2005:75). This involved a tight hold on volatile intra-party affairs, which he considered politically damaging. It will be interesting to look for evidence of this comparative indifference to conference in the relative ideological shifts demonstrated by the analysis.

**Modernising the Party**

The electoral fortunes of the Labour Party that Harold Wilson inherited in February 1963 had been poor; the legacy of thirteen years in opposition. The party was incohesive; as Bogdanor writes “Labour was beginning to appear an incompatible coalition between reformists and socialists” (Bogdanor, 2004:5). Minkin agrees that the “ideological and factional divisions
between Right and Left wings...dominated all other bases of conflict” (Minkin, 1980:34). With such internal divisions, electoral victory seemed distant.

Although Fielding writes that the success of Labour in 1964 was due to “the collapse of Conservative strength rather than any Labour recovery” (Fielding, 2003:79), it is also arguable that the party was transforming, and changing its own political fortunes. Shrimsley agrees that the leadership had a vision of a ‘New Britain’, an image they were convinced of and felt “the urgency by which they must travel” (Shrimsley, 1965:20).

Conservative dominance meant that Wilson was charged with developing the party in the political and economic context created by the Conservative Party (Honeyman, 2007:35), and by the time of the 1966 election when a larger Labour majority was returned, Fielding admits that “Labour had modernised and was largely in tune with contemporary developments” (Fielding, 2003:61). However, modernisation was not unilaterally supported in the party, and Wilson was labelled “Ramsay MacWilson” by his opponents for steering the party towards the right (The Manchester Guardian, October 3, 1966:1).

Like Wilson, the electoral damage was similarly apparent when Blair took over in 1994. Riddell agrees that “the landslide defeat of 1983 made Blair and his allies realise how much Labour would have to change” (Riddell, 2004:309). In order to increase voter appeal, Blair presented a ‘middle road’ between remaining neoliberalism and the approach of Old Labour. The modernisation of the Labour Party had a ‘transforming’ effect. The development of the third way, which as Callinicos notes was forged with lessons from the domination of neoliberalism (Callinicos, 2001) represented a departure from the Left. This departure is demonstrated in the manifesto results from the MRG (Figure 1.1), in which Blair’s manifesto data is thirty points further to the right of the scale than Wilson’s.

It is arguable that both men acted as ‘modernisers’, attempting to turn around electoral fortunes by presenting a new, transformed Labour party. This may explain the similar ideological shifts demonstrated on the graph of manifestos of Blair and Wilson (Figure 1.1); changes of political positioning brought on by the ‘need’ for modernisation during both periods. These similarities may provide an interesting point of comparison when examining
conference speeches. The success of modernisation, or opposition to it, may also be apparent in the comparison of data.

**Selection of Data**

From the discussion so far, it seems that a comparative study of Harold Wilson and Tony Blair may prove fruitful for this analysis. A particular time period must now be identified for analysis. The data used will be the transcripts of speeches from Wilson and Blair before and during their first terms in government. The transcripts of Wilson’s conference speeches from 1963 to 1967 and Blair’s from 1996 to 2000 will be used. This will allow for an analysis of the ideological movement of two first term Labour governments, shortly before and after election, and make it possible to gain perspective on the ideological positioning of rhetoric after gaining power. This information can then be compared to MRG data for corresponding manifestos.

Below are the dates of each leader’s conference speech in proximity to relevant general election campaigns. Wilson fought two elections, in 1964 and 1966. After 1997 Blair went until 2001 without fighting again.

**Figure 2.1**

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<td><strong>Date of Conference Speech</strong></td>
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<td>04/10/1966</td>
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<td>02/10/1967</td>
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Blair:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date of Conference Speech</th>
<th>Date of General Election</th>
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Predictions

The conference speech is considered to work in the same way as the manifesto; as a tool of electioneering and political announcement. Therefore, it is likely that the ideological positioning of the speeches analysed will follow a similar trend to the manifestos of the same period. In the MRG data, the ideological positioning of each leader’s manifestos is some 30 points apart. In this respect, the speeches of Harold Wilson should be much further left on the ideological scale than those of Blair, in keeping with the positioning of the manifestos of the time.

Both sets of results should also exhibit an initial progression towards the right, occupying a more central position in the run up to an election. This phenomenon is explained in the work of Downs, whose theory demonstrates the “general convergence at the centre under two party competition” in an attempt to win votes (Downs, 1957:90). Essentially, party strategists cannot hope for perfect information on what will win votes but in order to present a balanced policy platform, the occupation of the centre ground is necessary to maximise support. The result, Downs claims, is a centralisation of both main parties. The presence of two general elections during Wilson’s first term may demonstrate further adherence to this rule.

