



History 7042
Specimen Question Paper 1G (A-level)
Question 04 Student 3
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 1G (A-level): Specimen question paper

04 To what extent was there a 'post-war consensus' in Britain in the years 1945 to 1964?

[25 marks]

Student response

In many ways, the years between 1945 and 1964 were a time of consensus. The basic outlook of the key political parties was much the same. They accepted a mixed economy of nationalised and private industries and a welfare state. They worked to keep inflation low but their main commitment was to provide full employment at all costs. However, there was not unanimous agreement on policies, particularly in the immediate postwar years and it might be fairer to say that political consensus really started in 1951 when the Conservatives got into power and accepted much of what the previous Labour government had done. The 1950s and early 1960s were a time of high living standards and low unemployment so there was little need or demand for radical reform. This boosted the consensus and between 1951 and 1964, all parties worked in broad agreement.

After the war, in 1945, the Labour Party won the election with a majority of 152. Voters wanted social change and reform and still associated the Conservatives with the 1930s when there was high unemployment and a disastrous policy of appeasement. In addition, the social changes of the war years had encouraged a belief in a more equal society and had produced the Beveridge report. Although this had been drawn up by Conservatives, its content matched Labour party ideology. So, since the Labour party was now considered respectable, because of its work in the wartime coalition, voters were prepared to give it a chance to put the Beveridge proposals into effect. In a sense this was the beginnings of the consensus.

During its years in power between 1945 and 1951, the Labour Party nationalised key industries and established a welfare state. It also tried to bring economic recovery by keeping interest rates and inflation low. Its nationalisation measures were controversial and this continued after 1951, but most of Labour's other measures carried some degree of 'consensus'. This meant there was support in principle, even if not in detail, from the Conservative opposition. The Conservatives accepted the nationalisation of coal, railways and the Bank of England although they opposed the nationalisation of transport and steel and denationalised them after 1951. However, the Labour programme was not strongly questioned and arguments were more about the extent and costs than the measures as such. Furthermore, after 1947, nationalisation slowed down suggesting that Labour and the Conservatives were prepared to meet half-way. Britain remained a 'mixed economy' with most of industry still in private hands in a form of consensus.

The development of the welfare state between 1945 and 1951 seemed to be a very Labour idea. Its principles matched socialist ideological beliefs about equality and support for the ordinary people and Labour introduced a wide range of measures including family allowances, Industrial Injuries Act, National Insurance, National Health and National Assistance. However, none of these Acts were totally 'new' and they built on measures introduced by both Liberals

and Conservatives in the past. So again, they were the product of some consensus. There was, however, some strong Conservative opposition, particularly to the detail of the National Health Act and compromises had to be made. So, it would not be true to say there was total consensus in the years 1945-1951.

Nevertheless, the basis of the post-war consensus was in place and would grow after 1951. There was certainly a general agreement about government aims and both parties believed in a better and fairer Britain after all the turmoil of the war years. In 1951, when the Conservatives came to power there was little desire or money for further restructuring. Labour's policies had been popular and it would have been foolish of the Conservatives to dismantle them, even if leaders had favoured this, which they didn't.

Conservative attitudes towards industry, the trade unions and social policy after 1951 were very different from the 1930s. Many Conservatives now accepted the need for government intervention in social and economic policies and the need for state planning. So, although the Conservatives de-nationalised the steel industry and road transport in 1951, they left the rest of Labour's nationalisations alone. The Conservatives also pledged themselves to preserving the NHS and Labour's welfare reforms. So whilst Labour was torn by internal divisions, the Tories committed themselves to what might previously have been regarded as Labour policies, including house-building schemes for working people. Furthermore, since the Labour Party had done nothing to change the distribution of wealth or income within Great Britain and had accepted private enterprise and the capitalist system, the change of party made little real change. This was when true consensus emerged.

There was little difference in the running of the economy. Since the mixed economy appeared to work and was supported by a cross-party consensus it was largely left alone. The Conservatives followed the Labour policy of maintaining full employment and tried to break their association with the 1930s when they were labelled 'the party of mass unemployment.' The post-war consensus was based on Keynesian economic principles and the Conservatives, like Labour before them found themselves facing 'stop-go economics'. There was a continuous balance of payments crisis, fuelled by the encouragement of imports, a fall in exports and a decline in Britain's share of world trade. However, the Conservatives were lucky to come to power just as economic recovery was beginning to take effect in Britain, with wages going up, leading to a boom in consumerism. The credit for rising living standards, mentioned in Macmillan's famous 'never had it so good' speech went to the Conservatives who won the 1959 election, but it was the product of consensus. There was no new direction after 1951.

The Conservatives' relationship with the Trade Unions also showed consensus. During the war the trade unions had become more powerful, their influence had grown and their control was also increased when coal and the railways were nationalised. Like Labour, who depended on the unions for their funds, the Conservatives wanted a good relationship with the trade unions. Consequently, they allowed the trade unions to have representation on NEDC which shaped economic policy. The result was that the powerful unions were very influential and in 1957, there was a proliferation of 'wildcat' strikes. However, there was political consensus in the way they were treated.

However, despite the broad similarity of outlook, there was some difference between the two major parties. This was mainly a difference in style and type of politician. Those who dominated the Conservative Party were public-school educated and aristocratic. For much of this period, the Conservative government was led by Macmillan and he was then replaced by the co-opted

grouse-shooting Alec Douglas-Home. Their 'establishment manner and behaviour marked them out as very different from the Labour Party which gained a new image under the pipe-smoking Harold Wilson. Despite the broad consensus, there was a growing feeling that the Conservatives were not keeping pace with the times. Old-fashioned values persisted and outdated laws, for example against abortion and divorce, continued to be enforced.

So, by 1964, the nation was ready for change and the consensus which had dominated the 13 years of Conservative government, and perhaps began even before that, broke down. Harold Wilson promised to lead in the 'white heat of technology' and although he did not live up to all his promises there was more divergence between parties once again after 1964 when he won the election. There is no doubt that there was a period of consensus (even if not absolute) in Britain after the war but it could not last. Consensus was a product of the age of affluence and high living standards. When they went, consensus disappeared too.

Commentary – Level 5

This is an effective answer. It is generally well focused, clearly understands the demands of the question and is persuasive in arguing that consensus really began in 1951 although aspects were clearly present before this. Assessment of the extent of consensus in the 1950s is balanced and appropriate with some generally convincing qualification to the proposition. The conclusion is effective and looks forwards as well as offering an overall view. There is some lack of development; it would add to the answer to explain more fully what, for example, were 'Keynesian economics', but it is a Level 5 answer.