

## The British Middle-Class Socialist

*"Class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail."*

Peter Pulzer, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION (1967)

*"Very little except class matters for politics in Great Britain . . . we have discovered little evidence of a decline of the association of class and party."*

Robert Alford, PARTY AND SOCIETY (1963)

THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT among domestic and foreign students of British politics that the conclusions of Pulzer and Alford are an adequate summary of voting behaviour and party loyalties in this country. The working class (*i.e.* manual workers, and their wives and adult children) vote Labour. The middle class (*i.e.* the remaining one-third of the electorate) support the Conservatives.

On this basis one would expect that Labour would easily win every General Election. In fact, over the almost thirty years since 1945 Labour has held a Parliamentary majority for only twelve years. To explain this apparent refutation of the "Class-Party" account of British party politics analysts have concentrated on the "deviant" manual worker—the *working-class Tory*. They have, for the most part, neglected the existence and importance of one other type of class defector—the *middle-class Socialist*. This neglect is surprising since it is clear from all surveys of voting behaviour that the Labour Party cannot win a General Election simply on the strength of its working-class support. For national victory it must be sure of the votes of at least 25% of all middle-class electors. Without them it could never be more than a permanent Opposition.

From a survey carried out at the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974 it is possible to say something about who these people are—what their values are—and how they differ not only from middle-class Tories but also from working-class Labour supporters.

The data comes from a probability sample of 1,000 men and women electors drawn from the Electoral Registers for the whole of urban Britain. On the basis of their occupation a little over one-third of the sample (37%) were middle class. Of these, in reply to the question: "*Which political party do you usually support at General Elections?*", 26% described themselves as *Labour*, and 45% as *Conservatives*; the rest of the middle class were Liberals, persistent non-voters, or inconsistent in their party loyalties. Of the working-class respondents, 54% usually support Labour at General Elections; 21% are Conservatives; and 25% are Liberals, abstainers, etc.

### *Middle-Class Socialists & Working-Class Socialists*

THE AVERAGE working-class Labour supporter is almost ten years older than his average middle-class political comrade. In common with the rest of the working class he has had considerably less contact with higher education. Only 3% have had any full-time schooling to the age of 18 or more; the comparable ratio among middle-class Socialists is 25%. However, his family income is only 25% lower—thanks largely to the high earnings of skilled manual workers. He is *more* inclined to describe his religious ties as either Church of England or Roman Catholic. (Indeed, one of the striking features of the urban working-class Labour vote is that nearly one-fifth comes from Roman Catholics!) He is *more* likely than the middle-class Socialist to own a washing machine; but on every other durable consumer commodity (car, telephone, central heating, etc.) his rate of ownership lags far behind. And, whereas one-third of all middle-class Socialists who take a holiday "go

abroad", among working-class Socialists only 7% take their holidays outside Britain.

The contrast in their self-identified<sup>1</sup> occupations is even greater. Nearly three-quarters of the working-class Socialists said they belonged to just three groups—skilled manual workers (32%), unskilled labourers (23%), and old-age pensioners (18%); on the four most common middle-class Socialist identifications—Civil servants (20%), Office workers (18%), Professionals (14%), and Teachers (12%), they made practically no showing at all. Only 8% of all working-class Socialists claimed to belong to any of these four occupations which between them accounted for two-thirds of all middle-class Socialists.

**T**HERE IS A SUBSTANTIAL DIFFERENCE between the two Socialist groups in their experience of social mobility. Whereas 95% of all working-class Socialists are the children of working-class parents, nothing like the same social stability is to be found among middle-class Socialists. Over 60% have acquired their present middle-class status after having been born and brought up in working-class homes. In spite of their many present differences the two groups of Labour supporters have a strong link in their past working-class parentage.

Their newspaper reading habits are, again, dissimilar. Among working-class Socialists, of all those who regularly read a morning newspaper, nearly three-quarters take tabloid dailies, either the *Daily Mirror* or the *Sun*. Only 1% read one or other of the three "class" papers—*The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *Daily Telegraph*. Quite a few middle-class Socialists also turn to the two tabloids (roughly one-third of them), but just as many are regular readers of the three "class" papers with *The Guardian* in first place, slightly ahead of the *Daily Telegraph* and well ahead of *The Times*.

