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The Trade Unions and the 'Winter of Discontent':  
A Case of *Myth*-Taken Identity?

J. Shepherd, *Crisis? What Crisis? The Callaghan Government and the British 'Winter of Discontent'* (Manchester University Press: 2013) xii + 205pp, £70, ISBN 978-0-7190-8247-4.

T. Martin Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent: Myth, Memory and History* (Liverpool University Press: 2014) 252pp, £70, ISBN 978-1-7813-8029-1

Colin Hay

*Sorrow breaks seasons and reposing hours,  
Makes the night morning and the noontide night*  
(Brakenbury, Richard III, Act 1, Scene 4, l. 76–77).

A lot can change in a season, especially if that season is winter and one is the Prime Minister of a minority Labour government seeking to extricate the economy from an unprecedented and seemingly intractable condition of 'stagflation' by imposing on the trade unions a ceiling on wage increases at around half the prevailing rate of inflation. So it was as autumn turned to winter in 1978. The story is well known. Indeed, it has long since entered into British folklore – and strangely perhaps it seems to have done so even as the events themselves were unfolding. Over three decades later and with historians and political scientists now enjoying the access to the public record afforded by the thirty-year rule, the evidence is in and a more systematic appraisal and reappraisal of the 'Winter of Discontent' is possible.

Yet it is perhaps naive to think that a perfect sifting of fact from folklore and fiction is ever possible. And, with such an intensely mythologized and symbolically significant historical episode, that inherent difficulty is compounded by the powerful sense that to understand the Winter of Discontent is, precisely, to understand the role of folklore, fiction, and mythology in the unfolding of historical events.

It is in this context, I will argue, that we should read, engage with and evaluate the recent contributions of John Shepherd and Tara Martin Lopez. Theirs are, in effect, the first book-length detailed historical accounts of the events of the Winter of Discontent and the narratives both with which they became suffused and to which, in turn, they gave rise to be written since the full opening of the archives. As such, and albeit in rather different ways, they provide the evidential basis for a reappraisal or benchmarking of what we know – or think we know – about this almost legendary episode.

My aim in what follows, then, is not just to review critically the contribution of each book to the existing literature but, and perhaps more significantly, to begin to use the evidence they assemble to adjudicate between the many contending perspectives which still fight over the interpretation of this most highly charged and contested historical juncture. That I seek to do so – and that there might be value in so doing – is at least in part because, for reasons that we will come to presently and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, neither of these books seeks to take stock of the Winter of Discontent in this way. Shepherd is certainly closer to declaring this as his at least ostensibly stated ambition. But, somewhat frustratingly, his analyses typically stop just short of adjudicating between contending claims in the existing literature and even of establishing what precisely is at stake for the wider debate in resolving the series of questions that he seeks to answer. His perspective, forensically detailed and richly evidenced though it certainly is, often remains rather implicit – and it would appear that, despite some ostensible claims to the contrary in the introductory chapter, his task is rather more to bring the evidence to light than it is to establish a definitive account of what happened and its enduring significance. There is a refreshing honesty and disarming modesty about this, but it does make the book feel at times more like a route-map through the archives (supplemented, of course, by copious references to witness testimony, biography, and his own and others' interviews with direct participants) than it does the direct intervention in the debate that it could have been. That said, it is undoubtedly a very fine work of (predominantly) archival contemporary political history that is destined, quite rightly, to become the primary reference point for all subsequent scholarship on the Callaghan government, the demise of the Social Contract and the immediate pre-

history of Thatcherism. But fine though it is, it is also very traditional and at times one almost feels the need to blow the dust of the archives from the pages of the text.

Yet superficial impressions can be misleading and even here all is not quite what it seems. The text certainly reads and feels very much like a traditional piece of archival history. But Shepherd is, in fact, quite wide ranging, even unconventional, in his use of sources and his analysis draws (albeit sparingly) on close to fifty interviews with key protagonists in the drama while relying extensively (in the end, perhaps *too* extensively) on the biographies of a number of Cabinet ministers and their advisors. As such, the book is less conventional than it appears. Indeed, there is a certain irony here. For where Lopez's rather more obviously iconoclastic text and Shepherd's part company, it is typically Lopez who provides either the prescient insight from the archive or the telling quote from sources rather closer to the core of the action to trump, in effect, one of Shepherd's many anecdotes from a key protagonist's biography or from one of his own interviews. One example, among many, concerns the crucial question of where the 5% wage limit at the heart of the dispute between the unions and the government originated in the first place. Shepherd, true to form, cites Shirley Williams from an interview with the author in 2008. In it she suggests, quite credibly, that the figure was 'probably based on Treasury models' (p. 37).<sup>1</sup> Yet Lopez's greater triangulation of sources would lead us to contextualize this observation rather differently. For, drawing on the comments of Bill Rodgers (as Secretary of Transport at the time, a figure rather closer to the action), she shows that the Treasury in fact held back its latest inflation projections (which were, in fact, rather higher than those it chose to share with Callaghan) and that, as a consequence, the 5%, though certainly informed by Treasury models (as Williams suggests), was not informed by the Treasury's then current thinking (p. 59).<sup>2</sup> Callaghan, in effect, acted on the basis of Treasury misinformation. The additional

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<sup>1</sup> For a similar observation see her autobiography, published the year after, see S. Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves: The Autobiography* (Virago: 2009), **PAGE?**

<sup>2</sup> W. Rodgers, 'Government under Stress: Britain's Winter of Discontent', *Political Quarterly* (PQ) 55:2 (1984), pp. 171–9.

context is extremely valuable and, time and again, and despite (or conceivably because of) the seemingly greater archival immersion of Shepherd, it is Lopez who provides it.

As this perhaps already serves to suggest, Lopez' book, while drawing on many of the same sources, is very, very different in ambition, style, and content to Shepherd's. Where his remains almost stubbornly conventional, hers is engagingly and infectiously unconventional. It is also much more ambitious and the nature of that ambition is fundamentally different from that of Shepherd. For, as its subtitle ('myth, counter-memory and history') subtly hints, this is above all a work of remembrance, recovery, even of *restitution* – a social (as distinct from political) history which arises from an unapologetically normative and dispositionally empathic relationship towards the everyday participants in the events which have come to characterize and constitute the Winter of Discontent. Her history is, in a sense, their history, a social and an oral history that she seeks to piece together from their own testimony. In so doing, she seeks to reclaim from the mythology in and through which these events are typically viewed, the experiences, the motivations and, above all, the authentic voices of the genuine participants – and to juxtapose these to the palpable fiction of the accepted narrative. It is for precisely this reason that Lopez's aim is not to revisit and to resolve existing controversies in the light of the new evidence she brings to light. For, in a sense, the implication of her approach is that the existing literature has been posing the wrong questions and gathering its evidence in the wrong way – it is, in effect, an elite political history of elite political conduct that is incapable of the kind of remembrance and reclamation that Lopez seeks.

