

PEOPLE LIKE US: HOW HAROLD WILSON'S ORDINARINESS CHANGED THE POLITICAL IDENTITY OF BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT

Political leaders of Britain have evolved from removed statesmen, who maintained a distinction between Prime Minister and people, to cultural figures who desperately try to convince the electorate that they are 'one of us'. In the 1960s, traditional boundaries between politics and society began to erode. Prime Minister Harold Wilson revelled in the 1966 World Cup victory, indulged in Beatlemania, and generally participated in the social life of the United Kingdom; in doing so, he helped reclaim politics for the ordinary person. The premiership of an ageing Yorkshireman seems contradictory against the 1960s backdrop of sexual liberation, changing moral codes, and youth culture. However, this paper argues that Wilson's image of mundane normality was vital in the seismic shift that Britain experienced during his political tenure. Going beyond existing portrayals of Wilson as a one-dimensional figure and the 1960s as a time of radical upheaval, this paper uses previously unexamined sources relating to the political landscape of his election, his place in British popular culture, and his relationship with the Isles of Scilly to provide a nuanced understanding of such a significant period. With his iconic pipe, Yorkshire accent, and ordinary image, Wilson bridged the gap between the tradition he visually represented and the modern world he was politically and socially constructing. It was this unification that allowed him to successfully oversee a reconstitution of the relationship between people and Prime Minister, a fundamental upon which contemporary society has come to be built.

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s are historically regarded as a period of intense change that affected all areas of life. British people saw a cultural shift towards social movements which challenged previously accepted norms through the mediums of art, fashion, and music. Alongside this superficial tide of change, tenets of social tradition surrounding sex, class, and youth experienced a fundamental transformation and liberal legislation, which forms the main pillars of our modern society, came into place. The 1960s in Britain also saw the end of 13 years of Conservative government, and, in 1964, the arrival of a Labour government under Harold Wilson. Wilson worked his way up the Labour Party ranks using pragmatism and arrived with the intention to modernise left-wing politics whilst continuing to unify the party and the country. Representing a northern constituency, his proud normality may seem anomalous for a modernising politician. However, it was this image which was his most significant contribution to British life in the 1960s. Kenneth O. Morgan has identified Britain's mood as 'one of a nation discovering itself, seeing itself anew' (Morgan 2001: 209); national identity was destabilised by post-war uncertainty, and the electorate were left searching for a new kind of leader.

Overseeing this period, Harold Wilson could have acted as a radical reformer who epitomised the zeitgeist of the 1960s. However, throughout his premiership, he remained committed to projecting steadfast normality and expressed his ordinary persona through physical appearance, habits, and public behaviour. This traditional image seems contradictory to the period he oversaw, but his image helped smoothly herald the seismic cultural shifts and facilitate a sense of belonging throughout the British public.

Representations of the 1960s in popular culture have subsumed the complex reality of a modernising nation. Whilst

the society that was forged then may now seem quotidian, the dislocation of familiar values and norms was not easily accepted nationwide. Wilson's image of ordinariness served those who did not fit into a complete overhaul of British identity, as he bridged the gap between the ordinary people of Britain and the modern world. This article regards the 1960s not as a time of rigid revolution, but a moment of transition to which Wilson, as Ben Pimlott has stated, 'in personality, style, and carefully nurtured image [...] suited [...] exactly' (Pimlott 1992: 266).

Research on Harold Wilson focuses on governmental evaluations and neglects to probe the disparity between his image of stable normality and the oscillating social backdrop (e.g. Ponting 1989). Unlike other political figures, Wilson lacked a steadfast loyalty to the right or left wings of the Labour Party. Due to this political ambiguity, investigations into Wilson's record remain largely one-dimensional and even cynical at times (Ponting 1989). His use of visual mediums, such as television, has been regarded with contempt by historians; explorations of his image largely rely on analysing the finished product, rather than looking at the reasons behind constructing a certain persona. Interrogation of Wilson's character have focused on various temporary guises, summarised here by Morgan:

There was Dunkirk Harold in Churchillian garb, white-coated Harold caught in the white heat of the technological revolution, Walter Mitty Harold about to amaze the world with deeds...even World Cup Harold...with mood as a substitute for achievement. He remained elusive to the end (Morgan 1989: 259)