On Sundays there are similar differences. Among working-class Socialists the most favoured newspapers are the *News of the World* (38%), *The People* (33%) and the *Sunday Mirror* (31%). A handful of deviants read the *Sunday Times* (4%) and *The Observer* (2%). In contrast these

<sup>1</sup> In addition to being asked for a detailed description of his occupation, each respondent was shown a list of 15 broad socio-occupational groups (e.g., skilled workers, clerks and similar office-workers) and asked "Which one of these groups would you say you belong to, or come closest to?"

last two are the most widely-read papers among middle-class Socialists (23% and 21% respectively), though neither of them is very far ahead of the *News of the World* and *The People*.

Table 1: Some characteristics of the three groups

	MIDDLE-CLASS		WORKING-CLASS
	LABOUR	TORY	LABOUR
	%	%	%
<b>Age:</b>			
18-29	33	17	23
30-44	27	25	24
45 and over	40	58	53
	100	100	100
<b>Sex:</b>			
Male	46	50	46
Female	54	50	54
<b>Terminal Education Age:</b>			
15 or less	49	42	87
16, 17	26	40	10
18 and over	25	18	3
<b>Weekly Household Income:</b>			
Under £25	13	13	31
£25-£44	36	29	42
£45-£79	38	37	22
£80 and over	13	21	5
<b>Religion:</b>			
Church of England	54	68	62
Nonconformist	13	10	12
Roman Catholic	9	6	18
Jewish	5	1	—
Atheists, etc.	19	15	8
<b>Parents' Social Class:</b>			
Middle class	14	26	1
Lower middle class	25	23	4
Working class	61	51	95
<b>Possess:</b>			
Central heating	53	66	30
Colour television	38	40	28
Telephone	68	82	27
Car	69	79	40

THE TWO GROUPS OF SOCIALISTS come together again when they were asked their views on the present state of democratic institutions in Britain, and what they thought ought to prevail. Each respondent was asked to consider six aspects of the democratic process and then to use an 0-to-10 scale to indicate how much of each he thought there is "in Britain today", and how much he thought there ought to be. On the scale, "10" represented "a very great deal" and "0" signified "not at all." The six aspects presented to him were:—

1. How much freedom of speech is there in Britain today?

2. How much *tolerance* is there by the general public towards people who want to live differently from the way most people do?
3. How *democratic* is Britain?
4. How easy is it for people like yourself to *understand what's going on* in politics and government today?
5. How much *influence* do voters have on the way the country is governed?
6. How much *social equality* is there in Britain today?

Both groups of Labour supporters took a poor view of the present state of British democracy. Only once did a rating exceed 7, and that was when middle-class Socialists put a score to the amount of freedom of speech in Britain. Otherwise both groups usually gave ratings round the 5 level. Both took a particularly gloomy view of the amount of influence exercised by voters on the way the country is run, and working-class Socialists averaged no more than a 4.7 score when asked how easy it is for people like themselves to understand contemporary politics. The two groups were also in agreement in their low ratings on the degree of social equality in Britain.

Labour Supporters' ratings of "Amount of Democracy" (0 to 10 scale)

AMOUNT OF:	MIDDLE-CLASS	WORKING-CLASS
Freedom of speech	7.6	6.9
Democracy in general	6.4	6.8
Ability to understand politics	5.9	4.7
Tolerance	5.5	5.9
Social equality	5.2	5.4
Voters' influence	4.8	4.6

When respondents were asked to use the scale to indicate how much there "ought to be" of each aspect, both Socialist groups indicated for each of them an average figure of either 9 or slightly under 9. Within a very narrow range of differences middle-class Labour supporters gave their highest average scores to "ability to understand political issues" (9.1) and "social equality" (9.0). Their working-class political allies, however, gave their highest ratings to free speech" (9.0) and "voters' influence" (8.9) and "ability to understand politics" (also 8.9). Greater "social equality" came fourth (8.8).

