Source-based Questions

The First Labour Government, 1924

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HISTORY STUDENTS REQUIRE ALL MANNER OF SKILLS. One of the most important, and one recognised as such by all the examining boards, is the ability to analyse documentary source material. We have to wring the last drop of reliable evidence from the surviving records of the past. Notice the word reliable. We must resist the temptation - which may be very great - to attribute more significance to a document than it can legitimately bear. Clearly source analysis involves judgement. Analysing source material is, in fact, not a single skill at all, but a complex amalgam of abilities. There are at least three broad areas of expertise.

A. The first of these is KNOWLEDGE. The analysis of sources cannot be divorced from context. A good knowledge of your syllabus is a prerequisite for success, whether you are tackling an essay or a source-based question. Those who attempt the latter without adequate understanding of the period will probably be unable to fathom the sources and will certainly fail to answer the questions examiners set on them.

B. COMPREHENSION. We have to struggle to understand documents. This means, first and foremost, reading them slowly and carefully. Do not trouble, at this stage, about the questions that have been set. Just focus on grasping the meaning of the sources. Rest assured that, if you understand the sources, you will be able to tackle whatever questions are posed. So go slowly, reading each document phrase by phrase until the meaning becomes clear. As you do, you will almost automatically become aware of its tone (factual, emotional, humorous, etc) and will perhaps distinguish between the information the author is deliberately putting across (sometimes called the 'witting testimony') and what he or she (or they) are conveying, perhaps about their values or what they take for granted, without meaning to (the 'unwitting testimony').

C. EVALUATION. Once you really begin to understand the sources, you are automatically evaluating them - hence phases 2 and 3 will merge. Key questions to bear in mind are: How reliable is the source? (Did the author have first-hand knowledge of the information being conveyed, or is it hearsay?). What purpose was it designed to serve? Do the sources under scrutiny complement or contradict each other? The questions you can ask are, in fact, legion. The most important factor, however, is not a particular question but an attitude of mind: you need the intellectual self-confidence to make your own judgements - common-sense judgements based on your overall knowledge of the period and your understanding of the sources. If you can cultivate this quality, you will be able to tackle whatever questions the examiners set.

Sources on the first Labour government

SOURCE 1. Labour's Manifesto in 1923:

> When Labour rules it will take care that little children shall not needlessly die; it will give to every child equality of opportunity in education; it will make generous provision for the aged people, the widowed mothers, the sick and disabled citizens. It will abolish the slums, promptly build an adequate supply of decent homes, and resist decontrol [of rents] till the shortage is satisfied.

SOURCE 2. A Conservative party poster in the 1923 election:

> **MacDonald for Moscow**
> **Baldwin for Britain**
> **Keep the Home Fires Burning**

SOURCE 3. *The English Review*, January 1924:

> We stand now at a moment when the sun of England seems menaced with final eclipse. For the first time in her history the party of revolution approach their hands to the helm of the state, not only, as in the 17th century, for the purpose of overthrowing the Crown or for altering the Constitution, but with the design of destroying the very bases of civilised life.

SOURCE 4. Beatrice Webb's diary, 12 April 1924:

> MacDonald has been useful to placate the ordinary man; I doubt his usefulness in the future … Meanwhile Sidney [her husband] and I will watch with a smile this policy of inverted permeation - the permeation of the socialist party by the philosophy of the philistine citizen, instead of the permeation of the philistine citizen by the socialist creed.

SOURCE 5. The Colonial Secretary, J.H. Thomas, speaking in March 1924:

> The Government (including men like myself who were born in the humblest circumstances, who were denied the opportunities and advantages of university education, and who graduated only in the school of hard work, experience, toil and suffering) said to the country and to the world when they undertook the duties and responsibilities of office: 'If you gambled on our disloyalty you are deceived, if you gambled that we were less patriotic than other people it only shows how foolish you were.' Our answer is that just as in every crisis of the history of our Empire that Empire has been fortified and protected, not by class or creed or section but by the unity of all sections, so, in this great trial of government, which is an experiment, we are all working with a single-minded desire to champion our cause, fight for our principles, and do what we believe to be right, determined, above all, that we will hand on the Seals of Office to our successors proud of being able to say at that time that our Empire is no less great than it was prior to working men accepting those Seals of Office. Let us get rid of this miserable class warfare and say that all classes and creeds will combine to make the Empire worthy of the sacrifices which all classes made in the war.

SOURCE 6. Ramsay MacDonald writing to the King, October 1924:

> They [the Labour government] have shown the country that they have the capacity to govern in an equal degree with the other parties in the House … and considering their lack of experience, have acquitted themselves with credit in the House of Commons … They can justly claim that they have left the international situation in a more favourable position than that which they inherited … and have done much to dispel the fantastic and extravagant belief which at one time found expression that they were nothing but a

band of irresponsible revolutionaries intent on wreckage and destruction.

SOURCE 7. Conservative candidate in 1924 election:

> A vote for the Socialists is a vote for the Communists. They pretend to be separate, but at every crisis we find them together. The same sinister power directs them both, and they both march to the pipers of Moscow under the shadow of the Red Flag.