Both data sets should also progress towards the centre in a demonstration of modernisation, and evidence of each leader’s attempt to present modernisation to conference will be considered. Although both men attempted modernisation, their reforms were not met with unilateral approval particularly by the unions. The measures put in place in Blair’s Partnership in Progress reforms permanently affected the power of conference, particularly the union movement. Uprising during Wilson’s first term, including the 1966 Seamen’s strike
and the government back down over In Place of Strife demonstrate periods of party strength that is absent from Blair’s first term. The authority of conference is assumed to be stronger during Wilson’s premiership when compared to Blair’s. It is therefore predicted that Blair’s speeches will follow a more ‘central’ path in line with modernisation, where Wilson’s speeches may demonstrate a return to the left to quell a still-powerful conference.

The development of the conference speech as a public event may also affect data results. As previously mentioned, the publicity platform of the conference speech has developed over time. As a result, Wilson’s speeches may be directed more towards the left, to appeal to the conference floor. Blair’s might occupy a more central position to attract the voting public, watching through assembled media. On the other hand, Wilson’s speeches may serve as an early example of the direction of rhetoric to the viewing masses, as Blair’s were. Subsequently, their projection as electioneering opportunities will be considered.

With these predictions in place, it is possible to move on to a discussion of mechanics; how the transcripts of the selected conference speeches will be turned into data for analysis using the MRG content analysis framework.

**Methodology: The MRG Coding Framework: The Mechanics**

With MRG, Budge *et al* note that “the object of analysing election programs is to measure policy positions of parties across countries within a common framework” (Budge *et al*, 2001:27). For this analysis to be comparable to MRG’s results for manifesto documents, it is necessary to adhere to their framework. Text from the conference speeches must be organised according to specific coding instructions set out by MRG.

Firstly, the text must be broken down into units suitable for analysis. The type of unit specified by MRG is the ‘quasi-sentence’, which they define as an ‘argument’. An argument can be explained as “the verbal expression of one political idea or issue” (Budge *et al*, 2001:27). In linguistics, a simple sentence deals with one issue and acts as one quasi-sentence. This would allow us to use punctuation to separate arguments. For example:

“I mark papers.”
“I want a pay rise.”

These are two, separate sentences, containing one distinguishable argument each. However, grammar is not always so simple:

“\textit{I want a pay rise because I mark papers.}”

The structure above is still one sentence, but it contains two arguments. It is therefore still considered as two separate quasi-sentences by the MRG framework, and is counted as two units. As Budge \textit{et al} note, a sentence will usually deal with more than one argument, and so long sentences are broken down into quasi-sentence units (Budge \textit{et al}, 2001:27).

Hence, this sentence can be broken back down into two quasi-sentences:

“\textit{I want a pay rise}”
“\textit{I mark papers}”

The grammatical construction of speech is often complex, and many sentences will contain a series of these units like this. Each sentence must be broken down into its relative quasi-sentences before moving on to the next step.

Once identified and broken down, these quasi-sentences are then coded in accordance with the MRG’s coding framework. The framework consists of 56 different categories grouped into seven policy domains (Appendix I). The coder must decide which category each unit fits into; the ‘classification’ of the quasi-sentences. Even if two or more units within the same sentence relate to the same category, they must all be counted.

The units which do not fit into any of the categories must be counted as uncodeable (000) and added to the total of uncodeable units; these are factored into the overall percentage totals later on. There are around 600 quasi-sentences in each conference speech.

Once all quasi-sentences in the speech have been coded, the number of units placed in each category must be counted. The total number of units in each category gives the coder the
‘quantification’ of each category (Budge et al., 2001:27). The proportional frequency of each category in the overall text (how frequently the category appeared) must then be worked out as a percentage of the overall number of quasi-sentences. For example in 1996, there might be 31 quasi-sentences placed in category 506; Health Expansion: Positive. If there were 551 quasi-sentences in the speech overall, then the percentage of category 506 quasi-sentences in the speech would be:

\[
\frac{31}{551} \times 100
\]

This gives 5.6, to one decimal place. These steps are repeated for each category, including the uncodeable (000) units.