These are, of course, negligible differences, and suggest that for all practical purposes Labour supporters from both social classes hold identical views about the character of a perfect political system. Of all six aspects put to them only *tolerance* receives a score significantly below the 9.0 points level, and even here but for the relatively lukewarm endorsement by working-class Labour supporters (8.3) the average gap would be slight.

THE STRONG VIEWS held by Labour supporters about the desirability of greater social equality are presumably related in part to their perceptions of the present very unequal distribution of incomes. Each respondent was asked to use the 0-to-10 scale to indicate what he thought most nearly represented the standard of living of people in 15 different socio-occupational classes—with 10 indicating the highest standard of living and 0 meaning the lowest standard. They then applied the same scale to their own standard of living.

Both groups of Labour supporters see a situation where some people (business executives, doctors and lawyers, and those who live on investment dividends) enjoy extremely high standards of living—round the 9 mark. Others (old-age pensioners, those who live on social-security benefits, unskilled labourers) are down at the 3-to-5 end of the scale.

There are here small, but not unimportant, differences between middle-class and working-class Socialists. The former give their own standard of living a rating of 6.7 and perceive this as exceeded by only five of the 15 occupations—business executives, professionals, investors, civil servants, and skilled manual workers. Working-class Socialists give themselves a rating of 6.3, and then see this surpassed by at least 9 of the 15 groups—the above 5, plus small shopkeepers, teachers, policemen, and office workers. And working-class Socialists, in addition to giving themselves a relatively low rating, are more generous than are middle-class Socialists when assessing everyone else's standard of living.

FROM THIS PATTERN of perceived present economic inequality, respondents were then asked to use the scale to indicate what standard of living they thought each occupational group *deserved*. Both types of Labour supporters are agreed on the character and outcome of such an equitable rearrangement. Both report that:

1. The average standard of living should be raised by 20%.
2. But two groups should suffer cuts—business executives and investors.
3. They themselves should receive an increase that at least matched the average all-round raise.
4. The gap between the highest and lowest standards of living should be reduced—but not eliminated.

The main difference between the two classes is in the relative increase they think should be given to particular groups. Working-class Socialists,

as compared with their middle-class comrades, are more generous in the relative increases they want for unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, and appreciably less generous towards teachers, students, and coloured immigrants. And they set for themselves an average relative standard of living (*i.e.* as expressed on the 0-to-10 scale) just as high as the standard to which middle-class Socialists feel they are entitled. Both feel their deserved standard of living on this scale would be at slightly over the 8 out of 10 level. It is clear, however, that middle-class and working-class Socialists have *different* perceptions of present standards of living. The former with a "deserved" increase of 20% on his present standard of living would still have a standard of living 20% higher than the "deserved" standard of living to which the working-class Labour supporter feels he is entitled.

IN SHORT, WHEN IT COMES TO "operationalising justice" in material terms, the working-class Socialist defines it as a situation where he has reached the present standard of living of the average middle-class Socialist. The latter defines it as one where he is at least as well off as the average middle-class Conservative. Both socialist types feel deprived, but have different reference groups in mind when it comes to assessing their deprivation.

THE PERCEPTIONS SHARED by both types of Socialists about the present unequal distribution of standards of living, and the lack of any close resemblance between *what is* and *what ought to be*, add interest to their replies to those questions in the survey which asked people

Table 2: Average Levels of Satisfaction in Various Life Areas (0 to 10 scale)

LIFE AREA	MIDDLE-CLASS WORKING-CLASS		
	LABOUR	TORY	LABOUR
Job	8.0	8.4	8.5
Housing	7.6	8.4	7.4
Health	7.6	7.9	7.6
Standard of living	7.5	7.9	7.1
Town where living	7.5	7.7	8.0
Leisure	7.3	7.6	7.4
District where living	7.1	7.9	7.3
Financial position	6.6	7.2	6.4
Education received	6.6	7.1	6.5
Democratic Process	6.3	7.0	6.5
<i>Life overall:</i>			
Now	7.4	7.8	7.5
Entitlement	8.7	8.6	8.6

to assess the relative importance of various circumstances that currently play a part in determining the average person's standard of living. The first of these questions asked the respondent to consider three possible causes, and then to indicate which one of them he thought was most important. The three possibilities were: (1) *his own efforts*; (2) *the way our society is organised and run*; or (3) *luck*.