Here, too, initial perceptions can be misleading. For, as I have already hinted at, Lopez has a lot to say about many of the issues that have divided historians and political analysts of the (elite) politics of the period. One might even suggest that, important though it clearly is to contextualize politically the situation in which rank-and-file union members found themselves, at times Lopez traps herself in precisely the same kind of elite political history that Shepherd exemplifies and that she ostensibly rejects.

Yet that is perhaps just a little too harsh. For this, too, is a very fine book and most of the history it contains, whether conventional and elite-political or less conventional and socially recapitulative, is fresh, insightful and innovative. Indeed, if I have a central analytical gripe with the account she offers it is not about providing too much contextualisation, but too little. It is, in fact, precisely the same gripe I have with Shepherd's analysis – the failure to provide a sufficiently detailed *economic* or, more accurately, *political-economic* contextualization of the struggles of the Winter of Discontent. As I will suggest presently, I think this leads both Shepherd and Lopez to fail to appreciate adequately the corner into which the terms of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, on the one hand, and the Callaghan administration's management of the Social Contract, on the other, backed the unions. Appropriately contextualized in this way it becomes clear, I contend, that the crisis, when it came, was almost bound to take the form of the withdrawal of rank-and-file union members' support for an ever more regressively redistributive incomes policy from which they got less and less in return. Indeed, by early 1979 all that the Callaghan government could offer union members in the hope that they might be persuaded to return from the picket lines and suffer (in silence) an accelerating reduction in their real earnings was the thought that things could only get worse under a Conservative administration. The tragic irony is that, in this at least, they were proved right. This, I think, should be integral to any attempt to reclaim and give voice to the hidden history of the winter of 1978–79.

In fact there is one other issue that I have with both of these accounts, though to call it a gripe would be putting it far too strongly. Indeed, one of the things that I like so much about both books is that they take so seriously, certainly in comparison to much of the preceding debate, the mythology of the Winter of Discontent and its significance for the legacy of this (retrospectively) ruptural moment.<sup>3</sup> But, ultimately, I think both get the mythology of the Winter of Discontent

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<sup>3</sup> Retrospective, in the sense that it was far from clear at the time that the Winter of Discontent was or would become, in effect, the point of inception of Thatcherism, and that Thatcherism would endure and evolve for so long afterwards. Thus, it is only with the benefit of both hindsight and the (politically contingent) unfolding of the history that

– and perhaps the role of mythology in the process of historical change, more generally – wrong. And they do so in a remarkably similar way.

This is a point that I will elaborate in much more detail, below. But, in brief, there are two elements to this. First, I think Shepherd and Lopez are misguided in seeing the mythology of the Winter of Discontent as, in effect, a *retrospective* construction conveniently placed upon events *once they had happened* and crystallized in the Conservatives' 1979 general election campaign. In fact neither presents very much evidence for this view and I would suggest that there is plenty of evidence that the crisis was lived, experienced, and responded to *in real time* – by direct participants as much as by more distant observers – in and through what we would now term the 'mythology' to which it gave rise. As such, myth and mythology were integral to what the Winter of Discontent was, and the events themselves are no less real for this. This is what I mean by a 'constructed crisis', though the term has been widely misinterpreted, not least by both Lopez and Shepherd, as I will seek to explain.<sup>4</sup> Second, and relatedly, such a view of the mythology of the Winter of Discontent as chronologically subsequent to and hence independent of the events themselves, leads both authors to attempt some kind of 'debunking' or 'demystification' – the sifting of fact from fiction. But, if we accept that the mythology was not chronologically subsequent to, *but simultaneous with*, the events then no such corrective demystification is possible. Put differently, the Winter of Discontent unfolded in the way in which it did precisely because of the myths in and through which it was lived, experienced, and responded to at the time. We can correct, after the fact and after the careful sifting of the evidence, the misinterpretations and misinformation on which such myths were predicated, but to

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was to follow, that one can fully appreciate the significance of the moment in which Thatcherism itself was born.

<sup>4</sup> On the Winter of Discontent as a 'constructed crisis', see C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the Winter of Discontent', *Sociology* 30:2 (1996), pp. 253–7; *idem*, 'The Winter of Discontent Thirty Years On', *PQ* 80:4 (2009), pp. 545–52; *idem*, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and the Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism', *Parliamentary Affairs* 63:3 (2010), pp. 446–70.

understand what happened is to understand the effects at the time of precisely such misinterpretations and misinformation.

My reflections, in what follows, are split into two parts. In the first of these I seek to develop a fuller appreciation of the (many) strengths and (fewer) weaknesses of these important new studies of the Winter of Discontent. In the second I seek to take stock of the place of the Winter of Discontent in the wider political and economic history of the post-war period, in a way that neither book does, by reconsidering some of the major unresolved disputes in the literature in the light of the new evidence that each study unearths.

The Winter of Discontent: myth-contextualized, myth-understood

Given that they draw on so many of the same sources and deal ostensibly with the same subject, it is remarkable how different these two books are in focus, style, and analytical content. Lopez's book, as I have already sought to suggest, is an almost restorative and redemptive work of normative social history. It seeks, above all else, to piece together and thereby to retrieve the experiences, subjectivities, and identities of rank-and-file union members from their pervasive depiction in the folklore of the time as instrumental, self-serving 'wreckers' bent on 'holding the country to ransom' to extract more than their fair share of the country's meagre economic resources, with wanton disregard for the consequences for others. In this way, Lopez uses oral history to restore to the otherwise silenced direct participants in the events themselves a voice and an identity largely effaced by the mythology in which the Winter of Discontent has come to be shrouded. She seeks, in other words, to give back to the strikers and pickets their, quite literally, *myth*-taken identity. And, in so doing, she sets out to correct a systematic bias in the elite political history of the period by juxtaposing the conventional view, reconstructed from the perspective of those whose voices are recorded in the official archives, the witness seminars, the biographies, and the autobiographies of the period with the subject-position of the pickets and strikers themselves.



Yet this would suggest that Lopez offers us a radical alternative social history of the Winter of Discontent, strikingly different from that of Shepherd, for instance. But though perhaps inherent in the logic of her approach that is, in the end, not quite what we get. For her book starts and finishes in much more familiar territory, in the well-worn elite political history of the winter of 1978–79. In between, to be sure, she strives – at times, quite brilliantly – to reconstruct and give a voice to rank-and-file union members and, indeed, their leaders and she unearths, in the process, a range of extremely important factors almost entirely overlooked in the existing literature (most notably, perhaps, the rapid organizational and generational changes underway in British trade unions at the time). But the questions that she seeks to answer with this new material are, in the end, perhaps all too familiar and all too conventional: whether Callaghan was right to decide against an early election in the autumn of 1978, whether he should have declared a State of Emergency early in 1979 and so forth. And her answers, though supremely well-informed and invariably extremely persuasive are actually quite conventional too.

