

CHAPTER 2

The Orator and the Conversationalist

From Laski to Oakeshott, 1921–1965

Daniel Skeffington

Introduction

The period that was to follow would have its tone set by the arrival of two titans of political thought: Harold Laski and Michael Oakeshott. Laski and Oakeshott's careers spanned most of the 20th century, from the former's appointment in 1920 to the latter's death in 1990. The two political theorists never crossed paths at the School, with Oakeshott moving from Oxford to take up the chair in Political Science following Laski's death in March of 1950. Both were the informal 'Conveners' of the Government department, in a time when there were no heads—or even departments—to speak of in the School, and each left their distinctive mark on the fabric of the institution.

Part of the reason the department's image was so dominated by these larger-than-life characters during the early and middle parts of the century was the interdisciplinary structure of the School. The LSE, like many institutions, had yet to develop distinct departments as such among its faculties, and most buildings involved the sharing of offices with members of different disciplines. In one sense, this reinforced the emphasis of the School's focus on the social sciences as a whole, bringing together all disciplines under one roof. Although the seeds of what would become the Department of Government had been

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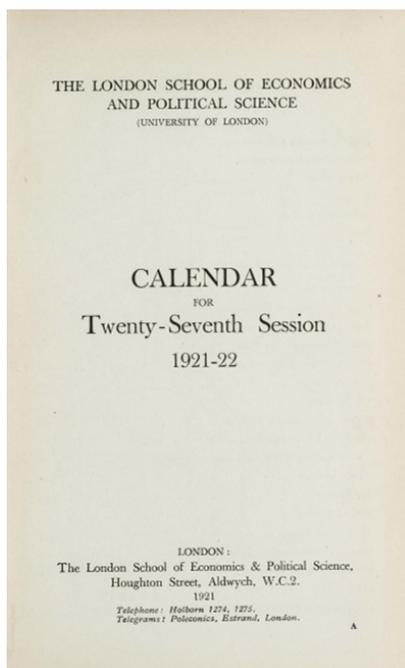


Figure 8: First page of the Calendar for the Twenty-Seventh Session, LSE Calendar, 1921–1922; Credit: LSE Library.

planted, expressed through the course division into matters of politics, public and colonial administration since joining the University of London in 1900, the reality on the ground was this was a somewhat imprecise and even ramshackle undertaking, collaborating between different, ill-defined groupings of scholars whose interests happened to align. It was in this collective of thinkers and teachers that these two scholars made their names, setting the course of the Government Department for two generations of students to come.

Harold Laski: The ‘Red Professor’

The early 1920s bore witness to the arrival of one of the Department’s leading lights. Harold Joseph Laski joined the School in the Michaelmas term of 1920, during the ‘second foundation’ of the School under William Beveridge.¹ He took Graham Wallas’s Chair in Political Science in 1926, where his passionate style of teaching would set the tone of the department during the interwar period, a tone that dominated to the end of the Attlee Government on his death in 1950. A brazen, youthful, socialist academic with a grasp of the broad brush

¹ Dahrendorf 1995: 135.

of political activity, his bombastic lecturing style and constant forays into political life soon became a hallmark of the LSE's approach to government.

As we saw in Chapter 1, despite sharing half the name of the School itself, Political Science was slow to achieve repute as a subject of study at the LSE. Indeed, when Laski took over Wallas's Chair in 1926, it was one of only two other such positions in Political Science in the United Kingdom, with one being held at Oxford, and another having just been created at Cambridge.² The former Director of the School, Ralf Dahrendorf, has gone as far as to describe political science at the LSE as a 'one-man band' well into the late 1920s.³ However, this band was to be championed by the most 'widely known and most loved professor' at the School, indeed in British political life during his time. It is no surprise that 70 years after his death, many still credit him with the founding of the Government Department at the LSE, even if its formal creation was not to be until after he passed away, at the young age of 56.

Upon his arrival, Harold Laski immediately took over many of the courses in political philosophy and public administration. A long-standing member of the Fabian Society and one of the founders of the Left Book Club, Laski was a convinced socialist, leaving a mark on the department in a period when the LSE's connection with socialist societies was probably at its height. Although those reflecting on his tenure at the School have come to see him as a radical, Laski held a tempered view on what it meant to be a socialist, and a closer examination of his life and style as a professor of politics reveals this more nuanced character in full.

Laski's academic work on politics was as varied as it was influential. He was a great proponent of pluralism throughout society, promoting local and voluntarist elements of a democratic political system. Works written between 1919 and 1921 began advancing this line of thought, attacking the notion of an all-powerful sovereign power against other highly centralised notions of the state, such as the German jurist Carl Schmitt's study of *Dictatorship* and subsequent proto-fascist treatises.⁴ These would form the beginnings of his academic and political struggles against totalitarian ideologies until the end of the Second World War.

His magnum opus, *The Grammar of Politics*, was first published in 1925, and formed a comprehensive examination of the history of democratic institutions. In so doing, *The Grammar* advanced arguments that would distance him from his successor, with Laski insisting there must always be a link between the practical and the theoretical in politics. During the 1930s, he became a convert of Marxism—in no small part as a reaction against the rising threat of fascism—and alongside the Webbs was convinced of its ability to produce a more

² Krammick & Sheerman 1993: 245.

³ Dahrendorf 1995: 226.

⁴ Laski 1919; Laski 1921; Schmitt 2014.

efficient, productive society. Later works from thereon in focused on the reform of capitalist economics in Britain along such lines.

Yet, the main focus of his work was always to be found in his lecturing, rather than in his written work. While his *Reflections on the Constitution*, given as three lectures one month before his death and published posthumously in 1951, remain an important text for understanding British constitutional thought, they also show this oratorical side most keenly, ‘stamped with his personality’, which was ever a force at the forefront of the School.⁵ Jacqueline Wheldon, LSE secretarial staff (1946) and U/G and Research Student (1948–1954), recalls that his lectures at the Old Theatre were always crowded, and that he was

magnificent at creating parables out of contemporary politics and those of the recent past. Had they been the only thing he had to offer he could not have been so influential a teacher. The most important thing about him was that he was a generous man of lively temper who desired, even when it was impossible to perform what he desired, ‘to confirm the lowliest in the possibility of what they might become’ as much as he relished the company of the great and powerful.⁶

He was fondly remembered by many students for just this, and while he possessed a tortuous writing style remarked on by George Orwell himself,⁷ his freestyle lecturing was considered an intellectually brilliant tour de force.

Laski’s oratorical presence also extended beyond academia, and into political life itself. Laski held the Labour Party Chairmanship from 1945 to 1946, regularly speaking at events that furthered socialist causes, in his memorably bombastic style. Laski’s guiding objective during his studies was benevolently described by the former Labour MP and socialist Ian Mikardo: ‘His mission in life was to translate the religion of the universal brotherhood of man into the language of political economy.’⁸

So great was his reputation as a lecturer that the young John F. Kennedy travelled to the School in 1935 to take his classes on the General Course. His brother, Joe, had studied under the young H. R. G. Greaves and K. B. Smellie—two central figures in the department’s history—in 1933, and it was his father Joe Kennedy’s intention that the future president would follow suit. A personal friend of the family, Laski had been recommended by Felix Frankfurter, who remarked he was ‘the greatest teacher in the world.’⁹ Unfortunately,

⁵ Laski 2015: prefatory note.

⁶ Abse 1977: 136.

⁷ Orwell 2013.

⁸ Neil Clark, “Harold Laski – the man who influenced Ralph Miliband,” *New Statesman* (3 January 2013), <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2013/01/harold-laski-man-who-influenced-ralph-miliband>.

⁹ Donnelly 2015.

J. F. Kennedy fell unexpectedly ill before he could commence his studies, and left London without attending a single course.