**The Left-Right Scale**

Once these figures have been obtained, the overall ideological positioning of the document according to MRG can then be determined by placing the tallied units on a scale of Left to Right wing distribution. Laver and Budge have created a scale which identifies certain categories as ‘Left’ or ‘Right’ wing (Laver & Budge 1992:5) (Appendix II). This scale was created by examining the nature of each category in context. As Benoit and Laver explain, “the identity of the Left and Right manifesto coding categories…was determined by Laver and Budge using a series of within-country exploratory factor analyses of a wide range of coding categories” (Benoit & Laver, 2007:94).

To convert the data into a Left/Right score, the total average score of quasi-sentences in the categories deemed to be ‘left wing’ is subtracted from the total average score of those in the ‘right wing’ categories. This calculation is detailed in Appendix II.

The speeches of Blair and Wilson contained around 70,000 words in total. These were coded and analysed using this methodology. The results can be seen in the following graphs.

**Results:**
Harold Wilson

The graph below demonstrates the left-right distribution of sentences within Wilson’s conference speeches between 1963 and 1967, on a scale of -100 to +100 (left to right wing).

**Figure 5.1**

Between 1963 and 1964, the ideological shift in the conference speech data is noticeable. The 1964 speech, made two months after Labour came to power in October, was more ‘right wing’ than the speech of 1963. Again in September 1965, the conference speech was proportionally more ‘right wing’ than in 1964, as predicted in the lead up to the election battle in 1966. After winning the general election in March 1966, the conference speech returns to a more central position on the scale. The 1967 conference speech remains in a similar ideological position.
Comparing Speech and Manifesto

Figure 5.2

The conference speech data exhibits much steeper trends than the manifesto data. There is also a large ideological difference between the data sets; in 1964, the speech and manifesto are separated by some 65 points on the ideological scale. The manifesto of 1966 occupies a more central position than its predecessor in 1964, but the ideological movement between the manifestos is negligible when compared to the conference speech movement.
Tony Blair

The graph below demonstrates the left-right distribution of sentences within Blair’s conference speeches between 1996 and 2000, on a scale of -100 to +100 (left to right wing).

Figure 5.3

Blair’s first conference speech as Prime Minister in 1997 was proportionally more right wing than the speech of 1996. There is only a slight gradient in the data for years 1998 and 1999, exhibiting a gradual return to the position adopted in 1996.

Blair’s conference speech in September 2000 was more ‘right wing’ than the previous two speeches, and the most right wing of this first term. The party faced election six months later in June 2001. Again, the rightward trends within the data occur in the lead up to an election.
Comparing Speech and Manifesto

Figure 5.4

In 1997, the manifesto and conference speech are separated by 30 points. Comparatively, this is much smaller than the 65 point gap between Wilson’s election year speech and manifesto. Blair’s conference speeches and the manifestos produced are generally more ideologically similar than Wilson’s documents.

The data for the conference speeches from 1997 to 2000 remains within a ten point margin, and is fairly linear. The manifesto of 2001 also remains fairly consistent with the manifesto of 1997.

Even though the 2001 manifesto appears here, the conference speech of 2001 was not included. It exceeded the time frame of the data set, but was also dominated by reference to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The speech was made on 2nd October, less than a month after the attacks. Excessive reference to protectionism and defence throughout made the 2001 speech much more ‘right wing’ than the others, and rendered it an anomaly in the data series. However, it is clear from the 2000 speech result that there is a rightwards trend in the data lead up to the election of 2001.
It seems that for both time periods, the ideological movement of the manifestos is negligible when compared to the conference speech data. The conference speeches offer a more detailed demonstration of ideological movement because of their annual occurrence. To gain a better perspective on the comparative movement of the conference speeches, the data sets will now be mapped together.

**Comparable Leaders?**

With the movement of each data set described, it is now possible to compare the conference speech data of two subjects. Numbers 1-5 on the X axis represent the speech numbers within the data sets, with 1 representing 1963 and 1996, and so on.

**Figure 5.5**

Figure 5.5 shows that the conference speech results for Blair and Wilson are congruent; at points almost exactly the same. This was not the predicted result; the conference speech results are much more similar than the MRG’s manifesto data of the same time periods (Figure1.1). When comparing these points, the manifesto data is separated by some thirty
points on the ideological scale. In comparison, the speeches of Wilson and Blair follow very similar scorings and patterns.

The time period that divides the two sets of data is, as predicted, point 3: the mid-term election of 1966. The conference speeches made by Wilson remain in a more ‘right wing’ ideological position here. In contrast Blair’s conference speeches move back slightly towards the left after 1997 and remain in similar, linear order. Wilson’s 1967 and 1968 speeches move back more sharply towards the left. This may suggest a more even ideological pattern in Blair’s first term.

