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# The British General Election of 1997

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# Preface

This is the fifteenth in the Nuffield College series of election histories. It is the seventh undertaken jointly by the present authors. We are saved from the anxiety about becoming stale in repeating the same enterprise by the continuous change in the personnel and the practice of British politics. It is arguable that the 1997 contest was the most innovative since 1959. We have certainly found it as fascinating as any that we have observed.

This book, like its predecessors, ends with the counting of the votes. Political life in Britain continued busily after 1 May 1997; the principal actors in the election became preoccupied with mastering the intricacies of government or with electing a new party leader and adjusting to the frustrations of opposition. As we asked them, in our post-election interviews, to reflect on what was well or ill done during the past five years, or during the campaign, their enthusiasms had moved on. But their memories were sharp and critical. This book is written without the longer perspectives of history but it does, we hope, escape the instant judgements, made in the heat of the campaign.

The Nuffield series of election studies was designed by its instigator in 1945, R. B. McCallum, 'to find immortality in the footnotes of others' and to prevent myths growing up about the nature of a campaign as they did after 1918 and 1924 and 1931. This work tries, once again, to pursue that honourable goal.

1997 provided a landmark election. It was not just that, for the first time in 18 years, it led to a change in government. It was also because the way in which it was conducted marked a change in style on a scale unmatched in any post-war election except one. In 1959 the advent of intensive television coverage, of large-scale advertising, of press conferences, and of private polls transformed the nature of campaigning. In 1997 the Labour Party brought to an altogether new pitch, the sophisticated presentation of its messages, nationally and locally. The six weeks of the campaign did not, of course, decide the outcome but the three years of disciplined preparation and the final assault must have had a substantial impact on the scale of the majority.

In addition to the two authors on the title page, another five are named in the table of contents. But there are many more contributors to this work. Journalists covered the election more exhaustively than ever before and many of our insights are drawn from them. The parties were immensely cooperative, allowing us access to their activities and giving us many hours

of their time in interviews. Party leaders generously granted interviews, and some key participants commented on parts of our draft; we cannot embarrass them by naming them, but they know how grateful we are.

Vernon Bogdanor, Michael Hart, Paul Martin, Peter Riddell, Marc Stears, John Taylor and Anthony Teasdale are among those who made comments on particular chapters; other helpful critics remain anonymous. We are deeply indebted to all those who have saved us from error of fact or interpretation or infelicity of style. We must also thank Nuffield College and the Department of Politics and Communications at the University of Liverpool for all sorts of practical assistance, and the Leverhulme Trust for so generously providing financial support.

Our work was greatly lightened by our Research Assistant, Ian St John of Nuffield College, and Marian Hoffmann and Yvonne Janvier did a vast amount of our typing. Martin Range had a major role in the production of the statistical appendix and Steve Moyle helped with the maps. Our wives once again tolerated the burdens imposed by our psephological enthusiasm.

David Butler  
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*August 1997*