His gifts as a teacher notwithstanding, Laski also gathered his fair share of criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. He embodied a certain academic activism that was lost on the Department's later star intellectuals; one unafraid to shy away from controversy or criticism. His vocal and combative demeanour earned him a measure of disdain, particularly among fellow socialists; he was most famous for being on the receiving end of a barb from Attlee that 'I can assure you there is widespread resentment in the Party at your activities and a period of silence on your part would be welcome' after Laski had appeared to be speak on behalf of the Labour Government and its foreign policy.¹⁰ Indeed, the tension between academic freedom and political expediency was sometimes a problem during the Laski era. After accusations that Laski travelled to Moscow to speak to the 'Communist Academy', Clement Attlee refuted these allegations, stating that Laski spoke to the Institute of Socialist Law, and in doing so, robustly defended the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Replying to the accusation that Laski was a communist and alien, and had been permitted by the LSE to 'spread his poisonous propaganda', Sir Stafford Cripps stated: 'Is the Hon. Member aware that the Charter of the London School of Economics expressly provides for complete freedom for professors and lecturers to express their political opinions outside the school, and will he resist the obvious tendency to try to curtail this freedom.'¹¹

Despite these high-profile run-ins with peers and critics for his radicalism, he retained a fairly incremental and progressive approach to actual social reform, reflecting the wishes of the founders of the School in this respect. Beatrice and Sidney Webb, alongside Graham Wallas and George Bernard Shaw, had set out a vision for the School as one of moderate change, devoted to social reform through established, rather than disruptive, methods. His was a democratic socialism based on the gradual change of society through parliamentary democracy, and although he supported the 'Hands off Russia' movement, which saw dockers refuse to load ships destined to help Poland fight against the Soviet Union, he opposed the advocates of 'direct action' that dominated the Left at the time. He believed in mediation and progress through parliamentary means over direct action, leading to a reputation among some peers as a snob of the workers' movement. Yet, Laski was committed, as many of his colleagues were, to promoting the School as an alternative to the traditional ancient universities, dedicated to meaningful and practical education for a new, more equitable society. He consistently declined to stand as Labour MP because of his love of academic life and his belief in the importance of ideas.¹² It seems his apparently snobbish attitudes separated him from the wider Labour movement at times, including one anecdote he wrote about in a letter

¹⁰ Newman 1993: 268.

¹¹ Hansard, HC Deb. 11 July 1934, Vol. 292, cc. 306–308.

¹² Newman 1993: 76.

to Oliver Wendell Holmes in which he said he was shocked to see a Labour MP finish off another's half-drunk beer.¹³

Laski's political direction and professional trajectory were heavily shaped by his friendships and personal correspondences. He ran in the upper echelons of international society, reflected through his contacts in the world of politics and law. He maintained relationships from his period in the United States which went on to shape changes in his ideas, giving him a sort of American streak to his political thinking. Samuel Baron in the *Clare Market Review* commented that 'many Americans found it difficult to believe that he was not American'. One figure who played a large role in the evolution of Laski's thinking was his long-standing friend, the US Supreme Court Justice and Harvard law professor Oliver Wendell Holmes, with whom he developed a close personal correspondence following his studies at McGill University. Indeed, Laski came to consider Holmes as his 'American father', and the relationship of the two strengthened the School's early transatlantic ties.¹⁴ The regular correspondence between the two gives an interesting summary on Laski's ideas on several topics, including religion and policy. Laski writes to Holmes that he was opposed to the favouring of any one religion under law and, while he believed that religion had an inherent beauty, this was its only appeal. He also opposed attempts to reconcile religion and science, which he saw as irreconcilable. In terms of policy, he writes that the 'only adequate test for good [is] social utility and this meant response to demand of persons ... if there was a God it was an everyday God, discoverable in everyday good'.¹⁵ In his letters with Holmes, some of the theoretical grounding of Laski's scepticism also comes through. Laski also maintained an international presence thanks to the influence of his academic works. This is particularly the case with Laski's connection to India. In 1930, Laski became the President of the 'India League', a British-based organisation which campaigned for the 'full independence and self-government' of India. Seven years after India claimed its independence, the Indian Government founded the Harold Laski Institute of Political Science in the city of Ahmedabad, at the time the capital of the province of Gujarat, in recognition of his contributions to the nation.¹⁶ One Indian politician is even said to have claimed 'in every meeting of the Indian Cabinet there is a chair reserved for the ghost of Professor Harold Laski'.¹⁷

These international links were primarily formed during a crucial change of emphasis in Laski's political outlook, following his return to the United Kingdom in 1919, the same year William Beveridge took over as Director of the School. Coming back from the United States, Laski began to share more

¹³ *Ibid.*: 73.

¹⁴ Dahrendorf 1995: 225.

¹⁵ de Wolfe Howe 1953: 909.

¹⁶ LSE Library n.d.

¹⁷ Shearhard 2014: 157.



Figure 9: Professor Harold Laski. Credit. Alamy.

political ideas with the Liberal Party despite still being a Labour Party supporter. Around this time, he began his correspondence with Liberal Cabinet Minister Lord Haldane, who played a role in Laski's appointment to the LSE. Haldane influenced Laski's interest in adult education as a crucial part of the worker's engagement in social change. Around this time, Laski also took up a position at Haldane's Institute of Adult Education. Laski became very interested, alongside Haldane, in forming an alliance between the Liberal and Labour Parties. While he shared the convictions of the Labour Party, he seemed to find it easier to relate to the Liberal Party and, more specifically, its members. He told Arthur Gleason that he found his comfort 'largely in the people outside the Labour movement altogether'.¹⁸

Alongside his strong personal relationships and correspondences, Laski also had much support and appreciation among his students. In a memorial edition of the *Clare Market Review* marking his death, students talked of his 'special talent [to] communicate with students on a common ground of understanding', but also mentioned his 'innocent and forgivable vanity'. There was a running joke about his radicalism among the students, who performed imitations of Laski along the lines of 'and so I said to Stalin ...'.

¹⁸ Newman 1993: 74.

Not all were so in awe of the department's famous professor, however. Laski was the direct inspiration for Ayn Rand's character Ellsworth Toohey in *The Fountainhead*, embodying

the soul of Ellsworth Toohey in the flesh ... his mannerisms, the pseudo-intellectual snideness, the whole manner of speaking on important subjects with inappropriate sarcasm as his only weapon, acting as if he were a charming scholar in a drawing room, but you could sense the bared teeth behind the smile, you could feel something evil.¹⁹

Interestingly, she writes that Toohey is 'not a member of the Communist Party, because that Party is still considered working class', alluding to his slight snobbish removal from the roots of the socialist movement.²⁰ He was also not regarded as a particularly strong writer, with George Orwell using his work as an example of bad writing in his essay on *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell cited a 53-word sentence, including five negatives, which appeared in Laski's *Essay in Freedom of Expression*, which Orwell thought illustrated 'various of the mental vices' present in writing.²¹ However, their attacks on the 'red professor', as he humorously became known, and were few and far between, and were water off the back of a man whose lecturing far eclipsed the impact of his written work.

The Department under Laski: A 'One-Man Band'?

During Laski's tenure as informal leader of the political scientists at the School, the proto department flourished. As had been the case in the early years under Wallas, it is difficult to describe this in any real sense as analogous to the modern idea of a 'Government' Department. This sense was to prevail well into the 1950s, when the late Professor of Middle Eastern politics, Elie Kedourie, arrived as an undergraduate. As Alan Beattie put it, for the first half of the School's life, politics was far more a subject, rather than a discipline, as had been the founders' intention.²² That is, the bridge between (1) politics, policy and political action, and (2) the conceptual underpinnings of politics as a discipline was, as yet, underdeveloped.

Nevertheless, under Laski, the cohort of scholars at the School focusing on political science continued to grow, creating the foundations of the modern discipline through their interests. These courses were grouped under the loose name of Politics and Public Administration in the School's Calendar, and could

¹⁹ Rand & Peikoff 1999: 85.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 84.

²¹ Orwell 2013: 3.

²² Beattie 1998: 110.

be taken on a range of BA courses in, for example, History or Sociology, to graduate within the framework of ‘Honours in the History of Political Ideas or Public Administration’, which would ‘frame their courses of study’.²³

This early model followed the School’s integrated approach to the social sciences, believing there to be a central ‘core’ of subjects one must study, but which one could approach from a variety of angles. As the years progressed, students would not only work towards their specialisation in the political sciences as a subdomain of the social sciences, but as an autonomous field-in-itself. In the 1920s, the subject was acquiring its academic credibility among British institutions, much as economics had had to do in the previous century, and which sociology was not to attain until well after the conclusion of the Second World War. Therefore, even if the term ‘proto department’ might be somewhat of a stretch during Laski’s early years, it certainly captures the drive that spurred on research and teaching at the time, that is as a collective of scholars feeling its way around unfamiliar but fallow ground.

