Labour and the Caucus: Working-Class Radicalism and Organised Liberalism in England, 1868-1888

Review Number: 1722

Publish date: Thursday, 5 February, 2015

Author: James Owen

ISBN: 9781846319440

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £70.00

Pages: 244pp.

Publisher: Liverpool University Press

Publisher url: http://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/index.php?option=com_wrapper&view=wrapper&Itemid=

Place of Publication: Liverpool

Reviewer: Jules Gehrke

James Owen challenges notions of the teleological rise of an independent parliamentary Labour Party by offering an intensively researched and intricately argued analysis of the years 1868 to 1888 when labour activists re-assessed and renegotiated relationships with the Liberal Party in a host of local contexts. His conclusions, nuanced but significant, are carefully woven into the contentious historiography surrounding relations between the labour movement and Liberalism. He argues labour activists were at key points able to determine the nature of their relationships with middle-class Liberalism in local contexts, relationships that revealed both flexibility and pragmatism. Further, acknowledging the significance of links between working-class radicalism and the socialist 'revival' after 1880, and locating them within the broader 'continuity' thesis, he analyzes prevailing tensions within relations between working-class radicalism and Liberalism at the local level and writes that establishing a truly '... national picture of labour's relationship with Liberalism is fraught with difficulty ...' (p. 15). Central to Owen's study is the way in which the label of 'caucus' was rhetorically deployed by representatives of the working class to articulate their opposition to Liberal selection and electoral processes they felt excluded them. The rhetoric of the 'caucus,' he believes, offers insight into problematic relations between labour activists and Liberalism. 'The 'caucus' was not a fixed term, but a malleable one, and was a versatile rhetorical weapon that could be adapted to suit the local political context' (p. 21). Rigorous, analytical, and intimately connected with local sources, Owen's study addresses labour-Liberal relationships between 1868 and 1888 across five roughly chronological chapters encompassing post-1867 electoral efforts, responses to caucus politics in the United States, the influence of Irish nationalist parliamentary representation on calls for an independent labour voice, and the impact of the post-1880 'revival' of socialism upon labour-Liberal relations. Complex and specialized, Owen's *Labour and the Caucus* offers new perspectives on 19th-century labour and political history backed by assiduous research and a willingness to re-visit prevailing assumptions.

In 'The struggle for political representation: labour candidates and the Liberal party, 1868–76,' Owen writes that relations between labour activists and organized Liberalism were quite fluid as both Liberals and Conservatives sought to negotiate the era of mass politics. The Howell-Glyn pact of 1868 offered a mechanism for bringing working-class political activists under a Liberal umbrella, yet it was soon evident to leaders of the new Labour Representation League (LRL) that the managers of local Liberal associations were

reluctant take up the cause of a working-class candidate with few financial resources. In drawing attention to local Liberal organisations which were suspicious of a working-class agenda and reticent in providing funds for working-class candidates, Owen begins to address the question of the Liberal 'caucus' as an obstruction to the advance of working-class electoral interests. He writes, 'The LRL's drawing of attention to the 'middle-class managers of electioneering contests' is significant. The leaders of the labour movement where [sic] making a clear link between organized Liberalism and the failure of working-class men to receive the Liberal nomination. In this context, the LRL's address prefigured the later adoption of the 'caucus' as a political bogeyman' (p. 51). However, Owen's overall argument is that there was a great deal of diversity in the responses of labour activists to the Liberal Party. For instance, even as rhetoric did emerge calling for the creation of an independent labour party, many continued to make a distinction between opposing the Liberal Party as organized at the local level and championing 'advanced' Liberalism at the national level.