There are, of course, different ways of interpreting this: (1) that Lopez merely shows (with recourse to valuable new evidential material) that the revisionist history of the Winter of Discontent associated with authors such as Steve Ludlam, Paul Smith, Nick Tiratsoo and, perhaps even myself, is broadly correct;<sup>5</sup> (2) that she reminds us that although not consciously intended as a redemptive reconstruction of the events from the perspective of the direct participants, that literature always contained within it a much more credible and sophisticated view of the motivational dispositions of rank-and-file union members (than in the popular mythology of the time); and (3) that one does not need a redemptive reconstruction of the identities and motivations of the strikers and pickets in order to answer the questions that

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<sup>5</sup> See S. Ludlam, '“Old” Labour and the Winter of Discontent', *Politics Review* 9 (2000), pp. 30–3; P. Smith, 'The Winter of Discontent: The Hire and Reward Haulage Dispute, 1979', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)* 7 (1999), pp. 27–54; N. Tiratsoo, 'You've never had it so bad: Britain in the 1970s', in N. Tiratsoo (ed.), *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1997); Hay, 'Narrating Crisis'; *idem*, 'Chronicles'.

Lopez poses herself and that, partly as a consequence, she is in danger of not making the best use of the new oral testimony she gathers.

Perhaps unremarkably, I see some mileage in all three responses. In a way, the first two can be taken together. Lopez's careful and sensitive reconstruction of the motivations of rank-and-file union members involved in the Winter of Discontent is not principally intended as a critique of the existing scholarly history of the period, except in the sense that it reminds us (usefully) of the dangers of presuming to know the motivations of political actors (especially where the option exists of asking them directly). As such, and particularly since her oral testimony largely verifies the more complex motivational assumptions made in that literature, it is hardly surprising that she reaches similar conclusions to it.

There is perhaps an additional point to be made here. If the weakness of the existing literature (which Lopez seeks to correct) lies in its failure to treat the motives and motivational dispositions of the direct participants as an open empirical question, then there is perhaps an inverse weakness in Lopez' own account – and one to which I have already alluded. For motivations are contextual, and Lopez, I would suggest, fails adequately to contextualize the behaviour of the strikers and pickets. In a way her interviews, sensitively and sympathetically redemptive though they undoubtedly are, tell us more about the *agency* exhibited by the union members she talks to in the invention and performance of the rituals of protest that characterized the Winter of Discontent than they tell us about the underpinning *motivations* informing such agency. For to get at these, Lopez would almost certainly have had to adopt a more inquisitorial and interrogatory mode of intervention – pushing respondents to relate their agency (what they did) back to their perception of the political and economic context in which they found themselves (getting them, in effect, to explain how and why they felt that what they did was justified).

An alternative strategy, rather closer in fact to the existing literature, would have been to relate the narratives of the participants she retrieves through oral history to her own understanding of the context in which union members found themselves. But to do this adequately would require rather more political economy than Lopez's book ultimately delivers. In order to make sense of the behaviour of strikers and pickets, and even to make sense of the narratives they offer

retrospectively of their behaviour, I argue, would require placing them in the appropriate political and, above all, economic context. Lopez brings us significantly closer to the point where we might be able to do that – by furnishing us with the narratives that we might relate to our understanding of the context in which the Winter of Discontent took place – but she does not provide it herself.

This brings us directly to the third point identified above, that is the suggestion, hinted at again in the preceding paragraph, that Lopez does not make full use of the opportunity to engage directly with union members that her interviews afford her. Again, I think there is something in this, and, laudable though it is, it might well be that construing her interviews as part of a process of redemption, is part of the problem here. For there remain a number of unresolved and even unasked questions in the political and economic history of the Winter of Discontent that urgently need to be addressed. But this is hardly a critique of Lopez. For reading her work makes one more aware of those questions. Indeed, arguably she is perhaps better placed than anyone to pose and to answer them, since she is one of the very few analysts of the period to talk directly to rank-and-file union members. The key question here, it strikes me, is ‘what *was* the alternative to Thatcherism?’ This is, of course, a phenomenally difficult question to answer with any authority.

But some things are clear. First, as almost all commentators agree, the attempt to control inflation by binding public-sector unions and their members to a degree of wage moderation that could not be secured in the private sector was untenable. But, second, and as we shall see in more detail presently, from 1975 onwards the Labour government (under first Wilson and then Callaghan) was in fact remarkably successful in bringing down inflation while holding unemployment essentially stable (see Figure 1).

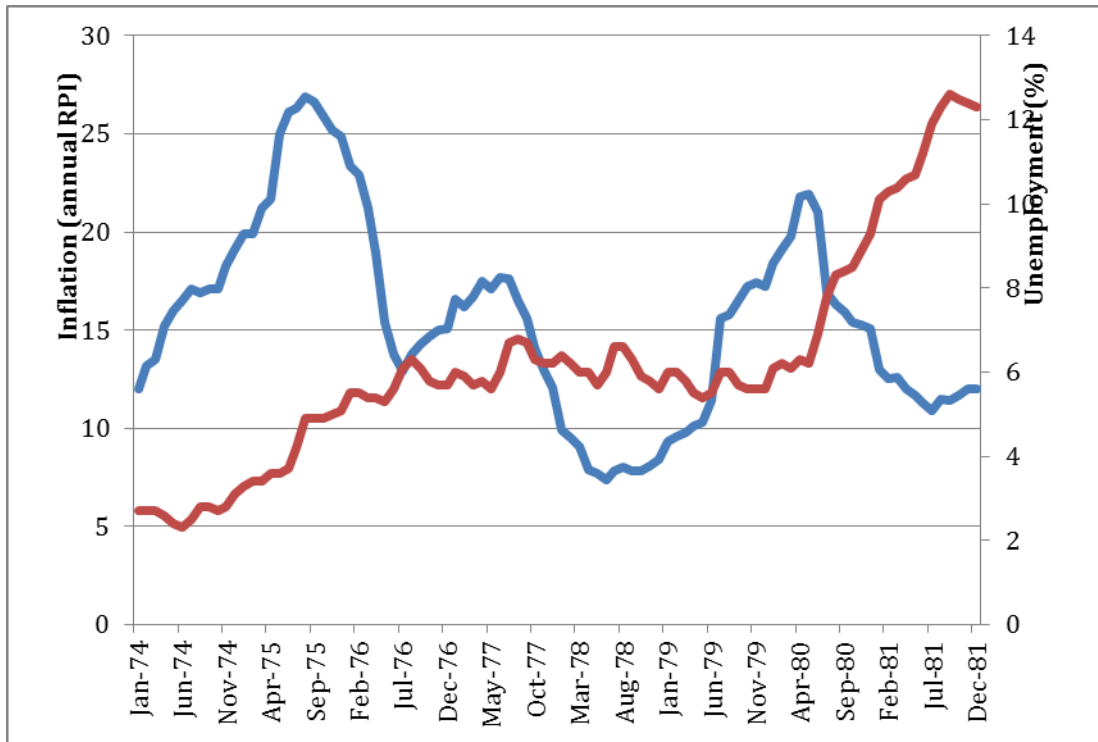


Figure 1: Managing the problem of 'stagflation'

Source: HM Treasury, *Economic Trends* (various years)

Key: unemployment (-); inflation (-)

In this respect its record was, of course, much better than that of the government of Margaret Thatcher which replaced it. As Figure 2 shows, during the years of 'crisis' (between the first quarter of 1974 and the second quarter of 1979) the British economy grew by around 12%, whereas the putative 'solution' to the crisis (from the first quarter of 1979 to the end of 1982) saw it shrink by 2.2%. The medicine may very well have been worse than the condition.