This article will explore the reality existing behind these caricatures and argue that his core image of sustained normality was a conscious endeavour to unite his electorate, an effort which should be recognised as vital in his social and political success. Firstly, the social circumstances of Wilson's

election will be identified to contextualise his prime-ministerial image. Subsequently, the paper will use Wilson's relationship with the Isles of Scilly to demonstrate that this image stemmed from reality and was successful in connecting him to local communities; this relationship will be regarded as microcosmic of Wilson's relationship with his electorate. Finally, the expression of Wilson's image in popular culture will be explored through using excerpts from *Private Eye's* satirical column 'Mrs Wilson's Diary'. Running through this analysis will be the main thesis: Harold Wilson's image of ordinariness acted as a vital link between the old Britain, and those who populated it, and the new nation he was building for them. Without his visual normality, large swathes of his electorate could have been alienated by the liberalisation he introduced; his image replaced potential trepidation with familiarity and accessibility, proving that modernisation would include everyone, even people like him.

METHODOLOGY

This article uses archival material collected at national and local levels. Opinion polls taken around Wilson's 1964 election help explain the social background of his image and consider the mood of the electorate as a possible motivation for his active promotion of his own ordinariness. The 1965 Landscape Charter for the Isles of Scilly and oral recordings showing the opinions of Scilly residents towards Wilson are used to examine his relationship to the Isles and what it represented in a wider context. *Private Eye's* 'Mrs Wilson's Diary' provides an opportunity to study Wilson's image within the cultural life of Britain; analysing the satirical caricature of Mary sheds light on how the image pervaded popular culture and was received by the electorate.

Individual studies of society and politics during the 1960s lack sources which link concerns regarding diminishing traditional values and emerging political trends. Wilson's image is examined in this article with the intention to dispute historical opinions, such as Tim Bale's, 'that Wilson had any true colours was, and is, of course, contentious' (Bale 1999: 124). It is necessary to recognise Wilson's demonstrations of accessibility and normality as essential links between the old and the new in 1960s Britain in order to avoid his image being classified as one of vague ambiguity.

Opinion Polls

Data generated by public opinion poll company Gallup around the 1964 election is evidential to the thesis that Wilson was answering a call for normality in British politics. One specific poll asked 'When deciding which party to support, which of these things do you look for first of all?'; the electorate rated highest 'forward looking plans for improving our standards of living' and 'concerns for the interests of myself, my family, and people like us' (Opinion poll, by Gallup, 1964, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Wilson d.26). This paper uses opinion polls to explore the views of people who do not typically characterise the era, including those of middle age, manual workers, and those disinterested in social change.

The core of this study revolves around 1964 as marking a shift in the relationship between the British electorate and their Prime Minister. Although historians such as Morgan have identified this, observing that 'public expectations of honour and decency in high places had fallen markedly' (Morgan 2001: 202), they have not yet speculated on alternatives to these Establishment values or compared them to Wilson's image. Evidence which shows the electorate looked for in a

leader supports the thesis that Wilson's normality was a political and social necessity.

Isles of Scilly Landscape Charter and Resident Testimony

Harold and his wife, Mary Wilson, maintained a relationship with the Isles of Scilly throughout their lives and continued to return regularly whilst Harold was Prime Minister. The Isles of Scilly museum holds a range of sources that provide insight to their time there including an oral archive, Harold's obituary in a local magazine, and visual images of the couple and their modest bungalow. These sources allow us to look at the reciprocal relationship between Wilson and his public, rather than focussing on his image as a monolithic feature of political landscapes. The way in which he was regarded by a local population can be used as representative of a wider appeal and accessible relationship he cultivated with his electorate. Sources that tie Wilson to the Isles of Scilly and show that this relationship depended on him as an ordinary person, rather than his political office, strengthen the thesis that his normality was key in his successful unification of traditional and modern elements of his electorate.

Private Eye's 'Mrs Wilson's Diary'

Wilson's central image of normality contrasted with the stately Conservative leaders of the 1950s. The British political satire boom was beginning as Wilson came into power (Carpenter 2002: 128), and his proud mundanity provided a source of material for satirists. *Private Eye* magazine exploited Wilson's accessible image in their Prime Minister parodies section. The imaginary diary of Mary chronicled her day-to-day life in Downing Street, and therefore defined the Wilsons' image in the British cultural sphere even more. Mary was presented as averse to her Establishment home, preferring middle-class comforts and looking after Harold, who was portrayed as an excitable, provincial, regular man. Promoting an image of Harold and Mary as a traditional loving couple, *Private Eye's* 'Mrs Wilson's Diary' exemplifies the contrast between Wilson's image within popular culture and his legislation which allowed the easier enjoyment of casual sex and singleness (Yates 2010: 88-108).