In 'Activism, identity and networks: urban and rural working-class radicalism, 1868–74', Owen alters his approach to focus on the relationships with the Liberal party generated by two other seedbeds of working-class radicalism – republican organisations and agricultural labourers' organisations. Arguments within these organisations revealed tensions regarding whether the Liberals could be considered allies in securing progress for workers. Many local republican organisations had limited success in organising themselves at the national level and soon fell into abeyance, yet in their political exchanges, they emphasized an identity separate from that of the two main political parties and, '... through their antagonistic language towards the Liberal party and their struggle to find spaces where they could meet, had established a sense of "separateness" from the two main political parties that can be linked to the later calls for an independent labour politics' (p. 76). Turning to an examination of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union (NALU) and the Lincolnshire and Neighbouring Amalgamated Labour League (LNALL), Owen highlights the diversity of relationships that could be established with Liberal Party organisations, and takes issue with historians who have all too easily connected radical rural groups with the Liberal Party. Rather than being effusive and consistent in their praise for Gladstone, rural radical groups often criticized Gladstone's first government for a failure to extend the franchise in the counties and for his inaction against the Criminal Law Amendment Act. Ultimately, Owen arrives at three specific conclusions in his assessment of republican groups and organisations of agricultural labourers. First, support for Liberal politics and policies was dependent upon the nature of relations at a specifically local level between the organisations' representatives and the established Liberal party, in other words, 'place'. Second, there was a diversity in types of reaction to the Liberal Party and ways in which radical groups chose to emphasize their independence. Third, personal networks of communication that connected both the republican activists and the agricultural labourers to a wider working-class movement were significant.

In 'Labour's response to the caucus: class, America and language, 1877–85', Owen takes on rhetorical deployment of the word 'caucus,' while incorporating significant research carried out on British working-class radicals who travelled to the United States. For labour activists, local caucuses were all too often controlled by middle-class interests and were unwilling to seriously countenance a working-class presence. The newly formed National Liberal Federation (NLF) promoted the idea of working-class representatives within its ranks after 1877, but Owen argues working-class participation was indeed limited. Trade unionist leader, and later Lib-Lab politician, George Howell, believed there were few opportunities for working-class representatives under the auspices of the caucus system and indicated in a list of grievances that it was a 'mechanical contrivance' that 'tends to encourage professional politicians, and throws into their hands the power to manipulate elections' (p. 99). Owen's analysis of 'caucus' suggests then that attitudes toward its structure and activities could vary in time and location and that rather than demonstrating a working-class resistance to the power of political organisation, responses to the idea of the 'caucus' are best seen as rhetorical weapons deployed in specific conflicts. The term 'caucus' – and its association with a closed body controlling a local nominating process – could be wielded by both Liberals and rival activists among working-class radicals in particularly fraught circumstances. This deployment of 'caucus' was shaped by the experience of many working-class travelers who returned to Britain with mixed views of the American system, but a prevalent understanding that an American-style caucus could undermine political processes at

home. 'Unsurprisingly, given its negative connotations, the word was never reclaimed as a positive term that embraced popular representation rather than dictation. Instead, it was appropriated by MPs and would-be politicians as a rhetorical weapon with which to attack their political opponents' (p. 112).

Owen continues to elucidate the diversity of relations characterizing labour-Liberal relations in 'Tensions and fault lines: the Lib-Lab MPs, the wider labour movement and the role of Irish nationalism, 1885–8'. He scrutinizes the arrangements established between successful Lib-Labs and local Liberal organisations, addressing the types of deals struck where Lib-Labs were successful and the tensions that emerged when working-class candidates were not supported by Liberal associations. With Lib-Labs in Parliament, questions arose about what exactly 'Labour party' actually meant. One channel of debate involved the creation of an organized political body to represent the interests of labour in Parliament. Most Lib-Lab MPs resisted the idea of establishing a separate political party and, as Owen writes, most '... believed that, as elected representatives in Parliament, it was not their overriding duty to satisfy the miners in particular or the labour movement in general' (p. 131). Such a position was detested by James Keir Hardie, who believed that the Lib-Labs had not sufficiently divorced themselves from the Liberal Party and were, 'content to follow in the train of the Liberal party whithersoever it may lead' (p. 130). The creation of the Labour Electoral Committee (later to be known as the Labour Electoral Association – LEA) at the 1886 Trades Union Congress (TUC) offered an alternate conception of 'Labour Party' in which a centralized, but more general labour movement would organize to support the friends of labour at different levels of politics. 'In this context, the "Labour party" was not precisely defined, but rather a linguistic tool to give a cohesive identity to the *extra-parliamentary* labour associations that it was hoped would be established under the umbrella of the LEA to promote the return of 'working men to Parliament, town councils and school boards' (p. 131). There was general support for the LEA within the TUC, but disagreement in the labour movement would continue to emerge over questions such as what exactly constituted a labour candidate and the strategies that organized labour could successfully undertake. 'The debate concerning who or what represented the 'Labour party' in the mid-1880s therefore revealed the fault lines running not only between the Lib-Labs and the LEA, but also through the LEA itself' (p. 137).