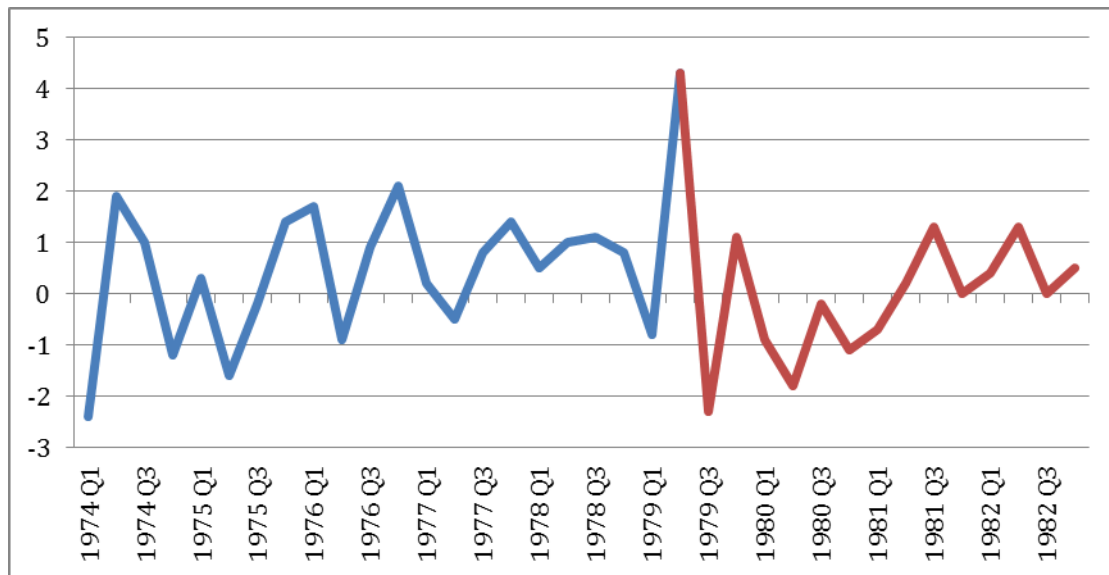


Figure 2: Economic output growth, 1974–1982

Source: HM Treasury, *Economic Trends* (various years)

Key: Labour tenure (-); Conservative tenure (-)

This suggests that there was a tenable alternative to Thatcherism, if only it could have been found. But, and this is the crux of the matter, to get a credible sense of what that might have been requires an assessment not only of the extent of the gulf of ideas separating union members, union leaders, and the government (which, to some extent we already have), but also a sense of what the former might have deemed acceptable in return for a binding agreement to a degree of wage moderation consistent with the management of inflation. The answer to that question still evades us. But if we are ever to find it, it can only be through the kind of oral history that Lopez’s work exemplifies.

Thus far I have tended to emphasize the striking differences between these two works. But no less striking are their similarities. Indeed, given that one is primarily a work of archival elite political history (ostensibly concerned with the Callaghan government’s role in, and culpability for, the Winter of Discontent), the other primarily a work of redemptive oral social history (ostensibly concerned with retrieving a ‘counter-memory’ from the long-forgotten subjects of that winter), it is staggering how much they have in common. Perhaps most surprising of all is their shared chronology, which even extends to the rather quirky ordering of the narrative they both present. Thus, both books start their substantive analysis (after a fair bit of

set up and framing) not with the Winter of Discontent at all but with the 1979 general election campaign. This, as I have already suggested, is largely – and both strangely and problematically, to my mind – because they see the mythology of the Winter of Discontent (with which both, refreshingly, are interested) as originating not in the events themselves but in the election campaign that was to follow. This is a point to which I return below. But, having overturned the well-established chronology of the Winter of Discontent at the start, both authors return to a very conventional, and rigidity chronologically-ordered, narrative in subsequent chapters. Thus, even if the content of the narrative is rather different, the episodes recounted and the order in which they are recounted, are both extremely familiar and almost identical to those in the existing literature. Accordingly, after a little contextualization in the politics and industrial relations of the 1970s (arguably too little, in both cases), the Winter of Discontent is seen to begin with the dispute at Ford, followed by the road haulage strike and the oil tanker drivers' overtime ban before we turn to the public-sector National Day of Action on 22 January 1979, and thence to the series of disputes and strikes involving public-sector workers (notably the infamous Liverpool gravediggers' strike, and stoppages and strikes by other local government and National Health Service staff) that would rumble on until the devolution referendum and the vote of no confidence in the Callaghan government. Things come full circle as we return to where we started with the 1979 general election campaign and, ultimately, to Thatcher standing on the steps of Downing Street quoting St Francis of Assisi.

What are we to make of this familiar and highly conserved narrative? Well, once again there are two rather different readings possible. On the one hand, we might take the seeming consensus as a simple vindication and verification: Shepherd and Lopez, benefitting from their access to the public records and to a rich and diverse array of other primary and secondary materials, are able to confirm that the existing literature (most of which did not enjoy the same access to such sources) is right in its chronology and sequencing of the key events, and perhaps even that it gets the linkages between them right too. But, tempting though such a reading is, this is perhaps just a little too convenient. Indeed, there is, I think, an important methodological point to make here, though it relates rather more to Shepherd than

it does to Lopez (whose aim is far less to establish the sequence of events and whose principal sources are non-archival).

It strikes me that, in the most general terms, there are two rather different approaches that one can take to archival evidence (and, indeed, to other primary data sources). One is more inductive than the other. At the more inductive end of the spectrum (for, in the end, this is perhaps better seen in terms of a continuum rather than a simple binary), the historian enters the archive without a strong sense of the historical narrative and precisely in order to construct or re-construct that narrative from the sources themselves. At the other end of the spectrum, the historian enters the archive with a narrative already in place and is seeking (merely) additional insight and detail to elaborate, augment, and further enrich an account which already exists in at least outline form. Shepherd, I suggest, is far closer to this (the latter) end of the archival historians' spectrum – and, in a way, that might be something of a shame.