Much evidence supports the idea that the Labour government under Wilson was more ‘left wing’ than that of Blair. Indeed, within MRG data the 30 point difference between the manifestos of each period suggests the same. However, the congruence of these data sets suggests that the conference speeches of each period were much more similar than predicted.

Some similarities can be explained. Both the first speeches of 1963 and 1996, the most ‘left wing’ of each data series, were made while still in opposition. It has been argued that the policy focus of government and opposition are different, and it is possible to identify such a shift in the developing policy discussions of the Labour Party. As Minkin says, the shift from opposition to government is reflected in the “different policy preoccupations” of the various conferences (Minkin, 1980:34). This is demonstrated in the data set as a rightward shift between the conference speech made in opposition in 1963 and Wilson’s first in government in 1964. A similar shift appears in Blair’s data between 1996 and 1997, and denotes a shift between status, rather than and ideological movement.

Other similarities may be concerned with electoral elements. As predicted, similar rightward trends occur in the lead up to an election campaign, for Blair in 1997 and Wilson in 1964 and 1965. Labour victory sees a similar move back towards the left, in 1998 and 1999 for Blair, and in 1966 for Wilson.

However, these explanations cannot account for the comparative similarity of the two data sets. Similar ideological shifts are exhibited across these two different time frames,
particularly in the event of an election, but the actual ideological positioning of Blair and Wilson’s conference speeches is much more similar than had been predicted.

These findings show that the ideological positioning of the conference speech has remained relatively unchanged over these time periods. This could demonstrate something about the nature of the conference speech that was not expected. Analysis of the relationship between contextual information and Labour’s ideological position demonstrated by the conference speech data will provide further explanation of the speech data results.

**A Note on the Results**

From these findings it is clear that the conference speech is generally more ‘right wing’ than the manifesto document. This can partly be explained by the coding framework used; the MRG framework classes certain remarks made in relation to the competence of the party in question (and subsequently the incompetence of their opposition) as ‘305’ structures; for example “Five more Tory years. Just mouth the words and feel your senses repulsed” (Blair, 1997). These are designated as ‘right wing’ quasi-sentences by Budge and Laver’s scale (Laver & Budge 1992:5) (Appendix II). Conference speeches are a prime platform for these statements, which Rose agrees is natural; “The first instinct of a party...is to defend its record in office” (Rose, 1984:56). Indeed, Heritage and Greatbatch’s work on conference speeches found that these kinds of statement were important; nearly 60% of audience applause was designated to ‘approval of the party’ and ‘external attacks’ (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986:121). Manifestos are a formal blueprint of policy goals and offer less opportunity for this kind of dialogue.

The frequency of these statements can explain the relative gap between conference speeches and manifestos of each time period. However, there are still differences in the amount of deviation between the data sets. The gap between the manifesto and conference speech data is as much as 65 scale points for Wilson, but no more than 30 points for Blair. The inclusion of these ‘305’ structures alone cannot account for such a difference in deviation. More importantly, it cannot explain the surprising similarities between the two sets of conference speech data. These similarities will be examined and discussed in the following analysis.
**Analysis**

The results clearly demonstrate some interesting patterns of ideological movement, and the comparative similarities between the sets of results were not expected. Several possible interpretations of these ideological patterns will now be considered, in order to contribute to a discussion of each leader’s approach to the conference speech.

Firstly, the ideological movement of the speech data will be examined with reference to the leader’s modernising intentions, and how these are presented to conference. These ideas will be used to decide whether the data sets demonstrate a permanent change in party ideology or an ideological shift for election purposes, with additional consideration to the application of Downsian Theory and the colonisation of centre-ground politics.

Using the speech data, it also will be possible to develop an understanding of the factors which are influential in the construction of a leader’s address to the party. In keeping with the earlier discussion on each man’s relationship with conference, conceptions of union power and conference reaction to the speeches will be discussed. These elements will help to identify the true target audience of the conference speech, and how the Labour party leader ‘makes the political weather’ by presenting ideas to suit the audience through rhetoric. Using this debate, conclusions on the authority of conference and its power as a decision maker may then be made.

**Presenting Modernisation**

In this research, it has been proposed that both Blair and Wilson acted as ‘modernisers’, turning around their electoral fortunes by attempting to present a new, ‘transformed’ Labour party. New Labour strategist Philip Gould writes that “Labour’s extraordinary victory in 1997 was a direct consequence of modernisation” (Gould, 1998:xiii). Fielding writes that by 1966, it was also believed “that Wilson had allowed the party to prosper in ‘affluent society’: Labour had modernised and was largely in tune with contemporary developments” (Fielding, 2003:61).