These were very much the School’s adolescent years, then, with the department developing its reputation as a centre for colonial administration and public policy, as well as political thought. Courses were run on ‘The Government of British India’ by Professor John Coatman, ‘British Colonial Policy’ by Professor Kingsley Smellie and the ‘French Colonial Office’ by the distinguished historian Professor Paul Vaucher.²⁴ There was much overlap in this period with the School’s academic lawyers, who contributed to the intersection of administrative and constitutional law with public administration, such as Ivor Jennings’s 1935 class on ‘Colonial Constitutional Law’.²⁵ More contentious classes, such as ‘The Genetical Theory of Inbreeding’, occasionally ran alongside these, but on the whole the focus was on comparative public administration of the colonies.²⁶ Political thought also began to take centre stage, with Laski personally running courses on ‘Political Ideas of the Ancient World’, ‘European Political Ideas’, ‘Medieval Political Ideas’ and ‘Political Ideas since 1689’.²⁷ Others joined him in lecturing on English, American and French political ideas, from time to time, as the years went on.

One of the most important figures among this cohort was Kingsley Bryce (K. B.) Smellie, who joined the School in 1921 as its first Professor in Political Science. Smellie was to prove influential in Laski’s departmental reinvigoration. He would lecture frequently on public administration and was later given a personal named Chair in 1949 for his services to the field, which he held until his retirement in 1965. Smellie also developed political thought at the School, running classes on American political ideas both pre- and post-Civil War

²³ LSE 1935: 1935–36.

²⁴ Eliot 2016.

²⁵ LSE 1935: 208.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 207–212.



Figure 10: Kingsley B. Smellie (Left) and Graham Wallas (Right), 1925; Credit: LSE Photo Archives.

alongside Laski, as well as ‘English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century’. By the middle of Laski’s term heading the political scientists at the LSE, the BSc (Econ.) degree for which the School became famous was offering these sorts of courses as a pathway to obtain the specialisation in Government, and students looking to graduate with a degree from the Government department would take special subjects like Smellie’s ‘English Constitution’ to account for this on their transcript. Other students, such as those enrolled on the BA (Hons) in Sociology, could also take these courses to count towards their own specialisation. All this points towards the nascent image of the Government department as a sort of ‘style’ of approach to the greater study of the economics and political sciences at the School, which had by now cemented its reputation as the Faculty of Economics within the larger University of London.

Another major addition was the LSE graduate and Fabian socialist Herman Finer, who joined the School in 1920 to lecture on public administration, until departing in 1942 for the University of Chicago.²⁸ Finer would serve as a major assistant to Laski on constitutional courses, particularly ‘The British Constitution’, ‘British Political Institutions’ and ‘The Constitution of Germany’, as well as heading his own on ‘Comparative Government Problems’ and ‘Local Government Problems’. By the mid-1930s, Finer was heading courses that tackled emerging ideologies, such as ‘The Fascist State in Theory and Practice’, working

²⁸ Pulzer 2004.

through fascist critiques of liberalism to understand these new doctrines as they gained traction in society.²⁹

Importantly for this nascent department, whose roots had been formed mainly from former Oxford and Cambridge history professors, with barristers-at-law teaching the legal and constitutional classes, this new strand of intellectual enquiry began to evolve into a more recognisably ‘modern’ faculty of individuals solely investigating political science. On the public administration side of things, William Robson embodied this shift from the law to political science. An administrative lawyer, part of the ‘LSE vanguard’ of John Griffith and Ivor Jennings who had sharply challenged A. V. Dicey’s legal orthodoxy, Robson took First-Class honours in the BSc (Econ.) at the LSE before being called to the Bar by Lincoln’s Inn in 1922.³⁰ Robson continued his education at the School despite the call, completing his PhD in 1924 and taking his post as a lecturer in 1926, where his courses focused on ‘The Principles of Administrative Law.’³¹ Robson would remain at the LSE until 1962, taking the Chair in Public Administration in 1948 and teaching widely on the intersection of law and emerging political science. His contributions to the discipline include founding the *Political Quarterly* journal in 1930 alongside Leonard Woolf and co-founding the Political Studies Association in 1950, although he struggled alongside Smellie unsuccessfully against the more conservative faculty to name it the Political Science Association.³²

By the middle of Laski’s tenure, the idea of distinct departments within the School was beginning to gain traction. The publication of *The Working Constitution and Practice of the London School of Economics and Political Science* in May of 1937 signalled this shift in thinking, but in practice this changed little of the administration, and was not to be seriously acted upon for another two decades.³³ Disciplines continued to assert their independence as much within the School’s walls as they did outside them, carving out new areas of study, but remained ‘conveniences rather than barriers’ for scholarship.³⁴

Laski’s great influence over the School was a large part of the reason why both the School and the proto department gained a ‘dangerous’ and ‘socialist’ image. The leading Marxist Professor of the era, Ralph Miliband—father of the prominent Labour Party MPs Ed and David Miliband—only lent credence to this image of the School as a radical ‘hotbed’ of hard-left social thought. Miliband, who arrived at the School in 1941 as an undergraduate and studied as a post-graduate under Laski, taught political science in the Department until 1972. Rodney Barker recalls him as a particularly prominent leading figure during

²⁹ LSE 1935: 205.

³⁰ Chapman 2004: 163.

³¹ Page 2015.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Dahrendorf 1995: 322.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 266.

his time in the department, representing, much like Laski, ‘a kind of academic life that, without being unscholarly, was also controversial’, retaining some sort of public presence. ‘What was extraordinary when I arrived at LSE’, he notes, was that:

people still talked about Harold Laski, the red professor. People would say ‘Oh LSE, that is a very left-wing organisation isn’t it?’, I would say ‘No it isn’t, you should look at some of the prominent people there: Hayek, Robbins, Oakeshott. A left-wing organisation? Oh come on.’ But of course it was all of those things ... There are pluses and minuses about having people in the Department who are known outside the Department. It can often lead to the wrong popular impression of the place.³⁵

Indeed, besides Laski and Miliband, there have been relatively few Marxist intellectuals at the School, at least of any repute. Hence, despite its external image cultivated under Laski as a bastion of radical, socialist thought, the ambiguities underlying the fabric of the institution reveal a more conflicted and, in many cases, less ideologically ‘pure’ faculty than this image would have the casual observer believe. Major leading figures were conservative in nature, such as Lionel Robbins and later Friedrich Hayek in the neighbouring Economics department, which was hardly a separate division within the School until well into Oakeshott’s time.³⁶ The department retained a decidedly historical attitude well into maturity, faintly echoing the classical focus of Oxford and Cambridge under the direction of Oakeshott.³⁷ In any case, the close association between the department, the School and the socialist movement was to fracture after Laski’s death in spectacular fashion, as he was succeeded by the great conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott in 1950.

Such was Laski’s force of personality that it remains a popular myth the department was his creation. No doubt this emerged from his personal prominence and influence on the School’s international reputation during its early years. However, it was in fact Oakeshott’s arrival at the School that marked the emergence of the Government department in 1950, a fact cemented in 1962 with its formal creation. He was to remain its *de facto* ‘Head’ for almost 20 years, retaining the post when the new formal title of departmental ‘Convener’ swept the School’s administrative system from 1962 to 1965. Although H. R. G. Greaves would take over as Convener in 1966, Oakeshott would remain the *de facto* departmental head until his retirement in 1968, after which regulation changes, begun in the Economics Department, introduced a formal rota system for appointing Heads. From then on, Conveners would usually hold the post for three years. However, he would continue to feature heavily

³⁵ Barker interview 2020.

³⁶ Alexander interview 2020.