There is a general point to be made here and a more specific one. The general point is that, as the first detailed book-length study of the Winter of Discontent to benefit from full access to the public records, one might perhaps have anticipated a more open and sceptical attitude to the conventional chronology and to the identification of the key episodes around which the established narrative is invariably structured. It is not impossible, I think, to imagine that a different historian, perhaps less versed in the literature, might have come to infer and reconstruct from the archival record a rather different history, placing the emphasis on different moments and different strategic choices in the unfolding drama. And that leads to the more specific point. For, at times, Shepherd's account in fact hints – albeit very subtly – at precisely such an alternative account. For there are at least three moments or episodes to which Shepherd refers, albeit briefly and in passing, that are scarcely mentioned in the existing literature and which just might be potential candidates for key moments in a newly revisionist history of the disintegration of the Social Contract and the birth of Thatcherism.

The first of these is the first significant strike in the public sector during the winter of 1978–79, namely that at the BBC. What makes this particularly interesting, and hence potentially worthy of the kind of detailed scrutiny that Shepherd chooses

not to afford it, is that this was hastily resolved by the government (ostensibly so as to prevent a television blackout over Christmas), with a pay settlement of 12%: that is at over twice the 5% ceiling. This, as far as I can tell, is the only reference to this dispute in the entire literature on the Winter of Discontent and, sadly, Shepherd gives us only a sentence (p. 61). His source is, in fact, not from the public records at all but from the *Financial Times* on the 22/23 December 1978, immediately after the dispute's resolution. Yet what would, of course, be fascinating to explore in more detail are the ministerial papers from the public records on this intriguing episode. How was the deal brokered and with what degree of opposition from around the Cabinet table? What advice did the government receive and from whom? To what extent was the deal seen as precedent setting and to what extent, if any, did it influence the negotiations, still underway at the time, to avert the public-sector unions' National Day of Action planned for the New Year? What was the rationale for this seemingly major concession made before the then almost inevitable clash between the public-sector trade unions and the government? How might things have proceeded differently if the terms of the BBC settlement had been taken as paradigmatic for the public sector as a whole? Some (if not all) of the answers to these questions undoubtedly lie in the public record; but they have yet to be unearthed.

The second such episode comes, ironically, from just a couple of days later in the unfolding saga. It relates to the attempt, orchestrated by the General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU) – but ultimately with the support of the other public sector trade unions including, crucially, the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) – to avert the National Day of Action and the ensuing dispute. On Christmas Eve 1978, Larry Witty (head of the GMWU's research department) and Derek Gladwin (the secretary of the GMWU's southern region and a close personal friend of Callaghan) presented to Number 10 a potential deal. What makes this all the more interesting – and, with the benefit of hindsight, all the more tragic – is that its terms were in fact less generous to the unions than those which would ultimately be agreed over two months later (and, in the case of NUPE, rather later still). To be fair, the episode itself is not new to the literature. It is mentioned by Steve Ludlam, whose doctoral thesis (despite being completed in 1991, nearly two decades before



the opening of the public records, arguably still remains the most authoritative study of the period) and it is something to which I also give some prominence.<sup>6</sup> And it is to her credit that Lopez, in fact, gives rather more detail than Shepherd, though, like myself, she draws in so doing largely on Ludlam's work (pp. 115–16). Interesting and incisive though they are, Shepherd's comments on the subject are confined to a single footnote and his source is, once again, not from the public record but from a personal interview with Larry (now, Lord) Whitty (p. 85, n. 12).

Here, as with the BBC dispute, we need to know more – and that information is only likely to be found in the public record. Why, by whom, and on what basis, was the deal rejected and to what extent was the resolution of the BBC strike two days earlier seen as precedent setting? How close did Whitty come to brokering a deal and to what extent did the government resign itself, in rejecting the deal, to a continuation of the Winter of Discontent in the public sector into the New Year? Finally, to what extent were Healey's attempts both in Cabinet, and in the House of Commons the next day, to augment the 5% ceiling on wage rises with an across-the-board £3.50 increase in weekly pay and an acceptance of a permanent mechanism to monitor and ensure wage comparability a direct result of the failed deal? Again, we do not have answers to these, arguably crucial, questions but at least we now know where to look.

The final element of a potentially new revisionist history of the Winter of Discontent is not, strictly speaking, an episode so much as a text, the 'Stepping Stones' programme produced, in effect, by the Centre for Policy Studies for Thatcher and her closest advisors. This, of course, has generated its own literature.<sup>7</sup> But its implications for our understanding of the Winter of Discontent have, to date at least, typically remained un- or under-explored. Here, I think, Shepherd and Lopez deserve

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<sup>6</sup> S. Ludlam, *Labourism and the Disintegration of the Postwar Consensus: Disunited Trade Union Economic Policy Responses to Public Expenditure Cuts, 1974–79* (Ph.D, University of Sheffield: 1991); Hay, 'Chronicles', p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> A. Taylor, 'The "Stepping Stones" Programme: Conservative Party Thinking on Trade Unions, 1975–79', *HSIR* 11 (2001), pp. 109–33; P. Dorey, 'The Stepping Stones Programme: The Conservative Party's Struggle to Develop a Trade-Union policy, 1975–79', *HSIR* 35 (2014), pp. 89–116.

rather more credit, for both clearly see the link and spend some time exploring it. But, arguably, they do not explore it quite enough and, from my perspective at least, they don't get the link quite right (though I freely accept that, in the end, this is a matter of historical interpretation and not simply something that can be resolved evidentially).

What is interesting about *Stepping Stones* is that it resolves (or might credibly be taken to resolve), in a way, a long-standing dispute in the literature on Thatcherism (a literature with which, of course, neither book engages). That dispute concerns the question of whether the first Thatcher government was elected with an ideological 'blueprint' for office – an animating policy script, in effect, which would inform the unfolding of a Thatcherite 'project' over time.<sup>8</sup> Clearly no such script ever existed and it is much better to see Thatcherism, if it can be seen as a project at all, as a unfolding script made and re-made over time in the light of changing circumstances, although animated throughout by a common and central moral-cum-political 'instinct' or disposition.<sup>9</sup> What is interesting about *Stepping Stones* is that it shows that although Thatcherism lacked an ideological or a policy blueprint and was not, as such, pre-scripted, it had – and benefitted massively from – a communications strategy blueprint. Indeed, what it also shows is that, before the Winter of Discontent, those who were ultimately to define what Thatcherism was to become (and, notably, *not Thatcher herself*, who remained stubbornly sceptical and unconvinced until the Winter of Discontent itself) had targeted the unions as public enemy number one for the new Thatcher administration (should the Conservative prevail at the polls). The point is that it was the Winter of Discontent which made *Stepping Stones* credible as a communications strategy, not least for Thatcher herself; and as soon as it was credible it became defining of what Thatcherism was

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<sup>8</sup> Most vociferous in their criticism of such a view of Thatcherism are D. Marsh and R. A. W. Rhodes (eds), *Implementing Thatcherite Policies: Audit of an Era* (Open University Press, Buckingham: 1992), and P. Kerr, *Postwar British Politics: From Conflict to Consensus* (Routledge: 2005).