Although both men attempted to modernise the political outlook of Labour, their reforms were not met with unilateral approval. It was predicted that their success in actioning
modernisation may be apparent in the comparison of data. Ideological differences were recorded in the manifesto results (Figure 1.1), and it was predicted that similarly, Blair’s speeches would follow a more ‘central’ path in line with permanent modernisation, while Wilson’s remained in a more ‘left wing’ position.

However, the surprising similarities between the speech data sets may suggest that Wilson’s modernising attempts were much closer to Blair’s than the manifesto data suggests. Policy developments around the 1964 election support the idea of a change in ideological direction. Speaking of Wilson’s policy before and after the election, Lowe writes


Lowe demonstrates that Labour’s policy focus changed during this time. In addition, Wilson’s approach was not wholly left wing; indeed, he was “not an emotional believer in Socialism” (Eyre-Noel, 1964:58). This arguably conditioned Wilson’s language, manifesting itself as a shift to the right. This shift is visible in the results for Wilson’s conference speeches from 1963 to 1964.

However, this cannot explain the disparity of the manifesto and speech data results. Rather, one explanation for this difference is the practice of presentation within rhetoric. At the beginning of this work, the subtleties of rhetoric were discussed. Within rhetoric, messages can be shaped and prioritised to represent how the leader “thinks propositions can and should be forwarded” (Finlayson & Martin, 2008:451). Rather than representing actual ideological shifts, the ideological movement of the conference speeches represents the leader’s presentation of policy to conference.

Essentially, by couching leftist appeals within an economic, technological drive, Wilson could appeal to those outside of his direct support bracket with a speech that appeared more centrally placed than those of previous Labour leaders, but still appeal to conference. This explains the similarities between the two data sets; on first appearance, numerous references to socialism in Wilson’s speeches make them appear left wing, but with content analysis it is
clear that this appearance is not a true reflection of Wilson’s rhetoric. These speeches share the centrality of Blair’s speeches thirty years later.

Indeed, Wilson’s rhetoric often remains detached from Left and Right altogether; avoiding specific policy claims. He speaks of ‘change’ in an indeterminate manner “if there is one theme running through this conference this week...it is the theme of change” (Labour Party Conference Report, 1963:134). This tactic is also employed by Blair, who discusses ‘modernisation’ ambiguously throughout his conference speeches.

Still, Wilson’s conference speeches move back towards the left of the scale after 1966. This suggests that the rightward shifts in Wilson’s speech data represented only temporary changes. In comparison, the centralist distribution of language within the data from Blair’s conference speeches may demonstrate a firmer departure from left-wing rhetoric. As King notes, Blair’s actions had permanent effect, and “undoubtedly changed how people thought about the Labour Party” (King, 1998:201). Unlike Wilson’s post election speeches of 1967 and 1968, where data moves back towards the left, Blair’s post election data remains in similar, linear order. This linearity may reflect a more stable policy arrangement, and therefore more permanent modernisation.

There is evidence that Wilson tried to make a similar effort to permanently modernise the party, but that this was curtailed by the left. Wilson’s call for the modernisation of industry was supported by Whitehall and the business community (Pimlott, 1992:349), and Minkin argues that there was “accord between union leaders and leadership...a loyal support for policy and thereby to the right wing” (Minkin, 1980:34), but this did not necessarily hold. Wilson’s modernising attempts were deemed by some to be against the grain of party ethos. Indeed, it is Gould’s argument that his actions were seen “by many in the party not as the failure of modernisation…but as yet another betrayal of party and principle by Labour’s leadership” (Gould, 2000:28). Wilson’s move back towards the left wing could demonstrate a left wing presentation of policy to satisfy conference; it is noted that he leaned on the left when he needed their support (Coates, 1972:15)

This would suggest that conference were still influential; contrary to the contextual information gathered. However, another explanation is offered by Pimlott, who writes that
the 1964 government was “a consciously temporary, transitional and therefore electioneering one” out of its natural place (Pimlott, 1992:319). It may be that once the election battle was over, Wilson’s speeches returned to the ‘natural’ position of the government. In the internal party battle of Left and Right, the Left still held some importance, and weighted the party to its side. The Blair government, with a firm majority from the start, instead remained in the modernised centre ground.