Owen highlights the multiple and inter-connected ways in which the Home Rule movement challenged and influenced the idea of a 'Labour party' within Britain. Supporters of Irish nationalism and supporters of the English working-classes had offered backing for each other's agendas and sometimes maintained close personal connections. After the period of crisis in 1885 and Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule the next year, Lib-Lab representatives moved to support Gladstone, despite some divisions among labour supporters at the local level. The example that Irish political organisations could act as the balance between the Conservative and Liberal parties in the interest of winning Home Rule drew the attention of labour organizers. Nonetheless, Owen writes that they faced the dilemma of a movement that was much more fractionalized than the Home Rule movement, 'Indeed, the labour movement's inability to imitate the organisational features of Irish nationalism was reflective of the overriding difference between bringing together the various lines of a movement with a clearly defined agenda, and trying to co-ordinate the electoral activity of a class with competing political, industrial and religious loyalties' (p. 145). Near the end of the chapter, Owen arrives at the narrative of the Mid-Lanark by-election of 1888 which he argues has been embedded in the writing of both labour supporters and scholars as a critical step in the inevitable development of a separate Labour Party. Hardie's rhetoric on that occasion, contending that a critical test had arisen as to whether labour candidates could receive due recognition from the Liberal Party had, in fact, been pre-figured by many labour representatives in the previous 20 years, according to Owen. He concludes:

Despite the clear fault lines running between the Lib-Labs, the LEA and individual labour activists ... it is important to note that they were united by their refusal to close the door on closely co-operating with official Liberalism. Thus, while Hardie and his supporters may have presented the Mid-Lanark by-election as a 'test case' for the Liberal party's attitude towards labour representation, in the immediate aftermath of the contest, none of the leading actors in the labour movement identified the beginnings of an inexorable break with Liberalism that

would lead to the formation of an independent Labour party. (p. 154)

In 'Rethinking the "Revival of Socialism": socialists, liberals and the caucus, 1881–8', Owen once again uses local research to examine the relationship of socialist organisations to the caucus, arguing that historiography has not critically challenged the organisations' own assumption that it was the 'caucus' which held back their advancement at the end of the 19th century. Owen seeks to do two things in this chapter. First, he seeks a more nuanced understanding of socialist activists at the local level, highlighting the significance of connections between Liberalism, nonconformity and trade unionism that often proved a formidable barrier to socialist organisation. Second, he seeks to take the reader beyond a simple explanation that it was the inability of socialists to 'generate class conflict' that proved their undoing (p. 157). In the cause of the second goal, Owen takes steps to debunk the idea that the 'non-revolutionary character of the British working classes' was a reason for the SDF's political loss (p. 157). However, and more importantly for the overall thesis of his work, he addresses the deployment of rhetoric surrounding the 'caucus' in the struggle between the Liberal party and the SDF. He offers an in-depth look at John Burns's defeat at Nottingham West and the conditions under which socialist activists modified their organisations' positions during the Northumbrian miners' strike of 1887. His goal is to examine the degree to which socialist activists both confronted the challenges of Liberalism, nonconformity, and trade unionism and showed flexibility in adapting to the politics of specific areas. Critical to Owen's work, is an emphasis on the degree to which the rhetoric of the caucus could be deployed by both Burns and his adversaries to suggest that their opponents were simply the creation of a closed political network. Owen argues that the caucus took on a rhetorical significance when it was deployed not only by Burns to highlight local Liberal political power, but deployed by local Liberals to challenge Burns' status as a representative of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). He writes:

Although Burns's campaign discourse included vehement attacks on the Liberal caucus, it would be a mistake to conclude that an intransigent hostile Liberal association was nefariously holding back the forward march of labour. The fact that both Burns and the members of the Nottingham Liberal union used anti-caucus rhetoric shows that the 'caucus' was simply deployed as a rhetorical tool to attack one's opponents ... The SDF, in its publications and personal recollections, argued that such links proved that the caucus represented an immovable barrier to the socialists. However, as this discussion has suggested, organized Liberalism and nonconformity offered the local workers a positive opportunity to embrace progressive politics, without resorting to the class-based appeal of John Burns (p. 172).

Owen concludes his study with a particularly well-written epilogue that succinctly reviews his work. Reviewing the first efforts of the labour movement to have working-class men elected to Parliament after the 1867 Reform Act, he revisits the efforts of the LRL and the difficulties faced in defining the labour movement in the 1870s. These difficulties were re-configured in the late 1870s with the creation of the NLF to which labour activists often voiced their opposition, giving rise to the notion that it was the caucus which consistently blocked the advance of working-class organisations. Owen reminds us, however, that labour activists often recognised such political organisations for '*both* good and evil,' and in fact responded in a variety of ways to the new organisational changes within the Liberal party (p. 188). 'It cannot be overstressed, therefore, that the path forward for the labour movement in terms of its relationship with the Liberals was still wide open for negotiation after Hardie's by-election defeat in April 1888' (p. 189). Owen goes on to consider the evolution of the labour movement in the 1890s, bringing his story into the early 20th century when the LRC was compelled to make an agreement with Herbert Gladstone before the election of 1906. In the first decade of the 20th century, Ramsay MacDonald defended the increasingly centralised structure of the Labour Party, and noted in response to criticisms of such a structure that the Labour Party was not in danger of a caucus system by ensuring that the financial basis of the party was democratic. The Labour Party was thus confronted with its own dilemmas regarding centralisation versus democratic control in the early 20th century, dilemmas which were informed by the struggle over the idea of the 'caucus' in the last third of the 19th century.

Owen's work in *Labour and the Caucus* is a strategic challenge to assumptions that have continued to underlie assessments of labour's relationship with the Liberal Party between 1868 and 1888. In his assiduous research focused on organisational records, the local press, and national publications, Owen offers significant support for his overall thesis, as well as makes contributions to several historiographical channels. With the inclusion of significant research on diverse topics ranging from organisations of agricultural workers to working-class responses to the American caucus system, to an in-depth look at the Social Democratic Federation, his work is likely to feel unwieldy in the hands of a non-specialist audience. [\(1\)](#) Yet, for those closely engaged with the histories of labour and Liberalism in the 19th century, *Labour and the Caucus* is sure to become a valued part of the scholarly conversation.

Notes

1. The reader may wish to see James Owen, 'An inexplicable constituency?' Organised liberalism in Nottingham, 1868–1880', *Midland History*, 35, 1 (2010), 107–28; Owen, 'Triangular contests and caucus rhetoric at the 1885 general election', *Parliamentary History* 27, 2 (2008), 215–35; Owen, 'Dissident missionaries? Re-narrating the political strategy of the Social-Democratic Federation, 1884–1887', *Labour History Review*, 73, 2 (2008), 187–207; Owen, 'The 'Caucus' and party organization in England in the 1880s' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1722>

Links

[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/117486](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/117486)