<sup>9</sup> On which see S. Farrall and C. Hay (eds), *Thatcher's Legacy: Exploring and Theorizing the Long-Term Consequences of Thatcherite Social and Economic Policies* (Oxford University Press: 2014).

to become. In other words, the targeting of the unions, which arguably made much of the Thatcherite agenda possible, was contingent on the Winter of Discontent itself. This neither Shepherd nor Lopez see – though it is an interpretation quite consistent with the evidence they present.

The importance of this can scarcely be understated. For it suggests, that, in the absence of the Winter of Discontent, the first Thatcher administration would not have been able to, and would not even have chosen to, target the unions (and perceived union ‘power’) in the way in which it did. And without that, it is impossible to imagine that the consequences of its brutal monetarist offensive in terms of unemployment and social inequality would have proved politically sustainable. In other words, what we now refer to as Thatcherism would have been impossible in the absence of the Winter of Discontent.

#### Defrosting the Winter of Discontent: *de-myth*-ification

Thus far I have sought to limit my reflections on the Winter of Discontent to those which arise from a direct engagement with the argument and evidence presented in these two important studies. But there is another way of approaching the Winter of Discontent and the debates that it has generated in the light of the evidence that Shepherd and Lopez bring to bear upon it. That is not to confine oneself to the argument each presents, but to ask instead whether, to what extent, and how that evidence can be used to adjudicate between existing disputes in the wider literature on the period. That is my aim in this final section. There is much which could be said here, but I will confine myself to commenting on three key issues which have been widely debated in the existing literature and each of which is recast, at least to some extent, by the evidence Shepherd and Lopez unearth. I conclude with a brief discussion of the wider methodological implications of the opening of the public records and the reopening of the debate on the Winter of Discontent that it has generated.

#### *The ‘phoney’ election episode*

The first set of issues, which Shepherd and Lopez both explore in some detail, relates to the ‘phoney’ election campaign of autumn 1978. There are, in fact three issues here: why did Jim Callaghan not rush to the polls at the earliest opportunity in autumn 1978; was he wrong not to do so; and what difference would it have made anyway? Clearly the three questions are related but somewhat strangely, to my mind, Shepherd and Lopez both concentrate on the second – the judgement of Callaghan’s conduct. And, perhaps more strangely still in the light of the evidence they present, they both conclude that Callaghan was wrong not to call an early general election. This, I fear, is the wrong answer to the wrong question.

In a book that is often frustratingly equivocal, Shepherd is in fact uncharacteristically forthright on the issue, suggesting that the Prime Minister’s decision to defer the election was ‘astonishing’ (pp. 15–16), and, later on, that this was his ‘single greatest error’ (pp. 125–6). Lopez, too, chastises Callaghan for his strategic ineptitude in ostensibly similar terms, arguing that his actions throughout 1978, most notably his ‘cancellation (*sic.*) of the autumn election, illustrate his decision to have a showdown with the trade unions over economic policy’ (p. 61). But both judgements are, in the end, too harsh on Callaghan, though Lopez’s is perhaps more easily explicable. For her concern is with rank-and-file union members. And, from this perspective, as soon as there was no longer the prospect of an autumn election, Labour’s political and, indeed, electoral fortunes rested solely on the government’s capacity to hold wage inflation (particularly that in the public sector) significantly below price inflation. Callaghan was, in effect, gambling his political career and the electoral prospects of his party on his ability to inflict continued suffering on (what he arrogantly assumed to be) his core supporters in the public-sector unions.

Recast in such terms, Lopez may well be right. But the *underpinning logic* of her argument is surely that Callaghan’s error was not the decision to postpone the election but, instead, the choice of the 5% ceiling on wage inflation in the first place. Indeed the real problem here is that both Shepherd and Lopez allow the benefit of their shared historical hindsight to shape their judgement of Callaghan’s conduct. The key question here is surely not whether, with thirty years’ hindsight, Callaghan

was right but why, *at the time*, he chose to defer the election until at least the spring. Seen from his perspective, particularly in the light of the advice that he received, it would have been 'astonishing' had he chosen an autumn election which it was far from clear that he would have won. One might even argue that if Callaghan's actions appear 'astonishing' to Shepherd it is only because he has failed to understand them.

The irony is that, between them, Shepherd and Lopez provide us with all the evidence we need to make sense of Callaghan's fateful decision. He was unsure that his government would win an early election; he retained the courage of his conviction that the 5% wage-inflation target was the best means of controlling inflation; he remained no less certain that his strategy would work, or would work at least sufficiently well, to show that Labour was the only party capable of improving Britain's still parlous economic condition after the IMF loan; and he was confident that this would ultimately be rewarded at the polls, was his best chance of re-election and, indeed, his only chance of achieving a working majority. Put in these terms (and putting to one side our hindsight) it would have been remarkable had Callaghan done anything else.

Indeed, there is one final piece of the jigsaw here. For, as Shepherd in fact shows rather well, Callaghan and his advisors were, at the time, unaware of an additional factor that was to prove crucial to the unfolding of the Winter of Discontent. They assumed that, as long as union leaders and the TUC general council supported (however reluctantly) the terms of the Social Contract, then ultimately so too would rank-and-file union members. With the benefit of hindsight this might appear naive; but this was a hindsight that Callaghan could not and did not enjoy.

If we pull all of these pieces of the puzzle together, then, I think it is actually quite clear that Callaghan's decision to defer the election until the spring – while inadvertently setting the government, union leaders and rank-and-file union members on a path that could only end badly – was not in any sense part of a deliberate strategy to confront the unions (as Lopez implies). It was, moreover, perfectly rational and intelligible given the situation in which Callaghan found himself and the advice that he received. Though this is not their conclusion, I think it

is the logical inference to be drawn from the new archival material that Shepherd and Lopez assemble.

*Why no declaration of a State of Emergency?*

The second issue which, arguably, Shepherd and Lopez' fresh evidence allow us to resolve once and for all, concerns Callaghan's reluctance or failure to declare a State of Emergency in January 1979 at the height of the road haulage strike and the oil tanker drivers' overtime ban.