The patterns and emphases of responses from both groups were strikingly similar—and surprising. Both gave two-thirds of their votes to the "own-efforts" determinant. There were some differences in the allocation of the minority options. Middle-class Socialists discounted "luck" almost completely, and nearly one-third of all their choices identified "the way society is organised" as the most important determinant. Working-class Labour supporters were not so apt to underestimate "luck." One in ten regard it as more important than either "personal effort" or the effects of the social system in determining one's standard of living.

A SECOND QUESTION asked the respondents to make a similar choice between three other possible determinants: (1) The strength of the trade unions; (2) the management and efficiency of employers; and (3) government policy. This time the patterns of response differed appreciably. Working-class Labour supporters, as compared with middle-class supporters, gave many more votes to "trade union strength" (34% as against 20%) and many fewer to "government policy" (25% as against 40%). In short, in the eyes of the working-class Socialist industrial action rather than Whitehall legislation ensures higher living standards for the ordinary man—*i.e.* themselves. But for both groups of socialists at least 60% of all votes went to one or the other of these two factors. Neither group seems to attach any substantial importance to managerial efficiency.

THE TWO GROUPS OF LABOUR SUPPORTERS can also be compared in the light of the answers they gave to a question in which the respondent was asked to choose from four listed socio-political values the two which seemed "most desirable" to him. The four offered him were:

1. Maintain law and order in the nation.
2. Give the people more say in important political decisions.

3. Achieve a higher standard of living for everyone.
4. Protect freedom of speech.

The hypothesis behind this question was that Conservatives of both classes would pick (1) and (3)—Order and Affluence (or peace and prosperity). Socialists of both classes would presumably choose (2) and (4)—Participation and Liberty.

The outcome, however, was very different. In both Socialist groups the biggest block of preferences went to the combination of Order and Affluence—just over 40%. A handful of middle-class Socialists (9%) opted for the expected combination of Freedom and Participation, and in the working class even fewer (3%) chose this pair. The rest picked other combinations; and the working class in particular put its support behind "more affluence" and "more participation" as the pairing that seemed to them most desirable.

MUCH OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE used in this survey was concerned with measuring people's levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various aspects of their lives—job, leisure, education, housing, etc. Again they used the 0-10 scale (with 10 indicating "completely satisfied", and 0 "completely dissatisfied").

The average levels of satisfaction expressed by the two groups were very similar. Middle-class Socialists expressed most satisfaction with their job (8.0); their health (7.6); their housing (7.6); the town in which they lived (7.5); and their standard of living (7.5). Four of these were also among the top scores of working-class Socialists; the one exception was "standard of living" which dropped down (to 7.1), and its place among the working-class top five was taken by "leisure" (7.4).

Middle-class Socialists gave the lowest average levels of satisfaction to their leisure (7.3); the district in which they live (7.1); their financial position<sup>2</sup> (6.6); the education they had received (6.6); and the quality of British democracy (6.3). Apart from the one difference already noted, these were also the low scorers in the working-class ratings.

ON THESE FIGURES one might be inclined to conclude that our respondents' Left-wing political attitudes spring from a frustration primarily with

the workings of British democracy and with the education they had received, and (to some extent) from their relatively unsatisfactory financial situation. This conclusion, however, is hardly supported by their answers when they were presented with a list of various life-areas that had been discussed, and were asked:

*"Which three on the list are the most important for you personally in determining how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your life as a whole these days?"*

Both groups of socialists indicated that they attached hardly any importance to either education or the democratic process. Both gave replies to the effect that very much more importance was attached to the state of their health and to their standard of living. The middle class Socialists added their "job" to this pair, while working-class Socialists added their "housing conditions."

THERE ARE, THEN, important differences in the backgrounds of these two groups of Labour supporters.

