Nobody will be able to accuse Paul Foot of having understated the case against the Prime Minister. For well over 300 pages, he relentlessly documents that tortuous career. It is often on quite small matters that Paul Foot is most effective: when he quotes the Prime Minister as deprecating appeals to the Dunkirk spirit in 1961 and then appealing to it in 1964, he brings out the way in which the man will trim his utterances to his circumstances. This kind of behaviour has been essential to Wilson’s career, for at the core of that career has been an attempt to achieve the policies of the right while posing as the leader of the Left. In policy Wilson has always been a Gaitskellite, even if a Gaitskellite with a difference. On matters such as race relations, Gaitskell himself at least was quite prepared to put liberal – not socialist – principle before political calculation; how wicked by contrast has been the genteel racism of the Wilson government. But, like Gaitskell, Wilson is a technocratic believer in a mixed economy; and, like all such believers, he has become bemused by the

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fetishism of the Gross National Product. Growth is all; and even the deliberate
creation of unemployment is a legitimate means of fostering growth.

Yet precisely what is Paul Foot indicting? Certainly not only Harold Wilson
as a person, but the substance and style of pragmatist and opportunist politics.
Yet, in his chapters on Harold Wilson and the Labour Left and on the futility
of Wilsonian pragmatism, Foot’s argument becomes unfortunately cloudy.
He situates Wilsonian politics in the wider context of Labour parliamentarism
and of the bureaucratic neocapitalism of the 1950s and 1960s without ever
making it clear what he thinks the basic causal connections are. But this
question of the causal relationships between the larger social and economic
system and the political system and the particular acts of the Prime Minister
is crucial. If we criticise Wilson in the way that Foot does, it implies that
the Prime Minister, or at least someone else, could have done better; but, if
Wilsonian politics is the inevitable outcome of the social environment, and
only a revolutionary transformation of that environment could win us a new
and better politics, then the criticism of particular Labour failures is almost
beside the point. If, on the other hand, we believe that even with the existing
context, the Prime Minister and his colleagues could have done very much
better, then Paul Foot’s root-and-branch diagnosis becomes irrelevant to the
explanation of why they failed.

The political importance of this point is underlined by the essays in Matters
of Principle: Labour’s Last Chance. Tyrrell Burgess on education, John Rex on
race relations and Michael Lipton on the confusions in the government’s
whole perspective have written three outstanding essays all of which suggest
ways in which the present government could have acted creatively, and failed
so to act.3 If they are right, there are policies which it would still make sense
to press upon the Labour government; if Paul Foot is right, not merely this
government, but the whole political system, is beyond redemption. Paul
Foot’s book thus invites the type of rejoinder which it has received from
Michael Foot and Raymond Fletcher: you are, they say in effect, crying for
the moon, you are failing to recognise that politics is the art of the possible.
To them, one must reply that the definition of politics as the art of the possible
is a conservative definition: socialist politics is concerned with altering the
limits of the possible. But even so, we can only do this by starting with what

3 Burgess 1968; Rex 1969.