Questions and commentary

1. Study Source 3. Specify the aims which the magazine believed a Labour government would attempt to realise. (4 marks)

This question tests comprehension and, to a greater degree, your contextual knowledge of the fears which were associated with the inauguration of the first ever Labour government in Britain. What were the 'very bases of civilised life'? It was commonly feared that Labour would fail to respect private property and the sanctity of marriage. In fact, a veritable swag-bag of 'crimes' was projected on to Labour.

2. Study Source 4. Explain what Beatrice Webb meant by 'inverted permeation'. (3 marks)

Webb herself defined her meaning, so be sure to go farther than her explanation. Never simply paraphrase, always try to explain. In particular, you must explain what you think she meant by the philosophy of the philistine citizen and the socialist creed. If you do not grasp the meaning straight away, try to judge the mood of the diary entry. Is she saying, at bottom, that too high a price could be paid for 'buying' the votes of the electorate? A mention of Fabianism will score well.

3. Study Source 5. Which parts of Thomas's speech define a distinctively 'Labour' position on the Empire, and which indicate that Labour was following traditional policies? (8 marks)

This is the longest document in the series, so be sure to read it slowly and carefully. Your first impression may well be that Thomas was making a virtue of Labour's continuity with its Liberal and Conservative predecessors - and so you should have no difficulty in answering the second part of the question, although he was short on the precise details of what Labour was doing in the Empire. But it is clear that, to Thomas, Labour's working-class personnel gives them a distinctive position. His imperial patriotism recognises the contribution which all classes have made to the Empire.

4. Study Source 6. With reference to the work of the government, estimate how justified MacDonald was in his assessment of Labour's achievements. (10 marks)

Try to match each so-called achievement in the letter with your knowledge of the historical reality. Note that, except perhaps in foreign policy, MacDonald was not saying Labour had performed better than the other parties. The competent administration, the adherence to customary procedures and acceptance of civil service advice, the orthodoxy and respectability - these were designed to show that Labour was not irresponsible or secretly communist. By failing to take extreme measures, Labour would give the lie to the notion that they were revolutionaries. Specify what Labour did to improve the international situation. You will probably accept the view that the situation in Europe - especially with the Dawes Plan - was better than in the previous year; but you may not accept that this was necessarily due to the work of MacDonald at the Foreign Office.

5. Study Sources 1 and 6. Why do you think MacDonald made no reference in his letter to the King to the aims set out in the party's manifesto? (5 marks)

MacDonald does not, at least in the extract in Source 6, refer to the social aims contained in Source 1. One possible explanation is that Labour had no, or very few, social achievements in office. But what about Wheatley's Housing Act and Trevelyan's work at the Board of Education? May it be that MacDonald's personal gaze was focused elsewhere? Or could it be that the aims in the manifesto were too grandiose to bear comparison with the more prosaic reality. They were aims for when 'Labour rules'. But did Labour, a minority government with fewer seats than the Conservative opposition, actually 'rule' in 1924?

6. Study Sources 2 and 7. Account for the continuity of Conservative election propaganda in these two examples, from before and after the first Labour government. (8 marks)

First, you must decide what continuity there is between the two examples. (They are remarkably similar. The only real difference is that, after the election, the Conservatives found no need to vaunt their own patriotic credentials.) So why did Labour, despite MacDonald's best intentions, not throw off the stigma of communism? Clearly, you must refer to the Russian treaty and, even more important, to the Zinoviev letter which was so exploited by the right-wing media and by sections of the Tory party during the election campaign.

7. Using these sources and your own knowledge, judge how far Labour showed they were 'fit to govern' during their first period in office. (20 marks)

By any standards, this is a difficult question. Most candidates could probably write thousands of words in answer to it. But remember that it is not an actual essay question. Therefore, although you are expected to write proper sentences of fluent prose, you do not have to use all the conventions of an essay. In addition, you should build upon your previous answers. Hence, instead of explaining the Zinoviev letter or the terms of the Dawes Plan - which you will have done earlier - you may simply refer to them and use them as parts of a relevant and coherent argument. Most students will construct their answers around the exaggerated fears associated with Labour, Labour's work (and rhetoric) to dispel them (even at the risk of alienating left-wing supporters), and the fact that, nevertheless, very similar fears were still entertained by some during the general election of October 1924.

Which extra information will you include? You might bring in aspects of Labour's work (for example, its willingness to defy the unions) which were calculated to convey an image of respectability. But how can we judge 'how far' Labour showed themselves fit to govern? Fitness to govern is a matter of subjective opinion rather than of objective fact - but whose opinion? The answer is the British public's, and hence you must - if you are to get a good mark - bring in data from general elections. Many Liberal voters switched to the Conservatives, perhaps because of the 'Red Scare'; but to the extra million people who voted Labour, MacDonald's party had shown themselves fit to govern. Yet nine months in office was too short for such fitness to be proved indisputably. After all, it was only in 1945 that Labour won an overall parliamentary majority.

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