³⁷ Dahrendorf 1995: 515.

in the Department, and run his famous ‘History of Political Thought’ course until 1981.³⁸

A one-man band, then, the department certainly was not, although its leader was certainly accomplished on many of the instruments they ended up playing. This core of political scientists and public administration lecturers would remain almost a constant until Laski’s death, joined by a collection of others in more specialist subjects; the Baron Alexander Felixovich von Meyendorff reprised his classes on topics such as ‘Communitistic Legislation in Russia’ and ‘Current Russian Problems’ from 1922 until 1934. Ada Wallas continued to lecture occasionally alongside Laski’s cohort until her death in 1934, with courses focused on her specialties in literature, specifically the romantic movement in politics, covering ‘French Thought in the Eighteenth Century’ and ‘Political Aspects of the Romantic Movement (1740–1848)’. Hastings Lees-Smith, the prominent parliamentarian and Privy Councillor who had joined as a lecturer in public administration in 1906, remained at the School for the entirety of his career, until his death in 1941. The beginnings of a ‘Government Department’ were starting to take hold.

The Department and the War

Laski’s last years in the department saw the School evacuated to Cambridge in 1939, at the outset of the Second World War. Overseen by the School’s Director, Sir Alexander Morris Carr-Saunders, Cambridge’s oldest College Peterhouse agreed to house the LSE for the duration of the war, as the Ministry of Works took over the Houghton Street buildings for the war effort. The two institutions could scarcely have been more different; Peterhouse, founded in 1284, was a bastion of pedagogic traditionalism. The School, a vanguard institution of new social sciences and emerging disciplines, had just established itself as the main rival to the ‘Cambridge School’ of economics and prided itself in its research focus in these emerging fields. It was said at the time that ‘Oxford and Cambridge trained people to run the British Empire’, whereas the LSE ‘trained people to overthrow the British Empire’.³⁹ At the time, the LSE had just shy of a thousand students, almost half of them women, and with roughly a third of this number in evening students, whose commitment to studies throughout the war was to split the faculty’s time between Cambridge and London. As the School’s archivist Sue Donnelly notes, by 1944 women made up two-thirds of the total student body of the School, which had risen to 2,151 by the end of the war.⁴⁰

By all accounts, the integration of the LSE into the collegiate life of Peterhouse was a success, and the political scientists were no exception. With a

³⁸ O’Leary interview 2020; Franco & Marsh 2012: 5; Podoksik 2012: xvii.

³⁹ Hix interview 2020.

⁴⁰ Donnelly 2018.

reputation preceding him, Laski's lectures attracted many Cambridge students to listen, and of those LSE faculty who are fondly recalled by students during the 'Cambridge Years,' almost half were of the Government department; William Pickles, Hastings Lees-Smith, William Robson and Ivor Jennings, and of course Laski himself, are all remembered as particularly prominent during the years, keeping the emerging discipline of political science alive in the economics-heavy, mathematically minded alcoves of Peterhouse.⁴¹

The links between this time and the present, with the School having been dispersed by the COVID-19 pandemic halfway through the Lent term in 2020, are hard to ignore. While prone, perhaps, to being compared too superficially, these two epochs in the Department's life share much common ground. Both have involved a great displacement from the Houghton Street campus, the former concentrating it in a single, albeit alien place, the latter scattering its students and professors throughout the world. The department's period at Cambridge was a definite phase in its development, sealed off and isolated from the rest of its life; as Ralf Dahrendorf recalls it, an 'episode,' a 'time capsule,' for there could not be a London School of Economics and Political Science without London itself.⁴² Quite whether this second 'evacuation' will remain a phase, or mark a more fundamental shift in the way the Department approaches education, remains to be seen.

What is certain is that the war had a lasting effect on the character of the department, as it did on the wider world. Even late into the 1950s, former students recall the harrowing impact the war had on former pupils and staff still teaching in the nascent Government department, returning to the bombed-out buildings of central London. Many spoke in private of experiences during the war, among them Keith Panter-Brick, the noted professor of international relations and scholar of area studies, who joined the department in 1950. Captured at Dunkirk after his Lieutenant was shot and killed next to him, Panter-Brick's forced, 300-mile march from Poland to a Stalag labour camp saw him interred in the forced labour camps for the duration of the war. Upon his release, he studied at Keble College, Oxford, before lecturing in Government and International Relations at the LSE. Tales like this, while spoken of in hushed tones, were far from uncommon during the period.⁴³

Two of the last permanent appointments during Laski's tenure were to the public administration side of the department, which gained valuable additions in the form of Richard Pear (1947) and Peter Self (1948). Pear returned to the School after the war as a lecturer, having studied politics as an undergraduate there in 1935.⁴⁴ Continuing the department's tradition of taking old Oxonians

⁴¹ Dahrendorf 1995: 346.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 358.

⁴³ Alexander interview 2020. Alexander was a student of Panter-Brick.

⁴⁴ Childs 1998.

onto the faculty, Self began lecturing on ‘Morals and Politics’ by the invitation of Laski and Robson in 1948, a class he would continue to run throughout the early Oakeshott years.⁴⁵ The famous sociologist, who would succeed Robson to Smellie’s chair in 1963, was the leading specialist in cities and urban planning of the period, and was crucial in establishing the MSc in Regional and Urban Planning Studies in what would become the Department of Geography and the Environment.⁴⁶ While Self and Pear would split off from the political scientists as the years progressed, they were crucial in helping William Robson found the Greater London Group in 1958, the foremost institution for the study of London government since the 1960s.⁴⁷

On 24 March 1950, Harold Laski passed away after a brief fight with influenza. He had been preparing to speak at a conference held by the LSE on the creation of the Political Studies Association, having laid much of the groundwork the previous year in a series of informal meetings at Paris, Oxford and London.⁴⁸ ‘Held a prisoner’ by his doctor on 22 March, he passed away the evening of the conference’s second day, with Robson and Smellie holding the discussions about the ‘Political Science Conference’ in his stead.⁴⁹ Following Laski’s death, his friend Felix Frankfurter, the jurist and professor who had first introduced Laski to Holmes, worked hard alongside Lord Chorley to raise funds, mostly from the United States, to purchase the whole of Laski’s book collection. The intention was to house it all together in a ‘Laski Room’ on the LSE campus. After a long fundraising push, the collection was purchased and eventually housed in the rare books room at the renovated LSE library on No. 4, Portugal Street, although the room was not named the Laski Room. This might have been partly due to the School being ‘very hard pressed indeed for space’ at the time, according to a letter from Mrs Laski regarding the collection. In an *LSE Magazine* article from June 1978, Granville Eastwood called for the Laski Room project to be reignited. He suggested either the Old Theatre or the New Theatre be renamed the Laski Theatre and that the School commission a new volume of Laski’s most important works.

In his 30 years in London, Harold Laski had transformed Political Science at the LSE, and indeed in much of the wider world, from an amorphous collection of historians and barristers into one of the central, autonomous disciplines at the School. And although much of the definition that was to be seen in the later departmental structure of the School was clearly lacking, the foundations were there to be built upon.

⁴⁵ Jones 2016; see also Fig. 2.5.

⁴⁶ Hall 1999.

⁴⁷ Kochan 2008.

⁴⁸ Morris-Jones 1988: 343.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Michael Oakeshott: A Sceptical Mind

Upon his appointment to the School in 1950, Michael Oakeshott may not have been so agreeable to the above description of the Government department. Indeed, in his view, ‘the department was very loosely organised’ when he got there, and he took steps to unify and expand the beginnings of the faculty cobbled together by Laski over the past 30 years into something more recognisable as a Department of Government.⁵⁰ The steps taken by the Cambridge historian to this end would effect a sea change in the character of the department not unlike that of Laski in the 1920s, and would reset the Department’s composition for half a century.

On the surface, Laski’s successor could not have cast a more different shadow when he took up his Chair that autumn, and a long shadow at that. Although they shared a middle name, this was perhaps the only obvious feature the two men could be said to have held in common, outside their commitment to scholarly investigation. Michael Joseph Oakeshott, a reserved, private man with an individualistic and original outlook on life, had spent his early years reading History at Cambridge before joining the faculty as a Fellow in Philosophy. He later spent the war as an artillery rounds spotter for the intelligence regiment Phantom. His father, Joseph, had been a friend of George Bernard Shaw, was a founding member of the Fabian Society and the LSE, and had written several Fabian pamphlets, as well as delivered Fabian lectures.⁵¹ However, his son had long grown out of any youthful dalliance with socialist ideas. He had become the epitome of a philosophic conservatism which went well beyond politics, and which was to dominate the image of the Department to come.