The importance of non-political sources has been underestimated by previous studies of Wilson and the 1960s; the use of personal and cultural sources allows us to enhance our communal understanding of both Wilson and the period.

'PEOPLE LIKE US': 1964 ELECTION

Analysing opinion poll data shows that Wilson's image aligned with the public sentiment and social atmosphere of his first election. Despite the dynamic backdrop framing the 1964 victory, the results that saw Wilson into office were politically underwhelming. Possessing a narrow majority of four seats, Wilson lacked the strong mandate that would be expected for an enactment of meaningful social change.

Historians, such as Steven Fielding, note that the election had been 'popularly regarded as one of the great progressive turning points in Britain's modern political history' (Fielding 2007: 309). Data taken from 1964 Gallup polls show that Wilson's slender victory was awarded to him primarily by voters in the 45-65 age bracket, coming predominantly from the working classes (Survey, by Gallup, 1964, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Wilson d.26). These voters went to the ballot box to elect a leader whom, as they had explicitly outlined in polls, needed to have 'plans to increase the standard of living and make the world a better place', and

'concern for the interest of myself, my family, and people like us' (MS. Wilson d.26). Wilson's 1964 success was a victory for those people who wanted a leader like them, rather than representing a complete social endorsement of liberalisation and left-wing politics. Differing views concerning the political implications of this election tend to neglect the more profound change taking place within the British electorate: they asked for familiarity, accessibility and collective representation, rather than a distant figure of leadership, and received it.

This call for normality, paired with a slim parliamentary majority, echoes the thesis that Wilson's image of ordinariness was a conscious and deliberate choice. However, pleas for people 'like us' did not correspond to a fixed homogeneous identity. National identity during this era was particularly in flux, as post-war society became divided by conflicting social values, norms, and priorities. Richard Weight has remarked that 'Britishness' declined in the 20th century (Weight 2002: 11), creating a vacuum which needed to be filled by a reliable figure who could at once represent the young and the old, the traditional and the modern, and everything in between. Wilson embraced this potential for a reconstitution of British identity, whilst recognising the political necessity of appealing to a wide electorate.

Furthermore, Andrew Thorpe has written of the 1966 election being 'still highly class defined in its voting patterns' (Thorpe 2019: 163); he notes that Labour took its highest ever share of the manual worker vote whilst also taking more than a quarter of the non-manual vote for the first time since 1945 (Thorpe 2019: 163). This initial success with the middle-aged working classes of Britain in 1964 was sustained into the later years of the 1960s, and Wilson's appeal broadened as he gained increasing support beyond Labour's traditional voting pools. In representing the ordinary components of British identity whilst normalising the liberalisation of others, Wilson was able to reassure his electorate that an equilibrium between the old and the new was viable, and desirable.

THE ISLES OF SCILLY

The Wilsons first travelled to the Isles in 1952 and started to build their bungalow, 'Lowenva' in 1958. Mary chose the Isles as Harold's final resting place after his death in 1995. Wilson's authorised biographer, Philip Ziegler, has described the islands as 'the place where the Wilson's felt most at ease' (Ziegler 1993: 168).

Harold Wilson's relationship with the Isles of Scilly is emblematic of the authenticity and success of his ordinary image. The close-knit community and physical dislocation from the British mainland allow us to further probe Wilson's image in a local context. The relationship he developed with the residents of the Isles demonstrate that his image of normality allowed him to connect with members of his electorate on a more intimate level than a formal image may have allowed; this enduring success can be seen to mirror his appeal to the wider British electorate.

The Landscape Charter

After becoming Prime Minister, Wilson maintained his relationship with the Isles and included them in his political concerns. In 1965, the first Landscape Charter for the Isles of Scilly laid out a blueprint for the future of the Isles, with a copy being sent to Wilson. Engagement with the Isles at such an intense time in his career demonstrates Wilson's desire to maintain links to his ordinary personal life despite his extraordinary political role.