**The Influence of Trade Unions**

It has been noted in this research that Wilson and Blair had a similar relationship with the trade unions. Wilson “dismissed conference resolutions that repudiated government policy” (Coates, 1972:326), and Blair’s internal reforms meant that the union body, were “powerless to damage the government” (Seldon, 2005:282). Wilson and Blair’s first term speeches followed a similar ideological pattern. This might suggest that; as predicted, the unions of both periods were equally disregarded in the crafting of the conference speech.

However, it is clear from research that the unions still had some effect on Wilson’s Labour party. A British Electoral Survey in 1964 showed that 64.6% surveyed believed trade unions held too much power; a figure which rose to 73.3% in 1966 (BES SN:V0228). Bogdanor adds that between 1964 and 1970, rather than facing defeat at the hands of opposition “the most painful defeats were by trade union allies in reaction to In Place of Strife” (Bogdanor, 2004:5). The curtailing of union strike action in this document exacerbated what Bogdanor refers to as the “uneasy alliance between the parliamentary and industrial wings of the party” (Bogdanor, 2004:6).

Instead, it may be that the difference in Blair and Wilson’s fortunes lies in Blair’s ability to disregard the political intervention of extra-parliamentary factions. Blair’s marrying of different sectors did go against the will of the party’s traditional support structures: his “crusade to reform public services, often with the help of private firms, has been pursued in the teeth of union opposition” (The Economist, June 10 2006:30).

However, it is clear from relevant literature that Blair’s leadership held a great amount of power. Although Fairclough reminds us that “not everyone in Labour was New Labour” (Fairclough, 2000:80), Blair had enough support to disregard union opinion. Blair was also
“mindful that union militancy in the 1970s was one reason for two subsequent decades of Tory hegemony” (The Economist, June 10 2006:30). The centrality of the conference speech data may demonstrate a purposeful distance from the organised Left.

Conversely, Bogdanor writes that Wilson “sought agreement and the holding together of the Party as an end in itself, to be achieved at all costs” (Bogdanor, 2004:175). Wilson was a party ‘fixer’, busy with the aggregation of internal factions. He would “choose neither tendency but to try to reconcile them both” (Gould, 1998:33). His attempts to transcend the party divide may have had a centralising effect on the speech data; his marrying of socialism and science and the couching of market potential within terms of employment was an attempt to appeal to the unions and the electorate.

However, these ideas may overstate the influence of conference. Even though Coates writes that the unions were in “almost consistent opposition” to the leadership (Coates, 1972:1010, it was reported that in 1966, the atmosphere in the conference hall was conducive to leadership plans, reluctant though it was. “The TUC acquiesced government control over prices and incomes, but their acquiescence was the most reluctant yet” (The Times, October 3 1966:1). Although a stand was taken against the government by Frank Cousins of TGWU, this was described only as a ‘rebel’ movement. Dissent came not from the union body as a whole, but through ‘rebel strikes’ (Thorpe, 1997:164). Even after devaluation in 1967, the trade unions still supported the leadership platform by accepting its terms (Coates, 1972:178). Conference’s diligence allowed Wilson to disregard its potential. Even before this when the government announced Part IV of the Prices and Incomes Act, which included measures for compulsory wage freezes, Wilson announced to the press that he had done so “without regard to conference’s tactics” (The Times, October 3 1966:1). This might better explain the relative centrality of the speech data; Wilson could speak with little regard to conference’s reaction.

Shaw does argue that extra-parliamentary bodies remain important, even for New Labour. Their dependence on unions “extended beyond direct financial assistance. In successive elections affiliated unions played a key role in mobilising support for the party.” (Shaw, 2008:127). However, although the role of extra-parliamentary figures remained valid, Coates points out that the left has never had an effective political arm or leader to challenge the PLP (Coates, 1972:183). The influence of the unions may never have been potentially great,
allowing both leaders to disregard their potential. This may contribute to an explanation of
the similarity between the speech data sets.

**Audience**

If there is a disregard for the conference floor as outlined above, it may be that the target
audience of the conference speech may not be conference alone. It has been outlined in this
research that since Wilson’s premiership, the nature of conference has changed. Over time,
conference has developed an enlarged media focus. Rather than addressing the party faithful,
conference speeches have become electioneering platforms, designed to appeal centrally to
large numbers of voters. It was predicted that Blair’s conference speeches would adopt a
consistently central position, designed to attract a large number of voters outside of the
traditional conference support bracket. The interpretation of Wilson’s speeches was
uncertain; the data set could have alluded to an early example of the direction of rhetoric to
the viewing masses, or directed more towards the left to appeal to the conference floor.