Oakeshott, who took up the Graham Wallas professorship in Political Science from his post at Nuffield College, Oxford, was a ‘very distinctive character’ and ‘unscrupulous charmer’ who ‘cast a long shadow’.⁵² Counted among the most original minds in 20th-century English political thought, Oakeshott was an enigmatic figure whose work continues to have an impact on philosophy at the School today. However, to many observers, his appointment to the Chair of the School’s star professor seemed a little curious, not least because it was doubtful Oakeshott even *believed* that the discipline to which he had been appointed, political science, existed. Oakeshott had been one of the most vocal of the ‘conservative’ detractors against Laski, Robson and Smellie, seeking to found not a Political Science Association, but a Political Studies Association. He didn’t believe in political science as such, and is credited with being perhaps *the* reason why the UK Political Science Association is called the Political Studies Association, with its associated *Political Studies* journal. And so although it was in the name of the institution, the London School of Economics

⁵⁰ Minogue interview 1988.

⁵¹ O’Sullivan 2014: 473.

⁵² O’Leary interview 2020; Charvet interview 2020.



Figure 11: Professor Michael Oakeshott; Credit: LSE Library.

and *Political Science*, Oakeshott ‘was going to make damn sure there wasn’t a Political Science Department’, recalls Professor Brendan O’Leary.⁵³ To this day, there isn’t a Political Science Department at the LSE. There is the Government Department and the International Relations Department, and although they share deep links, they remain distinct and separate entities.

Oakeshott’s succession to Laski was therefore not without its controversies, being greeted with ‘much dismay’ and a flurry of adverse commentary in the more Left-leaning media. R. H. S. Crossman was coruscating in his criticism of the appointment of a ‘non-believer’ to an influential position in one of the homes of Fabian socialism, writing of ‘a cavalier iconoclast, [Oakeshott] marches with his pick-axe into the portals of the School, dedicated by the Webbs’ to the scientific study of the improvement of human society; and there he smashes, one by one, the idols with which Laski and Wallas adorned its walls.’⁵⁴ In the print media, *The New Statesman* and *Evening Standard* were particularly vocal in their incredulity at Oakeshott’s appointment.⁵⁵ His arrival heralded a new approach to the study of government at the LSE, one that was to maintain a hold until the last decade of the millennium, on his passing in 1990.

⁵³ O’Leary interview 2020.

⁵⁴ Franco 2004: 13.

⁵⁵ O’Sullivan 2014: 477.

His oft-quoted inaugural lecture upon taking his Chair at the School, ‘Political Education’, set the new tone of this era:

In political activity ... men sail a boundless and bottomless sea: there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.⁵⁶

The conservative vein derived from a decidedly liberal philosophy ran throughout his historical works and philosophy of education, and impressed heavily upon the nascent London School at which he arrived. Unsurprisingly, Oakeshott’s opinions of his predecessor Laski were rather low, made apparent in his early works on political philosophy from the 1920s and 1930s. Here, he is openly hostile to ‘Mr Laski’s’ various muddled accounts of the state and civil society. These views were crystallised in an interview with Kenneth Minogue towards the end of his life, where Oakeshott remarked that the then-Director of the School, Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, ‘knew a fool when he met one’, and there were ‘many people at the School he couldn’t stand ...’, among them ‘Laski of course’.⁵⁷

Yet, despite these differences in substance and style, there remains a surprising amount of overlap between the two that links to the founding vision of the School itself. Both Laski and Oakeshott took a comprehensive view of politics and political analysis, drawing little distinction in their work between the various social science subjects such as History, Sociology, Law and International Relations taught at the LSE. This attitude reflects the aims of the School at its inception, an attitude that has somewhat degraded as the institution has grown and departments have delineated their territory within its walls. A particular site of overlap for the pair was constitutional and legal philosophy, although again Laski’s more overtly political and practical focus draws a sharp comparison to the abstractness of Oakeshott. Laski’s well-known and penetrating accounts of sovereignty and the constitution were matched by Oakeshott’s own historical investigations into the nature of human association, both in his *magnum opus*, *On Human Conduct*, and his famous *Lectures on the History of Political Thought*.⁵⁸ In both men, then, despite their differences in the idea of the university and the education one should receive from it, there remained an enduring commitment to the incremental change of society, and the place universities have in helping one understand it.

⁵⁶ Oakeshott 1991: 60. Given as his inaugural lecture at the LSE in 1951.

⁵⁷ Minogue interview 1988.

⁵⁸ Oakeshott 2006.

A comparison of the pair's inaugural lectures sheds more light on this continuity thesis. Oakeshott had begun his with a reflection on the department's past, remarking:

The two former occupants of this Chair, Graham Wallas and Harold Laski, were both men of great distinction; to follow them is an undertaking for which I am ill-prepared. In the first of them, experience and reflection were happily combined to give a reading of politics at once practical and profound; a thinker without a system whose thoughts were nevertheless firmly held together by a thread of honest, patient inquiry; a man who brought his powers of intellect to bear upon the consequence of human behaviour and to whom the reasons of the head and of the heart were alike familiar. In the second, the dry light of intellect was matched with a warm enthusiasm; to the humour of a scholar was joined the temperament of a reformer. It seems but an hour ago that he was dazzling us with the range and readiness of his learning, winning our sympathy by the fearlessness of his advocacy and endearing himself to us by his generosity.⁵⁹

While his remarks covered over an almost visceral disdain for Laski's academic work that peppered his earliest writings, even as early as his successful Fellowship application to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1925, Oakeshott's reverence for the man himself speaks volumes to the sort of lecturer he was in practice, and the figure he cut across both the Department and British politics itself.⁶⁰ He was described as a force of nature whose words inspired a global generation of students in the nature of political enquiry. One is hard-pressed not to compare these words to Laski's remarks, delivered in the inaugural lecture to the same Chair some 24 years prior:

I do not want to leave upon you the impression that politics should be studied historically merely for the sake of the history thereby revealed. Our end is to know the causes of things, to attain a perspective whereby the philosophies we adopt may be the richer and truer in substance. I say advisedly the philosophies; the plural noun means that we do not ask in this university the acceptance of any particular creed. My object as the occupant of this chair is not to create a body of disciples who shall go forth to preach the particular and peculiar doctrines I happen to hold. It is rather that the student shall learn the method of testing his own faith against the only solid criterion we know—the experience of mankind. That does not, of course, mean that in the exposition of political philosophy it is one's business to pretend to impartiality. In any case that is

⁵⁹ Oakeshott 1991: 43–44.

⁶⁰ See Oakeshott 2010: 84, 117, 134, 135, 168–169, 203.

impossible; for in the merest selection of material to be considered there is already implied a judgement which reflects, however unconsciously, the inevitable bias that each of us will bring. The teacher's function, as I conceive it, is less to avoid his bias than consciously to assert its presence and to warn his hearers against it; above all, to be open minded about the difficulties it involves and honest in his attempt to meet them. For the greatest thing he can, after all, teach is the lesson of conscious sincerity. More truth is discovered along the road than can be found on any other.⁶¹

The differences are at once subtle and stark. Laski almost immediately admonishes the historical studies to which Oakeshott was wedded, both by interest and by training. Yet, he affirms many of the principles Oakeshott personally strove to uphold, committed to the creation not of followers, but of *thinkers*. One student of Laski's, none other than B. K. Nehru, once remarked that he had 'reached the opposite conclusions' to those Laski had taught him, to which Laski replied he had only 'taught him how to think'.⁶² This, perhaps, is the commonality between the two great professors: a love of teaching not ideals as such, but of ways to think for oneself.