Within the Charter, Tregarthen Mumford, Chairman of the Council, states the ethos of the Isles of Scilly: 'Not to spoil – this is always our theme' (a Landscape Charter for the Isles of Scilly, 1965, Bodleian Library, MS. Wilson c.1642). Mumford's foreword talks of the need to secure the unique Scillonian way of life by drawing out plans to protect the geography and nature of the Isles (MS Wilson c.1642). Choosing to cement his links and vested interest in the Isles whilst in public office, Wilson endorsed the spirit of enduring stability that the archipelago represented.

Allowing his electorate to witness their Prime Minister holidaying in his shorts and smoking his pipe on a British beach strengthened the aura of accessibility and normality which Wilson exuded. Visual images of the Prime Minister taking pride in otherwise neglected domestic landscapes, rather than jetting off to foreign locations, allowed Wilson to become emblematic of the ordinary person and a patriotism which was becoming increasingly splintered. Weight has commented on the historical British power of transforming the 'popular image of the countryside from a backward hovel into a picturesque repository of national values' (Weight 2002: 7). Wilson's affinity to the landscape and mood of the Isles of Scilly, demonstrated in the Charter of 1965, bolstered the image of stability, normality, and provincial pride that linked him to those forgotten by the radical overarching changes of the 1960s.



Figure 1: Harold Wilson on holiday on the Isles of Scilly

(Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Wilson a.10)

Wilson As An Islander: 'He Was One Of Us'

To measure the image's success, we need to consider how it was received and regarded by members of Wilson's electorate. Researching his relationship with the Isles of Scilly therefore requires an exploration into the views and opinions that the islanders held regarding their prime-ministerial visitor.

Video recordings of a bus tour around the islands led by resident Vic Trenwith show Harold and Mary's bungalow; small, grey, and modest. 'Lowenva' is described by Trenwith as 'two back doors and no front door, and no chimney – the

famous bungalow' (Isles of Scilly Museum Oral History Archive, video 58-1). This fond mocking of the Prime Minister's residence being far from palatial shows the extent to which Wilson's image was founded on, and benefitted from, genuine accessibility and mutual respect between himself and his electorate.

Wilson's obituary in a local Scilly magazine reinforces this sentiment of Wilson being an equal and cements his inclusion in their island community. The personal affection expressed crystallises the contradiction between Wilson's image of familiar normality and his status as Prime Minister, two elements which he worked to unite. Scillonian John Nicholls remembers Wilson as 'a small balding man, a rucksack on his back, Prime Minister of Britain', going on to recount:

first of all it was Mr Wilson then latterly Lord Wilson. But to me and most of Scilly they were known as Harold and Mary... Scilly has lost a good friend (J. Nicholls cited in Scilly up-to-date, July 1995, no. 89: 2-3).

The idea of Harold as having a presence and a position on the Isles which existed independently of his role as Prime Minister shows how his time there resembles his resonance in wider British society. His ordinariness allowed his image to transcend the boundaries of politics and become embedded in the identity of 1960s Britain.

'MRS WILSON'S DIARY'

Wilson's personal normality reinforced his public image of ordinariness, epitomised by the publication of *Private Eye's* 'Mrs Wilson's Diary'. The satirical take on Mary's interiority capitalised on Wilson's visual character and demonstrated how this image translated through cultural mediums. This particular cultural representation hinged on the significance of Mary, a figure often forgotten in appraisals of Harold.

In 'Mrs Wilson's Diary', Richard Ingrams and John Wells presented Harold and Mary as an ordinary ageing couple, who had happened to end up in 10 Downing Street. Harold and Mary as a loving, stable couple provided a vital cultural marker, contrasting with Wilson's Government making changes which fundamentally impacted sex and relationships, such as legalising abortion and homosexuality, easing divorce guidelines, and making the contraceptive pill freely available through the NHS. Proudly appearing as a married man, Wilson could simultaneously endorse sexual liberation whilst advocating for traditional relationship models.

The imagined Mary makes repeated allusions to her personal discomfort and dislike of No. 10, confiding in her diary that 'sometimes I would give the earth just to be back in Hampstead Garden Suburb with Harold and the cat' (Ingrams and Wells 1965: 33). This portrayal of Mary not belonging where her husband's career took her separates her from the political world and thus generates an affinity with the ordinary person reading *Private Eye*, as well as mirroring her independent reality.