Those now in the middle class are much younger. They have had many more years of formal education. They have larger incomes. Their homes are better equipped with durable consumer goods; and they are much more likely to take their holidays either abroad or in their second homes in the country and by the sea. In religious beliefs they are more likely to describe themselves as Atheists and Jews, and are less likely to be Roman Catholics. Unlike their working-class comrades their jobs are mainly "clean", and their working hours are fewer. They have experienced much greater upward mobility within one generation. In their reading habits they prefer newspapers which communicate through words rather than pictures. And they see Government action, rather than trade-union action, as the more important determinant of the average citizen's material conditions.

But the two groups of Labour supporters have some things in common. Both consider that our democratic institutions are far from satisfactory. In particular, they feel that voters have too little influence over the way the country is governed, and that there is insufficient social equality. Both see business executives and investors enjoying very high standards of living, and feel these standards ought to be reduced. Both perceive

<sup>2</sup> *I.e.*, income plus assets minus debts and liabilities.

considerable inequalities in standards of living and think that these ought to be reduced—but not entirely eliminated. Both hold that they deserve to be better off than they are. Both, when asked to choose between them, favour order and affluence rather than participation and free speech. Both admit that they are well satisfied with their jobs and their housing, and both consider that—after “health”—“material well-being” is the most important in determining their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their lives as a whole.

And, finally, at least 60% of today’s middle-class Socialists have one other feature in common with working-class Labour supporters. They, too, come from working-class parents. They are far from being, in their political values, “class defectors” or rebels against parental norms. They are, rather, holding on—despite their changed status and life styles—to views acquired in childhood.

### Middle-Class Socialists & Middle-Class Conservatives

COMPARED with their Tory middle-class neighbours, middle-class Labour supporters are younger—there is an average age difference of twelve years between them. They are more likely to have Sixth Form and university education—25% have received full-time education at least until after their eighteenth birthday (the comparable Tory figure is 18%). They have slightly lower family incomes—there is an average difference of £5 a week between them. Perhaps as a consequence of this income gap, the average middle-class Socialist household (although much better equipped than the average working-class family) is, when compared with the middle-class Tory, less likely to have a car, a telephone, a washing-machine and central heating. However, when it comes to ownership of colour television, second homes, and taking holidays abroad, they do not lag much behind their Conservative neighbours. They are less likely to describe their religious ties as Church of England and more likely to be Atheists, Roman Catholics, or Jews.

WHEN ASKED TO CHECK from a list of 15 occupations the one that came closest to describing their own job, both Socialists and Tories naturally concentrated on the middle-class occupations—doctors and lawyers, civil servants, teachers,

company directors, owners of small firms, etc. But there were some striking differences between the two middle-class groups. For example, 32% of middle-class Tories described themselves as company directors, professional investors, or owners of small businesses. Among Labour supporters only 4% so described themselves. Or, again: 12% of Socialists were teachers as against a mere 1% among middle-class Tories. Broadly speaking, middle-class Socialists are mainly bureaucrats or are in the liberal professions. Middle-class Tories are much more closely associated with entrepreneurial activities.

There is also some, but hardly a substantial, difference between the two in terms of their parental backgrounds. Slightly over 60% of today’s middle-class Socialists come from working-class homes. Among Tories the proportion with some social mobility experience is a little over half. This difference is not nearly as large as one might have expected. Both middle-class groups have recruited heavily from the “socially successful” children of working-class parents.

NEWSPAPER READING HABITS are strikingly dissimilar. On weekdays half of all Tory middle-class newspaper reading is concentrated on the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*. Their appetite for *The Times* and *The Guardian* is extremely slight—2% read each of these. On Sundays the range of their reading is even narrower. Of those who take a paper just over half turn to the *Sunday Express*; the *Sunday Times* in second place accounts for another quarter.