Many have testified to the persuasiveness and impact, not just of Oakeshott's inaugural lecture, but of his teaching style more generally. A student of Oakeshott's at the time, Professor Nicholas Barr, recalls the atmosphere of his lectures:

I'm a classic economist. I don't understand political theory, but I found these lectures absolutely riveting, riveting as much for the delivery as the content. He was charismatic and again, I'm exaggerating, but sometimes you see a performance of a piece of music you don't understand or a play and you don't understand the language but you can recognise that this is of a stunning quality. And if you didn't understand Michael Oakeshott, he had that ...⁶³

Barr's view is mirrored by other students such as Elly Chong, a student at the School later in the period from 1974 to 1975. She recalls Oakeshott to have been the 'strongest influence' on her education personally, not necessarily in 'what he said', 'but the way he said it'.⁶⁴ He instilled a great sense in people of the 'importance of context'.⁶⁵ Indeed, the influence of R. G. Collingwood and the links to what would be called the Cambridge School approach of historical contextualism on Oakeshott seems to have translated throughout the

⁶¹ Laski 1926.

⁶² Dahrendorf 1995: 192.

⁶³ Barr telephone interview 2020.

⁶⁴ Chong telephone interview 2020.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Government department's approach during this period, running deep through their methods, if not necessarily the conclusions formed.

The Government department had gained a different sort of leader in the figure of Michael Oakeshott, a leader content to lead from the shadows, rather than proclaim from the frontlines. It was to be his appointments, made under this new philosophy of education, that would guide the development of the department into maturity.

The Changing of the Guard

Understanding the man behind the department during the latter half of this period is crucial, for his historical focus and philosophical scepticism was to reorient the image of the department, both in Britain and within the School itself. Unlike Miliband or Laski, Oakeshott was to preside over a more reserved department not given to maintaining public images or personal followings, although some of his 'disciples' would break with this over the years. George Jones recalls a right-wing 'old boy hold' over the department in the 1950s, with Oakeshott possessing great power over appointments, some of which occurred over a pint in university bars.⁶⁶ He was keen to appoint those of a similar philosophical disposition to himself, remoulding the department into one focused on the historical rather than the practical. Figure 12 is a pictorial representation of the department based on the 1950–1951 Calendar. In the year that Oakeshott arrived, courses were split into even divisions between Public Administration, the History of Political Thought, and Political and Social Thought, although a weighting existed towards the latter. Over the years, this balance was to tilt decisively in the favour of 'Oakeshottian' trained political theorists and historians, marginalising the public administration thinkers, and creating a rift between the two.

Upon assuming Laski's role as the informal leader of the political scientists, he began this departmental reconstruction. Elie Kedourie joined in 1953, as a scholar of Middle Eastern politics, having been denied his PhD by the University of Oxford. Kenneth Minogue joined as an assistant lecturer at Oakeshott's invitation in 1956, after completing his evening course BSc (Econ.) at the School, while Maurice Cranston arrived in 1959, again from Oxford.⁶⁷ All would follow in Oakeshott's footsteps to head the Department as its 'Convener' across the course of their careers, and cement this move away from Laski under Oakeshott to the study of politics in the Department.

Ideological divisions had always been tolerated within the Department, but conservatism, variously described, was the dominant political discourse well into the 1960s and beyond. During these early Oakeshott years, the division

⁶⁶ O'Leary interview 2020.

⁶⁷ De-La-Noy 2011.

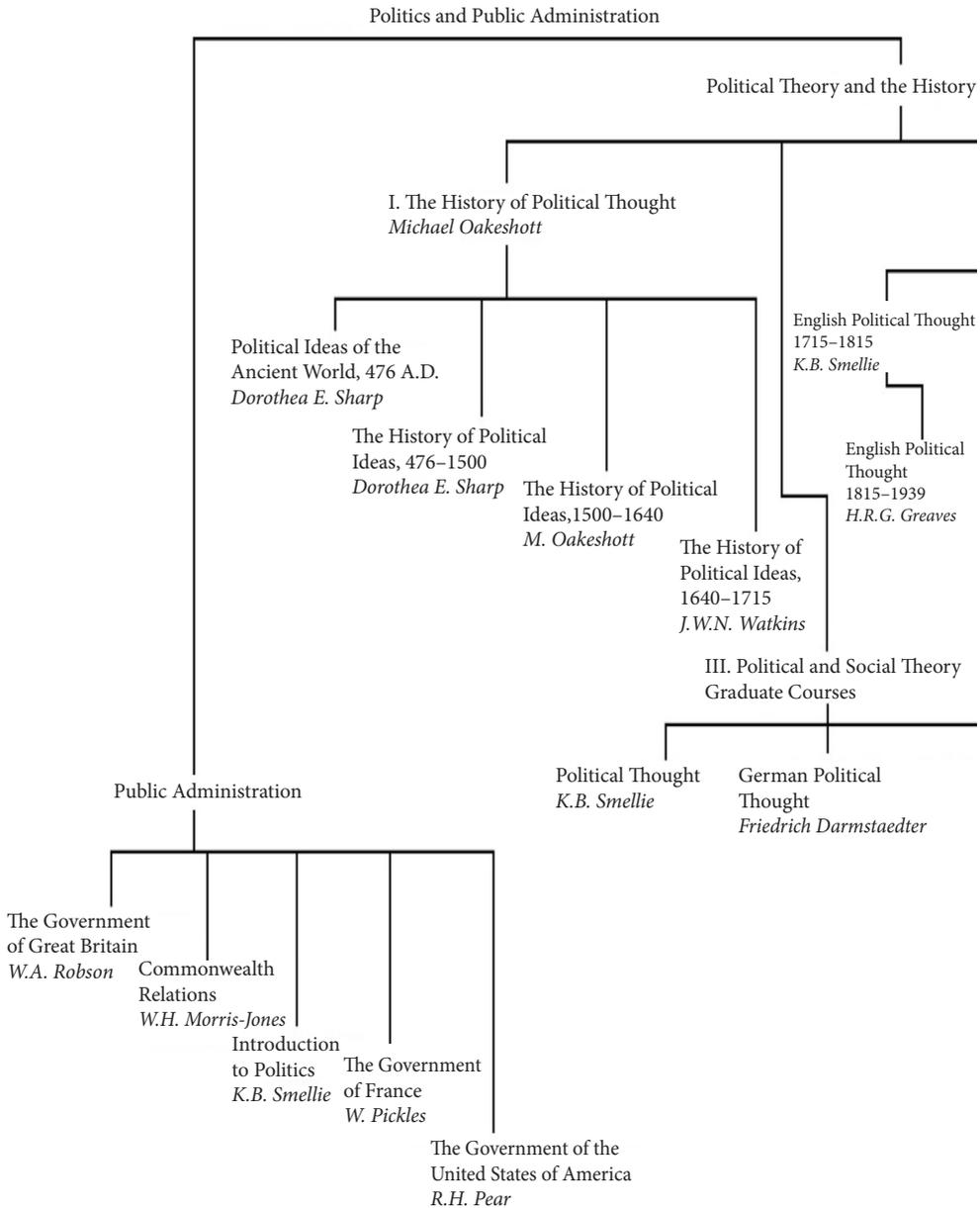
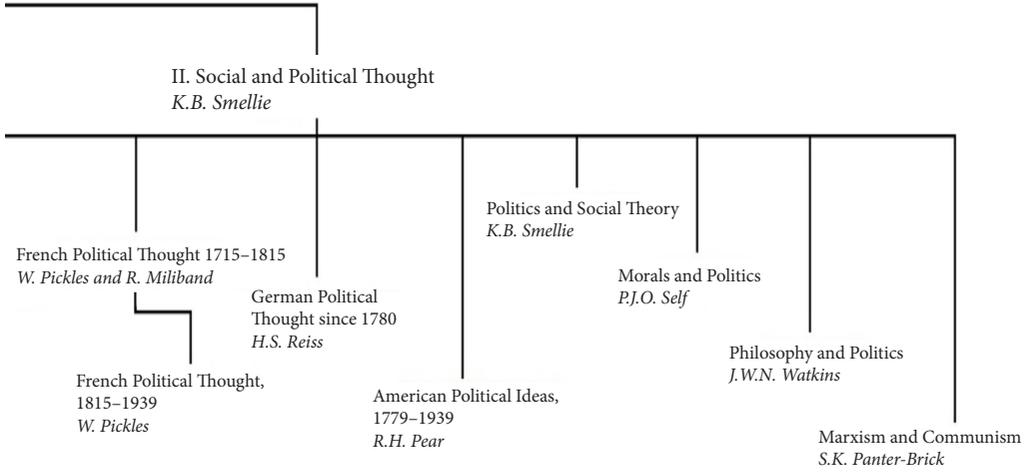