Appearing one year after Wilson had answered the electorate's call for 'people like us', 'Mrs Wilson's Diary' placed the new Prime Minister in a domestic context of regularity and humour. Tying him to his wife, and inflating their normality to parochialism, the Diaries epitomise the power of Wilson's image. Peter Hennessy has stated that 'for Wilson, much of the glory of the premiership lay in its antiquity' (Hennessy 2001: 38). This distinction between Wilson as an individual and the role he fulfilled shows that Prime Minister was not his sole identity in the British consciousness. This idea of his

normality as being of equal social importance to his position is further bolstered by his portrayal in 'Mrs Wilson's Diary'. Viewing the Prime Minister through his wife's eyes, he becomes 'Harold...wiping up the last of his gravy with a piece of Hovis' (Ingrams and Wells 1965: 22) and returning from America to the Scilly bungalow 'dressed in his summery things, with his 'I Love L.B.J. t-shirt' (ibid: 57). As both Harold and Mary publicly embraced this representation of them, the electorate were offered an alternative view of their Prime Minister in a social and cultural context.

'Mrs Wilson's Diary' provides the perfect medium through which to express the central tension between tradition and modernity in Wilson's image. Harold and Mary's championing of conventional marriage provided a source of solace for those pining for symbols of traditional values in an increasingly liberal sexual landscape. Conversely, the ability of *Private Eye* to satirise Wilson so intimately during his premiership was symbolic of the rapidly changing relationship between the Prime Minister and electorate which Wilson enabled and oversaw.

Weight has argued that 'Wilson presented change as an amplification of British traditions, rather than a betrayal of them' (Weight 2002: 362). Using his normality as the foundation of his public image, Wilson could inhabit personal, political, and cultural spheres with an amorphous identity which at once allowed him to appear as an agent and fellow observer of change.

THE POLITICS OF ORDINARINESS TODAY

Like Harold Wilson, contemporary leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and currently Boris Johnson, have depended on an image of normality for political success. Johnson's own strategy appears to be riding the unstable wave of populism and exploiting a rising tide of political apathy and disillusionment for his own political agenda. Claiming to represent members of a society where an anti-Establishment sentiment pervades, Johnson has adopted a performative normality through which he has established a hyperbolic caricature of himself: 'Boris'. In assuming this façade of the harmless clown, whether zip-wiring across London in a Union Jack harness (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-19079733>, date accessed 30.07.2020), or delivering tea in an assortment of mugs which are misrepresentative of his wealthy background whilst avoiding questions about controversial comments (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-45164768/johnson-gives-journalists-tea-while-avoiding-burka-questions>, date accessed 30.07.2020), Johnson has been able to visually appear as antithetical to the privilege and elitism he personally, morally, and politically represents.

To establish and further explore the importance of being ordinary in modern British politics requires a recognition of Harold Wilson as the trend's starting point. Study of the genuine roots and benign use of Wilson's own normality demonstrates that the image of regularity and an accessible relationship between Prime Minister and electorate can be a powerful force for good, as opposed to a channel for political exploitation and deceit.

CONCLUSION

Ruminations on the significance of the 1960s often focus on isolated sections of society, and fail to identify unifying links between social, political, and cultural spheres. By exploring the fundamental connection between Wilson's image of ordinariness and the electoral calls for a leader 'like us', our

understanding of the 1960s can be expanded. Rather than compartmentalised focus on cultural markers and conflict, a multidimensional comprehension of the period and Wilson's importance reveals the flourishing of a more profound social phenomenon. Without Wilson and his image of ordinariness, British society would remain founded upon archaic frameworks which intend to separate the Prime Minister and ordinary people, rather than bring them together.

Through his ordinary image and character, Harold Wilson was a bridge between post-war Britain of familiar tradition and the modern landscape of the 1960s. In showing his electorate that he, an ageing Yorkshireman who retained his modest behaviour and preferences whilst at the forefront of the

political Establishment, had a place in a liberalised society, Wilson successfully led the British people into the modern world leaving no one behind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Kate Hale and Emma Moore for their help and access to sources from the Isles of Scilly Museum and oral archive, and also thank *Private Eye* for the use of excerpts from 'Mrs Wilson's Diary' (www.private-eye.co.uk)

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