However, the similarity between the data series suggests that the perceived outside ‘audience’
did have an effect on Wilson’s conference speeches. It is arguable that Wilson’s rhetorical
appeals at conference were not made to the assembled faithful, becoming instead Wilson’s
platform to address other sectors of society. Contextual evidence within the speeches
supports this argument. In 1963 Wilson’s speech made references to socialism and appealed
to the Left, but these references did not stand alone, instead coming couched within his
discussion of technological advances and British scientists. For example

> ...if there had never been a case for Socialism before, automation would have created
it. Because only if technological progress becomes part of our national planning can
that progress be directed towards national ends. (Labour Party Conference Report,
1963:135).
Shaw explains this as a petition to professionals, not particularly predominant in the conference audience (Shaw, 2007:39). The centrality of the speech data may demonstrate an awareness of the outside audience, and an attempt to balance the presentation of policy to suit both the public and conference.

At the 1996 conference, Blair made a similar appeal to ‘Sierra Man’; the middle class voter who had defected to the Conservatives. “His dad voted Labour, he said. He used to vote Labour, too. But he'd bought his own house now. He was doing very nicely. ‘So I've become a Tory’ he said” (Blair, 1996). Blair also dismisses the label of socialism, noting that the party’s beliefs go further than any ‘ism’ (Bradshaw, Daily Mirror October 3 1996). These are examples of a leader using the conference speech to reach a wider audience. Wilson was indeed speaking over the heads of those in the room, and so was Blair. The similarities in the speech data are compatible with the contextual information.

The projection of conference speeches to an outside audience is also demonstrated by data convergence around the centre ground. In the approach to general elections, the data in both sets moves towards the centre of the scale. This movement essentially verifies the theory of Downs; who theorised the tactical attempt by parties to occupy the centre ground in order to maximise potential for winning votes (Downs, 1957:3). Again, this centralisation may demonstrate an awareness of the outside audience, and an attempt to moderate the presentation of policy to appeal to the voter. The conference speech is used as a piece of electioneering.

However, the differences in the ideological shifts which appear after these elections may demonstrate the true ideological direction of each man’s leadership. Blair’s speeches remain on a steady path, which may indicate a firmer ideological shift to the centre. Wilson’s speeches return to a more ‘left wing’ position once electioneering is over in 1966. These subtle differences are key to separating true ideological shifts from electioneering tactics.

**Conference Reaction**

Considering the dualistic power struggle between conference and leadership that was outlined at the beginning of this research, it is surprising that there was not more adverse reaction
from conference; supposedly one of the sovereignties of the movement (Shaw, 2004:73), over the presentation of modernisation and projection of the conference speech to an outside audience. In fact, contemporary reports from conference do note some poor reception to the leaders’ addresses.

Protests against Wilson during his first term are well documented. In 1966, reports note that conference was hounded by protesters chanting “Wilson is a Tory, he must go” (The Times, October 3 1966:1). However, the response from conference was surprisingly not one of dissent. Reports record the ‘unresponsive audience’ facing Wilson for his 1966 conference speech. It was clear to one conference delegate that Wilson was asking the party to “change step and follow their leader”, but their protest was limited to “a grudging standing ovation” (The Times, October 5 1966:1). Wilson did notice the “cool reception” offered by conference, but mentions little more (Wilson, 1971:355). This demonstrates the control that the leadership had over conference and the limited power that Wilson believed conference to have.

However, by 1967 there were changes in this arrangement. According to leftist backbench MP Ian Mikardo, a shock by-election defeat in Walthamstow West shook Wilson’s belief that he could “win elections single handed with the help of the goggle box” (Clark, 1967:1). Indeed, reports had detected the sense of “disillusionment and even betrayal” which had permeated conference by this point (Clark, 1967:1). Reports suggest that the party snubbed Wilson at conference, and gave only grudging support (Taylor, 1967:1). This may suggest that Wilson could no longer rely on conference’s diligence while projecting an image of the party to the assembled media. The movement of speech data back towards the left of the scale may indicate a retreat to the type of leftist policies that would appeal more to the conference floor. However, this move remains slight, and alludes to Wilson’s continuing impression of the leadership’s power over conference and the importance of communicating with the voters watching via assembled media. Indeed, Coates adds that issues discussed were “already settled” long before conference, to avoid presenting conflict on contentious issues (Coates, 1972:15).