In a way the problem is not terribly different from the question of the phoney election of 1978 in the sense that to understand the Winter of Discontent is, I would contend, to understand why, from the perspective of the government, it was rational *not* to declare a State of Emergency. Yet, interestingly and although once again drawing on the very same sources, Shepherd and Lopez reach profoundly different conclusions. Shepherd, though a little more equivocal, seems ultimately convinced by Peter Shore's suggestion (extemporizing on a comment in Callaghan's autobiography) that 'the armed forces should have been deployed to clear the refuse, dig the graves, ensure the water and essential services', in other words, that a State of Emergency should have been declared (p. 107).<sup>10</sup>

I think we need to be careful here. Though Shore was, of course, a Cabinet minister at the time, his comment comes from his own autobiography published in 1993. It develops a similar remark in Callaghan's own autobiography published in 1987. While it would be wrong to accuse either figure of retrospectively according to themselves a degree of foresight they lacked at the time, we should undoubtedly give precedence to evidence simultaneous to the events themselves. What is clear from the public record is that there is very little if any evidence of a cogent argument being made in Cabinet (by Callaghan, Shore or anyone else for that matter) for the declaration of a State of Emergency. Moreover, the Cabinet and Civil Contingencies Unit sought, received and considered reams of evidence showing that there was rather less of a threat to essential services than the media narrative of the time

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<sup>10</sup> Citing P. Shore, *Leading the Left* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1993).

suggested, and that the logistical complexities alone meant that the declaration of a State of Emergency would almost certainly make matters worse not better. Even putting to one side the practical difficulties of bringing troops back from Germany and training them to drive oil tankers, the declaration of a State of Emergency could only further serve to antagonize the unions, galvanizing them into more coordinated collective action and thereby precipitating a greater problem of secondary picketing while offering the capacity to delivering, at best, a small fraction of the fuel that was already being supplied (in part through the co-operation of the TGWU). In short, the Cabinet would have had to discount systematically the strategic assessment of the situation that it had sought in order to declare a State of Emergency. Finally, it might well also be pointed out that to act in such a way would, almost certainly, have been seen to accede to an agenda now being set by Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party and to commit the party, in effect, just before an election to some form of anti-union legislation in the immediate aftermath, should it prevail at the polls.

That Callaghan, looking back wistfully almost two decades later, might have wished that he had declared a State of Emergency is no reason for questioning Lopez' conclusion that, at the time, he had no alternative other than to heed the advice he had requested. As this suggests, here, just as in the case of the 'phoney' election, the combination of counterfactuals and hindsight (whether that of the historian or, as here, that of the participants themselves) is a potentially dangerous thing. In such situations we can do a lot worse than to recall the aphorism usually attributed to Eric Hobsbawm, 'ultimately things turned out the way they did, and because they did they couldn't have turned out any other way'. To understand the Winter of Discontent is to understand how things came to turn out the way they did, and that is to understand how the declaration of a State of Emergency was never really a possibility.

*A 'constructed crisis'?*

This brings us to a final consideration and one of a rather more theoretical nature. Both Shepherd and Lopez, albeit in different ways, take explicit inspiration from the

idea of the Winter of Discontent as a ‘manufactured’ or ‘constructed crisis’ – with Shepherd’s focus on the media’s coverage of the events of the winter of 1978–79 and, indeed, his discussion of the 1979 general election owing much to this perspective (pp. 7–8, 112 ff), and with Lopez keen to declare the concept ‘foundational’ to her own analysis (pp. 10–12.)<sup>11</sup>

As the author of this concept, I should perhaps just be grateful for the compliment and leave it at that. But, no doubt owing to my own infelicities of expression and not for the first time in the debate on the Winter of Discontent, I fear that both Shepherd and Lopez misinterpret in a non-trivial way the argument that I was seeking to develop. And, more significantly, I think this leads them to misinterpret the Winter of Discontent itself. As such, I hope I can be excused the indulgence of returning briefly to the idea of the Winter of Discontent as a constructed crisis in the light of the argument and the evidence both present.

To get at the issues involved here, it is perhaps best simply to cite (Lord) David Lipsey’s clearly exasperated comments on the heresy of the suggestion that the crisis was ‘constructed’ delivered in response to my lecture to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the events at the British Academy in 2009. The passage from the transcript of the debate is repeated, tellingly, in full by Shepherd.

I am not sure you where you were Professor Hay, but I can tell you some of the places you weren’t. You weren’t in Manchester where for ten days people were getting water out of standpipes in the street. You weren’t in Liverpool when the mortuaries were closed because the grave diggers wouldn’t dig the graves, and serious consideration was being given to dumping bodies at sea ... and you certainly weren’t in Downing Street, where I was, where hour by hour ‘the newest grief of an hour’s age doth hiss the speaker’ ... I am sorry, this [‘the Winter of Discontent’] was *not* a constructed crisis. It was a real crisis.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the Winter of Discontent as a ‘constructed crisis’, see Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis’, pp. 253–77; ‘The Winter of Discontent Thirty Years On’, pp. 545–52; *idem*, ‘Chronicles of a Death Foretold’, pp. 446–70.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in L. Black and H. Pemberton, ‘The Winter of Discontent in British Politics’, *PQ* 80:4, pp. 553–61, p. 556.



Lipsey's remark is painful to read again and I can only apologize to him, as I did at the time, for any offence. His comment is entirely understandable and were my argument that these events never took place, it would surely be right. But that is not, nor ever has been, my argument, though I can see how the language of 'construction' might lead to such a confusion. What pains and surprises me more, though, is that the same confusion persists, if in a rather less acute form. For it characterizes both Shepherd and Lopez's comments on the subject too. Both authors use a reflection of the concept and the debate it has generated to open a discussion as to the extent of the distortion or bias in the popular mythology and folklore of the Winter of Discontent.

That is, of course, an extremely important issue (and one that I have reflected on at length), but it is by no means the principal one issue raised by referring to the crisis as 'manufactured' or 'constructed'. For my argument is that *all crises are constructions* and that the construction of the (real) events themselves as symptomatic of a wider crisis is both what makes a crisis what it is (a crisis) and is integral to how the crisis is lived, experienced and responded to. This is as true of the global financial crisis as it is of the Winter of Discontent. Put simply, the construction of the events at the time *as symptomatic of a crisis* and symptomatic of a crisis *of a particular kind* (a crisis of a beleaguered state, or of Keynesianism, for instance) shapes the unfolding of those events over time as it does, crucially, the response to which they give rise. The Winter of Discontent is perhaps the clearest example of such a phenomenon in post-war British history, not least because the construction was, as Shepherd and Lopez show so well, based on an at times wild and wilful extrapolation and extemporization from the events that had already unfolded and those that were underway – and because the response was Thatcherism. But, crucially, the Winter of Discontent would have been no less of a constructed crisis had it given rise to an historically more credible mythology and to a response more appropriate to the events. The point is that, as with any other crisis, there is nothing inherent in the events of the winter of 1978–79 that makes them a crisis of a beleaguered and ungovernable state held to ransom by an all-powerful trade-union movement, or, indeed, a crisis at all.