What is distinctive and striking about the daily newspaper reading of middle-class Labour supporters is that so many of them are regular

**Table 3: Three Most Important Areas for Over-all Life-Satisfaction**

LIFE AREA	MIDDLE-CLASS		WORKING-CLASS
	LABOUR	TORY	LABOUR
	%	%	%
Health	21	25	21
Standard of living	19	16	17
Job	16	15	12
Income	11	11	15
Leisure	10	6	5
Housing	10	14	19
District	5	6	6
Democracy	5	6	3
Education	3	1	2
	100	100	100

readers of newspapers which do not support the Labour Party. Almost two-fifths read the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian*, but then their cumulative readership of the *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Daily Mail* is almost as large. Much the same is true of their Sunday newspaper reading when substantial minorities of middle-class Socialists turn to the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Sunday Express*, and to the *News of the World*.

WHEN RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED, first, to assess the quality of our existing democratic institutions, and then to indicate what their quality ought to be, significant differences emerged between the middle-class groups. Broadly, the Labour middle-class supporter has a relatively poor view of prevailing conditions and very high standards of what there ought to be. The middle-class Conservative is a little less critical of what we have and less demanding in his views of what is needed to bring about a more democratic society.

In their perceptions of the prevailing situation the two political groups, on average, gave similar patterns of answers. Both give fairly high ratings to the present degree of freedom of speech. Both award modest scores to British democracy, and to their own ability to understand current political issues. Both are in broad agreement that in Britain today the extent of toleration of minorities, of social equality, and of voter influence over government is low. Within the broad agreement between middle-class Socialists and middle-class Tories, the former consistently gave average scores that were very slightly lower; the average gap was less than 0.6 points behind the Tory ratings.

Again, in constructing their ideal democracy the two middle-class political groups often expressed almost identical views. On all six aspects, both gave ratings that were appreciably higher than what they felt is currently available. On all but one of them ("democracy in general") the Labour view of what should prevail was very slightly higher than the Tory rating. The only notable discrepancy related to "social equality." In turning from *what is* to *what ought to be* the average middle-class Socialist raised his score from 5.2 points to 9.0 points—a jump that greatly exceeded the average Tory increase from 6.0 points to 7.9. Indeed, in setting targets for an equitable society the middle-class Socialists placed social equality almost at the top of the list, while

the Conservatives located this value lower than any other.

THE STRONG VIEWS held by middle-class Socialists about the desirability of "more social equality" are not altogether matched by their views on the desirability of greater economic equality. They perceive very substantial differences currently between the standards of living of the rich and the poor. But, when asked how various groups would fare in a society where all received what they deserved, the most striking features of their responses were these:

1. To award *more* to almost everyone—the exceptions were business executives and those who live on investments. Both groups deserve much less than they currently have.
2. To claim a 20% increase for themselves.
3. To reduce—but certainly not to eliminate—the gap between themselves and the traditional underdogs of the economy (such as those who depend on social-security benefits, unskilled labourers, coloured immigrants, and shop assistants).
4. To give teachers (many middle-class socialists identified themselves as teachers) a 33% increase.
5. To award old-age pensioners increases that would more than double their present standard of living.

MIDDLE-CLASS TORIES have much the same perceptions of present inequalities: business executives, professional people, and investors enjoy the highest standards of living; old-age pensioners, shop assistants, unskilled labourers *et al.* come at the bottom. When asked to indicate what each of the several occupational groups deserved, they followed (up to a point) the pattern set by the middle-class Socialist. They, too, raised the average standard of living—but by only 13% as against the average Socialist increase of 23%. In particular, their picture of a society where incomes were based on "just deserts" is one where:

1. Everyone, except business executives and investors, is better off. The executives, however, suffer a mere 2% cut; but under a Tory middle-class dispensation of justice the person living

Table 4: How much ought there to be in the "democratic process"?  
(0 to 10 scale)

	MIDDLE-CLASS WORKING-CLASS		
	LABOUR	TORY	LABOUR
Ability to understand Politics	9.1	9.0	8.9
Social equality	9.0	7.9	8.8
Freedom of Speech	8.9	8.8	9.0
Voters' influence	8.8	8.5	8.9
Democracy in general	8.8	8.9	8.8
Tolerance	8.6	8.1	8.3