Blair’s 1996 conference speech was afforded a ‘very good’ reception at conference (Daily Mail October 4 1996:1), and it was reported that feelings of rebellion were futile “the party was saying that while its head had been taken over, its heart still wanted a fugitive moment of
expression” (Young, 1996:15). Indeed, formal protest did not transpire. This demonstrates that Blair’s conference was already feeling the control of the leadership. Even in 1999 when conference’s reaction began to turn sour, Blair’s address seemed to satisfy delegates. The Guardian reported that the 1999 conference speech was “skilfully-balanced…received inside the hall with enthusiasm and respect”. (Hardy, 1999:15). This enthusiasm is explained not as satisfaction with party direction, but as an approval of the speech itself “whenever they are interviewed about a speech, delegates say what they hoped to hear…the delegates heard the word 'equality'. That will keep them going for another year.” (Hardy, 1999:15). Here again, the presentation of rhetoric to conference wins favour for Blair. The policies coming from conference may not have pleased delegates, but Blair’s rhetoric made use of popular phrases to win them round. Blair understood the rhetoric needed to pass conference approval, and made use of moderate language to ‘balance’ his speeches; demonstrated in the centrality of the speech data. By winning their approval, he could effectively avoid protest and present a united party, one of his key objectives.

It is arguable then that conference’s reception to the speech cannot be used as a litmus test for the real approval of leadership announcements. In both time periods, there are examples of conference lending support ‘grudgingly’ even though the reception in the hall may seem positive. There is also an appreciation of the speech itself, rather than the policies it contains. This may explain the congruence of the data sets; there is a ‘winning formula’ for the conference speech which satisfies delegates; a piece of electioneering that employs positive rhetoric around which the party can unite.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, the dualistic power struggle between conference and the leadership was discussed. It was predicted that in this power struggle, conference would be more likely to win out under Wilson than under Blair, as the party was suspected to have more control. Shaw agrees that during the 1960s “conference was the supreme authority, the ‘parliament of the movement’.” (Shaw, 2004:260). If this were strictly true, then it would be more likely for Wilson’s speeches to contain more ‘left wing’ references to keep conference approval. This was expected to be reflected in the data sets, with Wilson maintaining a more ‘left wing’ position in line with the manifesto results. However, the data sets demonstrate that
the patterns of ideological movement of conference speeches are much more similar than predicted.

Although this analysis offers only interpretations, the findings do raise questions about the real authority of conference. Some agree that conference never has held great power. Although it is a common conception that the development of New Labour created a shake-up of authority within the party, there is evidence that power has always been concentrated within the Labour leadership. Minkin argues that in the Sixties, power was already “concentrated in the hands of the leadership” and that there was “defiance of the power of conference by the party leader” (Minkin, 1980:316).

Indeed, the similarity between the data sets may demonstrate the freedom with which Wilson crafted his speeches, and the winning out of the leadership in the dualistic power struggle. This contradicts the previous assumption that party authority was more diffuse in the 1960s. Minkin suggests that it was actually Wilson’s government that first demonstrated a departure from extra-parliamentary authority, noting that “rarely in modern times can a parliamentary leadership have appeared as impervious to the policy preferences of its extra-parliamentary supporters as the Wilson government did” (Minkin, 1980:316).

From the congruence of Wilson and Blair’s rhetorical patterns, it is arguable that Wilson made an attempt to modernise the party as Blair did with New Labour. It may be possible to explain these ideological shifts as an attempt to attract electoral success. It was this success that gave both leaders leeway from conference; Shaw notes that in the quest for government “the institutions of the wider Party…have forfeited much of their capacity to operate as a check and balance of the leadership” (Shaw, 2004:278). As suggested in the analysis, this reduces conference to a forum for new policy announcement, with the intended audience outside of the conference hall. The unexpected similarity between the data sets and evidence from contemporary accounts suggests that this may be the case under both Wilson and Blair.

Even though reports demonstrate the feeling of unease with the leadership’s actions, the muted reaction from conference during both time periods demonstrates the control that the leadership held over conference. Wilson’s addresses to conference, a supposedly wieldier figure in the Sixties, show the same ideological pattern as Blair’s did thirty years later.
Conference’s often begrudging support during both time periods demonstrates that overall support was not a requirement. As Fielding points out “so long as the leadership retained the support of enough union leaders, conference endorsed policy with little demur” (Fielding, 2003:130). In this analysis, it has been suggested that the influence of conference was always limited. It may be true that Blair has depleted the role of conference, but if the findings are to be believed, then the leadership has always won the power struggle. With this battle won, leaders are merely charged with finding the ‘winning formula’ for the conference speech which satisfies delegates. Blair and Wilson, both skilful public speakers, mastered this approach.

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