The implication of this is that the Winter of Discontent was *lived and experienced through* a very particular construction of what was going on at the time. That construction was not a retrospective rationalization offered after the fact, as both Shepherd and Lopez assume, but was simultaneous with the events which it served to dramatize. Consequently, the question for analysts of the period, particularly those interested in its enduring significance, is not just about the accuracy of that construction, important though that undoubtedly is. For the construction came to have a life of its own. Put simply, how the events were understood at the time is crucial to how they were responded to and, consequently, to how the events of the winter of 1978–79 were to unfold. If the mythology of the Winter of Discontent was born contemporaneously, then it is crucial to our understanding of what that episode was.

This is illustrated by appeal to the witness testimony that we now have. Particularly valuable, here, is a paper written in 1984 by William Rodgers, Secretary of State for Transport between 1976 and 1979. Talking about the road haulage dispute, with which he was, of course, intimately involved, he states, ‘like wartime bombing raids, the strike produced more warnings of shortages and more signs of damage than actual disruption’. He continues: ‘the reporting of the strike by newspaper, radio and especially television was dramatic, and had much more impact on opinion than the public’s own direct experience of the strike.’ This is undoubtedly true and it is hardly remarkable. But what is perhaps remarkable – and certainly very interesting – is his final remarks on the subject:

The demeanour of pickets – seen against a bleak winter landscape – caused anger and anxiety. *The Guardian* reported that the strike had cut the country’s supply lines; that pigs and poultry might have to be slaughtered; that common vegetables were becoming a luxury; and that a shortage of newsprint might halt newspaper production. Ministers might have been tempted to treat this last

possibility with equanimity. But in truth, *most reporting of the strike was close to their own perception of events.*<sup>13</sup>

The passage is perhaps slightly ambiguous. What it certainly seems to suggest is that, despite the close counsel of their civil service advisors that the road haulage dispute posed, at no point, any grave threat to the distribution of essential supplies,<sup>14</sup> ministers too lived and responded to the crisis through a media veil. Similarly, union leaders themselves may well have sought to broker an earlier deal on public-sector pay fearing the consequences that on-going action was already having on workers not involved in the dispute – despite the now strong evidence to the contrary that we have.<sup>15</sup> If the fog of war descended on the direct participants in the elite-level politics of the unfolding crisis, then how much more pervasive must it have been for those with far less direct experience of the crisis to draw upon? As this suggests, the myths of the Winter of Discontent, and the very idea of the Winter of Discontent as a crisis, are crucial to its unfolding dynamic precisely because they provided the lens through the events of that winter were to be experienced, responded to, and interpreted politically.

Conclusion: the opening of the archives

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<sup>13</sup> Rodgers, 'Government under Stress', *PQ*, pp. 177, 178; see also B. Jones, letter, *Guardian*, 23 April 2013, for an interesting account, from a Fleet Street editor at the time, of the tactics deployed by the tabloid media to inflate, artificially, a sense of crisis, see D. Jameson, *Last of the Hot Metal Men* (Ebury Press: 1990). The key passage, frequently cited, reads as follows: 'we pulled every dirty trick in the book; we made it [the crisis] look like it was general, universal and eternal, when it was in reality scattered, here and there, and no great problem'.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, PREM 16/1707, PREM 16/2128; CAB 128/65/3, The National Archives; see also Lopez, *Crisis? What Crisis?* pp. 101–4.

<sup>15</sup> Hay, 'Chronicles', p. 456; G. A. Dorfman, *British Trade Unionism against the Trades Union Congress* (Macmillan: 1983), pp. 84–5.

I want to conclude on a somewhat different note. As a political scientist and comparative political economist returning to the history of the Winter of Discontent through reading and re-reading these two important works, I was struck by both authors' general silence on questions of methodology. Shepherd points, in the introduction to his chapter on the media, to the methodological issues raised by according to the media an independent role in the unfolding of the drama itself. But he then fails to discuss this further. And Lopez's book, as I have argued, could be seen as launching quite a profound methodological challenge to the conventional, archivally-grounded, elite political history of the period. Yet that is not how she chooses to couch the challenge posed by her perspective-shifting oral social history. Even in terms of the simple conduct of the analysis both accounts are, certainly when gauged by the prevailing standards of mainstream political science, decidedly methodology-'lite'.

To be fair, I have no great problem with this. Indeed, I find it almost refreshing – not least because, even if they are not explicitly stated, there are subtle and sophisticated methodological choices being made in the work of each author. But, this notwithstanding, there are a series of broader methodological issues raised by these two books which warrant – indeed, arguably necessitate – more concerted and explicitly methodological reflection. Space does not permit an adequate treatment (though some are already hinted at in the preceding discussion), so I will merely list them:

- the place of oral history in post-war British political history;
- the perspectives, subject-positions, and vantage points from which our history is written and, in particular, the privileging within the archival record of certain of those perspectives, subject-positions, and vantage points;
- the extent of the need for 'triangulation' between contending sources, witnesses, and claims, and the most appropriate methodologies for achieving such 'triangulation';
- the reliability of interviews and other forms of witness testimony conducted or gathered two or more decades after the events themselves;

- the reliability and appropriate use of biographies and autobiographies typically also written many years after the events they purport to describe (and with the benefit of a hindsight not possible at the time).

There is much to be written on each of these points, and much of the preceding discussion could, indeed, be recast in terms of these more general issues. Rather than single out any one among them for further attention, I want to conclude by discussing a different, if related, issue – the value added by the opening of the public records (under the ‘Thirty-’, now ‘Twenty-’ ‘Year Rule’).

When I read these two books for the first time I was struck by how *little* the opening of the public records has changed our view of the Winter of Discontent. This I attributed to the range, quality, and diversity of the biographies, autobiographies, and witness testimony already available to us. Indeed, I almost convinced myself that the opening of the archives was no longer a very significant moment. But on rereading these two studies and reflecting further upon this question, I have changed my mind in a way that raises serious methodological issues for contemporary British history.

Full access to the public record is important; indeed, it is crucial. But there is a danger here, a danger to which both of these studies ultimately succumb. It is that we do not make best use of such full access because we approach the archives seeking additional detail to supplement a pre-existing narrative. I want to suggest that, in future work on the Winter of Discontent, we need to strive to be both *more inductive* and *more deductive* (though not at the same time). By ‘more inductive’ I mean that we need to enter the archive, as it were, having put to one side (as best possible) the established narrative – seeking not verification, vindication or further detail but to reconstruct, as if for the first time, a narrative from the record itself. This we might later compare to the established orthodoxy. And by ‘more deductive’ I mean that we need also, quite separately, to enter the archive in the search for specific information which might help us answer a series of specific questions formulated in advance (the extent to which the government’s thinking on the BBC dispute was similar or different to that it exhibited in other public-sector disputes, for instance). Both perspectives, separately and together, can further augment our

existing understanding of the Winter of Discontent – the moment, arguably, when ‘then’ became ‘now’.

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