Figure 12: The London School of Economics and Political Science Faculty of Government, Calendar for the Fifty-Sixth Session, 1950-51 (London, 1950); Credit: Mapping created by D. Skeffington.

of Political Thought



Conservative Thought
Since Burke
W.H. Morris-Jones

between Political Science and Public Administration began to grow, with the old grouping of Peter Self and William Robson starting to go their own way, splitting off from the new cohort of ‘Oakeshottians.’⁶⁸ A prominent force in their day alongside the ‘Peterhouse Right’ of Cambridge, the College to which the Department had evacuated during the War, these Oakeshottians were an ill-defined grouping of academics embodying a certain sceptical outlook towards politics and political education, rather than a well-defined ‘ideological’ intellectual movement. Indeed, such a position would have been antithetical to Oakeshott’s worldview. This was encapsulated best by Minogue, who was said to hold an ‘Oakeshottian hatred’ of ideological shibboleths.⁶⁹

A dislike of any sort of ‘universalist’ philosophy would define Oakeshott’s work, and the Department he ran, for almost half a century. Oakeshott’s suspicion of Fabianism was that it was Baconian in inspiration, and that the source of its pragmatic, gradualist approach was derived from Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, published in 1624, of the technological society ruled by scientific experts. The ‘ends’ were everything to the Fabians and ‘means’ were less important so long as the goals of collectivism were achieved. This attitude could be taken to explain the Webbs’ susceptibility to praise Soviet communism despite the anti-democratic nature of the Bolsheviks, and the limits to personal freedom and liberty in the form of restrictions on freedom of expression and speech. Thus, even moderate and ‘democratic’ socialism could not be trusted. So it was that as late as 1981 the *Financial Times* described the Government Department at the LSE as ‘the most right-wing political science department in the Western World’, with distinctive voices like Oakeshott, Minogue and Middle-East scholar Elie Kedourie hovering in the background of its image.⁷⁰ And while this description wasn’t quite true, due to the influence of the ‘Old Fabians’ in both British politics and public policy and administration, Oakeshott’s philosophers and historians certainly made their mark, both on the Department’s image and the School as a whole.⁷¹

Elie Kedourie was the first to signal this shift, a leading if quiet mind in the department of Government, and a vociferous critic of the post-colonial orthodoxy dominating his field. He had studied under Laski as an undergraduate at the School in 1950, the year before his death, and had made an impression on both him and K. B. Smellie in his undergraduate work.⁷² A major but somewhat forgotten scholar in the emerging discipline of Middle Eastern Studies, Kedourie was a founder and editor of the journal of the same name in 1964, a post he would remain at throughout his career. He was fiercely independent, railing against the dominating, Orientalist accounts of his field—an attitude

⁶⁸ Dahrendorf 1995: 418.

⁶⁹ O’Leary interview 2020.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Beattie 1998: 110.

that cost him his doctorate in Oxford—and refusing to bring his thesis into line with the ‘misconceptions’ of his examiner, the leading Middle Eastern scholar of the day.⁷³ Kedourie’s main criticisms centred on the mismanagement of the Ottoman Empire by the British, accusing them of fomenting discord and war by carving the old stable empire up into

artificial entities in accordance with their imperial interests and in complete disregard of local yearning for political unity. By way of doing so, the British (allegedly) duped the naive and well-intentioned Arab nationalist movement into a revolt against its Ottoman suzerain, only to cheat it of its fruits and break the historical unity of a predominantly Arab area.⁷⁴

Reflecting on her husband’s work, Sylvia Kedourie (herself an eminent scholar of the Middle East), concludes: ‘As a historian of the Middle East, he completely changed the approach to the subject. His interpretation, revolutionary as it was, has now become so accepted that people can no longer appreciate how novel his ideas were when he started writing in the 1950s.’⁷⁵ Although a conservative in nature, Kedourie was, like Oakeshott, some distance from a ‘conservative’ caricature. He went through considerable effort to distance conservatism from the political ‘right’, believing that conservatism-proper consisted of a scepticism about what politics could reasonably achieve.

Leonard Schapiro, the leading professor of Soviet politics and totalitarianism in the Department, joined two years later in 1955, expanding the range of the faculty significantly in these areas. Drawn away from the London Bar by the collaborative efforts of Robson and Oakeshott, where he had practised both before and after the war, Schapiro headed a renewed effort to expand the Department’s specialisation in Russian politics, taking up where Baron von Meyendorff had left off. Remembered fondly for his lecturing style, Schapiro was swiftly appointed professor in 1963, became Convenor after H. R. G. Greaves in 1969 and stayed on as professor until his retirement in 1975.⁷⁶

Schapiro was joined the following year by Kenneth Minogue, another central and unusually outspoken member of the Oakeshottian cohort. An Australian philosopher with an ‘intense passion for archaic English conservatism’, combined with a libertarian political philosophy, Minogue was one of few in the Department who took a political stance. Perhaps Oakeshott’s ‘chief disciple’, Minogue was an advocate of putting his more abstract philosophy into practice. He was ‘a founding member of the Bruges group’, a right-wing think tank promoting the merits of independence from the European Union, whose first

⁷³ Karsh 1999: 704–706.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 706.

⁷⁵ Kedourie 2005: 647.

⁷⁶ Reddaway 1975: 13; Camfield 2016; Shukman 2004.

Honorary President was Margaret Thatcher, and one of the few Oakeshottians to become involved in policymaking.⁷⁷ Similar in his libertarian leanings to Minogue, which grew progressively more right-wing over his time in the Department, was Maurice Cranston. A historian and philosopher appointed by Oakeshott in 1959, Cranston would continue to teach until 1985 on Political Science and Philosophy, lecturing on the history of political thought. Cranston would enjoy considerably more success as a political biographer than he would as a philosopher. His study of the life of John Locke, published in 1957, is still considered the ‘definitive’ study of the life of this great political philosopher, matched by others of a similar calibre on Sartre and Rousseau throughout his career.⁷⁸

This group of philosophers and historians, moulded in Oakeshott’s image, was a clear divergence from Laski’s band of administrative professionals. But was this conservative image of the young Government Department a clean break with the Fabian traditions of the School’s founders? Anne Phillips, the current holder of Graham Wallas’s Chair at the School, helpfully interrogates this idea of an Oakeshottian/non-Oakeshottian split in the Department. She argues these thinkers were often not divided along political lines *per se*, but by differing views concerning the nature of political enquiry itself. It was a split between those ‘who are very committed to the study of politics being made as precise and scientific as possible’ and ‘those who think the study of politics should be addressing big questions that can’t and don’t actually lend themselves to that degree of precision.’ Such enquiries could dominate either the left or the right of the political spectrum, although Phillips sees no necessary tension in the Department along conservative or socialist lines as such.⁷⁹ And although Oakeshott has often been perceived as a right-wing thinker, with Perry Anderson counting him among the ‘intransigent right’ of Hayek, Schmitt and Strauss, his influence in mainstream liberal and even centre left-wing political theory has steadily grown since his death, particularly in constitutional thought. That is not to say that the Department during this period was free of such intransigent right-wing thinkers, and its leanings were certainly to the right of centre even in 1965.⁸⁰ Rather that, as under Laski, its external image was more influenced by the outspoken members of this cohort, such as Minogue. If there was a difference, it was in temperament and style of teaching, rather than any deeply ingrained ideological rift; Laski ‘the orator’ versus Oakeshott ‘the conversationalist’, as Dahrendorf so eloquently put it.⁸¹

⁷⁷ O’Leary interview 2020.

⁷⁸ De-La-Noy 2011; Burns 1995.

⁷⁹ Phillips telephone interview 2020.

⁸⁰ Charvet interview 2020.

⁸¹ Dahrendorf 1995: 368.

