Archives full of life: Adventures in the LSE's Fabian collection
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Looking back in 1968 over his long political life, the great Fabian Leonard Woolf wrote:

"I see clearly that I have achieved practically nothing. The world today and the history of the human anthill during the last fifty-seven years would be exactly the same as it is if I had played ping pong instead of sitting on committees and writing books and memoranda. I have therefore to make the rather ignominious confession…that I must have in a long life ground through between 150,000 and 200,000 hours of perfectly useless work…"

This a little harsh for the man who played such a great role behind the scenes of Labour's international policy development, published The Waste Land, and supported his wife Virginia through her most creative period, before her illness took her. Yet Woolf makes the point that great political lives are measured out in minutes, meetings and memoranda. (In his new book Boris Johnson makes the same point about Churchill, who produced more written words than Dickens and Shakespeare combined).

The Fabian Society archive held at the LSE, newly available online, is proof that social change comes out of the barrel of a committee and the pages of a pamphlet. Socialism, as Oscar Wilde said, does indeed take up too many evenings.

The collection comprises Fabian and Young Fabian pamphlets and tracts, from 1884 to 2000. It holds the original minute books of the executive committee from 1885 to 1954. Also, there's some of the sub-committee minutes, from the organising and propaganda committee, the finance and general purposes committee. Although tantalisingly, the research committee minutes, showing how proposals for pamphlets were accepted or rejected, are not present. I'd like to see one from 1976 which turned down a pamphlet from a young lawyer called Anthony Blair.

The Fabian archive consists of digital photographs of the original documents, which is where it gets really fascinating. The early minutes are handwritten, and committee members sign themselves in. On 7th Oct 1910, the exec members signed the book. Look, there's the militant suffragette Mabel Atkinson, Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw. In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the finance and general purposes committee considered the staff salaries, membership rates and fundraising campaigns. In October 1936, the committee minutes record, under correspondence, a request from 'Rt Hon Wedgewood Benn – request to add his name to list of possible Parliamentary candidates'. This of course, was Tony Benn's father, elected the following year at Manchester Gorton.

Indeed, if you had the time – and it would take a great deal of time – you could play detective with every set of minutes, cross-referencing them with great men's and women's diaries, with cabinet papers, with the great events of the day and with autobiographies. You could work out why Harold Laski was absent from the executive or where Shirley Williams was when the summer school was being discussed. You could even track down the exact moment when the Fabian executive decided to establish a 'School of Economics' , which in turn became the LSE, now home to the Fabian archive.

Then there are the pamphlets. The variety and richness is dazzling. In the category of remarkable prescience we can place the 1906 tract 'The case for a legal minimum wage' 'a National Medical Service' (1911), Sidney Webb's 1917 demand for 'Reform of the House of Lords', or 'What Future for the Falklands', written in 1977.

The period up to 1945 is peppered with Fabian pamphlets detailing aspects of what would become the Welfare State. Let no one tell you it was all that Liberal Beveridge. It was Fabian Socialists who laid the ground. Some works are eccentrically time-bound. 'Imperial trusteeship' (1929) is not a subject which troubles us much today. Nor 'Indian Federation' (1938).

The post-war period is characterised by Fabian approaches to all of the great issues, which shaped our modern society: nationalisation, Europe, NATO, 'the bomb', comprehensive schooling, New Towns, airports, and planning. This was the age of great Fabian social scientists such as Peter Townsend, Brian Abel-Smith and Richard Titmuss. In the 1980s, Fabian authors struggled with Thatcherism, both intellectually and physically.

In the 1990s, though, the Fabians started to lay the foundations of the 1997 landslide: the Southern Discomfort series; Gordon Brown's Fair is Efficient; Tony Blair's Socialism; Chris Smith's work on creative industries; Liam Byrne on the IT revolution; Peter Mandelson on social exclusion; Harriet Harman and Deborah Mattinson on women's votes; and Raymond Plant, David Lipsey, Tony Wright and David Marquand providing some intellectual heft to what would become 'New Labour'.

There's a fun game you can play: spot the political celebrity before they were famous. The Fabian Society has often been the place where aspiring political leaders have gained an early foothold. There's Clem Attlee's 1920 tract on Metropolitan Councils; David Blunkett on Sheffield in 1985; Denis Healey on world peace in 1951; and John Mann and Phil Woolas on young people and politics (1986). And what about this 1969 Young Fabian pamphlet 'Wither Kenyan emigrants' by Vincent Cable? I wonder what ever happened to him?

The archive is seductive: one line of inquiry leads to another. Even a cursory glance through the titles makes me want to read what Ramsay MacDonald wrote about winning elections in 1895, or what Kingsley Amis had to say about 'socialism and intellectuals' in 1957, or any one of George Bernard Shaw's seventeen pamphlets.

I've nothing against ping pong but I'm rather glad that Leonard Woolf and his ilk of thinkers, writers, politicians and intellectuals chose Fabianism

instead. This archive proves their time and effort was far from wasted; indeed it civilised our society.

Paul Richards is a former chair of the Fabian Society and author of two Fabian pamphlets, and one Young Fabian pamphlet, held by the LSE archive. The Fabian Archive is available online here.