The Department under Oakeshott

The Government Department under Oakeshott was ‘a large one, and grew larger during his tenure’, from 12 members on his arrival—already the largest in the country—to 30 when he left.⁸² Patrick Dunleavy recalls it as a time dominated by a philosophical rather than practical outlook, fitting with Oakeshott’s own views of politics.⁸³ The logic underpinning Oakeshott’s disdain for ‘political science’ was also to influence the administration of the day-to-day affairs. He insisted that the Department should have a ‘Convener’ and not a ‘Head’; a first-among-equals position whose job was convening their colleagues in discussion, rather than through ‘top-down planning’ or dictation. Oakeshott’s passionate and embodied defence of the LSE as this ‘community of scholars’, rather than a business-like factory of trained graduates, acknowledges a tension that persists to this day in the Department—the extent to which university education should be about training for jobs rather than a broader liberal education. Established as a vocational business school with a specific remit to encourage debate, discussion and critical thinking among a new class of professional governmental administrators, the LSE was lent academic credentials by joining the University of London in 1900. As George Jones would later recognise, this issue remains a key question in the identity and purpose of the Department as an institution in British and global education.

Despite the political divisions raised by his appointment and his old-fashioned style, writing as he did everything in longhand, Oakeshott was a ‘brilliant administrator’ and ‘spread a spirit of collegiality’ during his tenure as Convener. He devoted his time not to writing books, nor to ‘preaching conservatism as Laski had done socialism’, but to promoting academic work and standards.⁸⁴ He was, as Parekh notes, not always a major intellectual presence at the School by nature, but his hand was felt everywhere in the manner in which he guided the Department, led by a ‘strong sense of his own authority’ in the role, coupled with a ‘keen appreciation of what was required for the maintenance of amicable relations amongst his colleagues.’⁸⁵ In an interview with Ken Minogue, towards the end of his life, Oakeshott paints a picture of himself as rather removed from the politics of the university, which he explicitly notes he loathed, committed instead to the delivery and running of the courses as best he could. He seems driven by his devotion to his subjects and his intellectual ‘adventuring’. There were only a few departmental meetings per year, but they did not last long; Oakeshott generally got his own way at departmental

⁸² Kedourie 1998: 6; Johnson 1991: 410; see Fig. I, *The London School of Economics and Political Science Department of Government, 1950–1951*.

⁸³ Dunleavy interview 2019.

⁸⁴ *The Times*, Saturday, 22 December 1990.

⁸⁵ Parekh 1999: 101; Johnson 1991: 411.

meetings and School committees.⁸⁶ And, while this perhaps misses some ‘flashes of turmoil; adversarial encounters with colleagues and authorities’ that are common to all institutions, Oakeshott’s time at the helm of the Department seems to be recalled with general warmth.

While Oakeshott’s leadership and personal qualities are given subtle praise during this time, the same cannot be said for its formal research profile, which would suffer on his watch. The Department consistently performed poorly when Research Assessment Exercises were introduced towards the end of his association with the School in the late 1980s, which comes as no surprise to those aware of Oakeshott’s approach to education.⁸⁷ On the contrary, it correlates rather well with his final work, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, published in 1989, where he extols the virtues of subtle, comprehensive education against the sensibilities of ‘gaining knowledge’ for practical use. Research, or the idea that you would ‘waste your time writing fresh articles or accumulating knowledge, or the notion of a frontier of knowledge’, were indeed ‘bizarre notions’ for Oakeshottians.⁸⁸ Their focus was on the manner in which one was taught, as well as the manner one developed, rather than any particular ‘skill’ as such.

Several professors, past and present, have recalled these divisions within the Department, before the Oakeshottian cohort of academics began to be eclipsed. The re-emergence of public policy and political science to challenge the hitherto dominant field of political philosophy, as well as public administration, and British colonial administration, under the tutelage and leadership of the charismatic Oakeshott, was the work of many years, but proved to be irresistible. This evolution of the Department went alongside a clearer sense of its identity, largely a consequence of Departmental restructuring during the period. The emergence of a more professional approach has been remarked on by several colleagues—an academic community more engaged in research and, like much of academia in the second half of the 20th century, tending towards specialisation—although this wasn’t to take full effect until well after Oakeshott’s association ended.⁸⁹ However, even towards the end of the period in 1964, Ken Minogue remarked on the deficiencies of the course content:

The courses are mostly too broad—the conflict between breadth and depth is virtually insoluble. One just has to strike a compromise. The objection to broad courses is that the broader they are, the more dishonesty they involve. Students have no alternative but to learn off second-or-third-hand judgments, and pass them off as their own.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Minogue 2002: 69.

⁸⁷ See Oakeshott 2001, particularly Timothy Fuller’s Introduction, ‘The idea of a university’ and ‘Learning and teaching.’

⁸⁸ O’Leary interview 2020.

⁸⁹ In interviews, George Jones and Patrick Dunleavy gave particular emphasis to specialisation.

⁹⁰ ‘Mr. Ken Minogue ... Frankly Speaking’, *The Beaver*, 7 May 1964.

This is, perhaps, a natural tension in the study of the social sciences and the humanities; a balance to be struck between breadth and depth, which is inherent in the process of learning the subject itself.

The impact of location on the identity of the Department, however, remained much the same as it had even prior to Laski. Teaching was still conducted across the campus buildings, with a focus on the Old Building, but the Government Department had no one place it could call home. Offices were still shared by academics of all stripes within the School, as John Charvet recalls, who joined at Oakeshott's invitation in 1965;⁹¹ he himself shared office space with a law scholar, fostering the interdisciplinary culture the Founders had embraced and envisioned.⁹² However, by 1962, the discussions first mooted by the School's Constitution Committee in 1937 came to fruition, and the Department of Government was formally established alongside a host of others that had attained relative independence over the 1940s.⁹³ Oakeshott took his place as the first Convener of the Department, a title that was to remain in use until 2007. The one-man band had finally emerged from its ad hoc trappings and garnered an identity of its own.

Conclusion

While the Oakeshottians maintained their progenitor's distance from the practical world of political life, they nevertheless kept a steady influence on it through their works. Oakeshott's noted influence on history and philosophy was cemented by his early analysis of fascism, communism and the other *Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* in his 1939 work of the same name. His impact on Hobbes' scholarship has been recognised as significant and original by leading figures in liberal political thought, such as the Cambridge School historians Quentin Skinner and Noel Malcolm. Two eminent contemporary professors of law at the School, Martin Loughlin and Thomas Poole, continue to draw on and critique Oakeshott's later and most significant works, *On Human Conduct* and *On History*, with reference to the legal philosophy for their own accounts of public and constitutional law to this day, as do the wider circles of legal academia in which they run.⁹⁴ Indeed, his work continues to be taught at the LSE on courses in the 'History of Political Thought', on the very same MSc programme he founded some half a century ago.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Grant 2012: 32.

⁹² Charvet interview 2020.

⁹³ Dahrendorf 1995: 437.

⁹⁴ See Poole & Dyzenhaus 2017; Loughlin 1992: 63–83; Loughlin 2004: 153–163; see also Gerencser 2012.

⁹⁵ 'Advanced Study of Key Political Thinkers: Hobbes,' course on the MSc in Political Theory at the LSE 2019–2020, run by Dr. Signy Gutnick-Allen; see also Malcolm 2012. A view shared by former and current professors, taken from interviews with Professors John Charvet, Anne Phillips and Brendan O'Leary.

Although Elie Kedourie has remained a marginal figure in wider political studies, and is remembered as a fairly ineffectual lecturer, his work has been recognised in hindsight as important and path-breaking on Middle Eastern scholarship, and alongside Cranston's political biographies forms some of the Department's stellar scholarship during the period.⁹⁶ Yet, the Department's main strength during the early Oakeshottian years, Kedourie aside, seems to have been that of its teaching style, developed through a solid grouping of professors drawn as much by Oakeshott's historical leanings as they were by his style of pedagogy.

By 1965, then, the Department had radically shifted its image, through the golden formative Laski years and back again to the liberal right of Oakeshott's new cohort. It had, by now, formally *become* the Department of Government, even if its roots had been established decades before, and was maturing into a major entity within the School. Divisions remained between the old public administration appointees lingering from Laski's tenure and this new guard, historical and philosophical, with a focus not so much on research as understanding. These divisions were to come to a head not long after, during the days of the *soixante-huitards*, and the student protests of May 1968. And it is to this tumultuous period that we now turn.

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⁹⁶ Matravers telephone interview 2020.

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