Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart and Mind’

The guiding thesis of Angus Hawkins’s Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart & Mind’, is the beguilingly simple one that Victorian political values rested on the Shibboleths of history, morality and community, and that the differing political outlooks of radicals, Liberals, Conservatives and even socialists throughout the century can be traced back to their very different interpretations of this triumvirate, which ‘in a shifting world … provide Victorians with essential reference points for managing change’ (p. 387). It is a thesis which Hawkins proceeds to elaborate in great detail over nearly 400 pages of elegant prose, drawing on an impressive range of literature and the author’s own considerable store of accumulated knowledge.

Victorian Political Culture is essentially a work of synthesis, albeit one informed by decades of research in the archives of the principal figures of Victorian politics, as one might expect from the distinguished biographer of Lord Derby. In its subject matter and source material, it is very much in the tradition of earlier works such as Norman Gash’s Politics in the Age of Peel (1953). However, while Gash provided a snapshot of politics over a relatively limited period, by taking the century as a whole Hawkins presents a more dynamic picture of the long-term shifts in political culture over time. The book divides into sections around the century’s three great measures of reform and their impact on constitutional thinking and political organisation. An opening chapter on the primacy of parliamentary government at the start of the century is succeeded by four chapters on the Great Reform Act and its aftermath. This is followed by three chapters on the origins and outcomes of the second reform act of 1867, while a final chapter examines the changing political landscape from 1886 to the First World War.

The general outline of the picture revealed will be reasonably familiar to most scholars of Victorian political history, though it is stated with great clarity here. The Great Reform Act was never intended by its Whig authors as a revolutionary measure, at least in the post-1789 meaning of that word. To use an organic metaphor that would have had a familiar ring to contemporaries, its authors hoped to restore to vitality a branchy tree in danger of being smothered by the clinging vines of corruption and neglect and consequently vulnerable to the revolutionary axe of plebeian discontent. They aimed to admit within the pale of the constitution new commercial interests, particularly in the ports and industrial towns, while defending aristocratic privilege and the primacy of the land. In the latter they largely succeeded, though this is not to say that the political landscape was entirely unchanged or that all the consequences were intended: indeed Hawkins argues that the uneven increase or reduction of parliamentary voters in constituencies exacerbated
the impact of social and economic change in eroding ‘those traditional features of constituency communities that 1832 was partly intended to restore. In this regard the Reform Acts ultimately proved a failure’ (p. 169).

In parliament it also seemed at first that the political polarisation caused by the Reform debates would generate a firmer two-party system than the shifting pattern of alliances based on patronage and personal loyalty that had previously held sway. However, this pattern was undermined by serial Whig defections over the next nine years, before being decisively blown apart by Peel’s repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Peel’s Olympian detachment and refusal to subordinate national to party interests is identified as one of the key obstacles to the further crystallisation of a rigid party system in the 1840s; Palmerston’s ascendancy over the next 20 years was another. Peel’s attitude is contrasted with that of Disraeli, who believed in the primacy of party above all things as an essential instrument of governance. Though Hawkins doesn’t cite it, vivid illustration of this preoccupation can be found in Disraeli’s account of Daniel O’Connell’s last speech to the Commons in 1846, which describes a silent House straining to hear the almost inaudible O’Connell’s plea to save his starving country ‘as if the future of a party hung upon his rhetoric’. The late Angus Macintyre’s verdict on this breath-taking failure of perspective remains as damning as it is understated: ‘It was not a party but a people who depended on his words’. (1)

The Reform Act’s immediate impact was most obvious in the provinces, where thanks to the redistribution of seats from rotten boroughs more towns than ever could now partake in the tumultuous revelry of parliamentary elections. Where Norman Gash plundered the reports of select committees on disputed elections to reveal the seamy side of early Victorian politics, Hawkins dips liberally into the abundant research of the History of Parliament project to reveal something of the endless variety of politics at the constituency level. Following Frank O’Gorman, he also points out the alacrity with which new parliamentary boroughs adopted the panoply of potentially riotous and often dubiously legal electoral practices such as parades with bands and banners, nomination ceremonies where non-electors could voice their approval or disapproval, treating, and the sometimes terrifying ordeal of chairing the successful candidate. These elements of popular political culture had been satirised in the previous century by Hogarth in his *Election* paintings, now at the Sir John Soanes Museum in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. However, Hawkins’ emphasis on continuity masks the disappointment felt by many urban Liberals that the Reformed constitution did not usher in a more rational, enlightened mode of politics. At the election of February 1834, the Leeds Liberals made a virtue of eschewing the usual practice of using bands and banners to attract supporters and non-electors to the nomination of candidates in the hope of underlining the seriousness with which they exercised their public duties. The Tories, having no such qualms, so effectively rallied their troops that, to Liberal outrage, they easily won the show of hands in what was supposedly a solidly Liberal borough. The lesson was learned and at the next election the following year Liberal bands and banners were much in evidence and used to good effect. (2)

Similarly, while alive to the differences in political culture between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom in revealing discussions of Scotland and Ireland, Hawkins’ emphasis on parliamentary elections skates over the way that political battles were fought across a range of urban institutions and suffused the associational life of the urban middle classes, as revealed in local studies such as R. J. Morris’s *Class, Sect and Party* and the earlier research of Derek Fraser into the workings of local politics. As Fraser demonstrated, parliamentary elections were merely the tip of the political iceberg: local institutions from municipal councils to parish vestries could become the site of bitter party disputes, with representation in the latter a particular objective for parties who were otherwise marginalised. Arguably, before 1867 at least, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 had a far more significant impact on local politics and political culture than parliamentary reform; the fight to get a municipal charter for Manchester under the Act cemented Richard Cobden’s reputation in the town and was one of his first steps towards national prominence.

The real caesura in Victorian politics was the second Reform Act of 1867. While acknowledging their power, Hawkins punctures Liberal, Conservative and Radical myths of its origin: pointing out the political logic behind the measure and the role of contingency as it evolved in its passage through Parliament. Together with anti-corruption legislation, the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, and the reform and
redistribution acts of 1884–5, it left the political landscape irrevocably changed. Parliamentary government now became party government, and parliamentary sovereignty became popular sovereignty as the electorate expanded. A range of statistics is employed to demonstrate increased party discipline in the lobbies. As a result, the ‘independent backbencher’ in the mould of Cobden or Joseph Hume became an endangered species, while the Whips reigned supreme. As Joseph Redlich put it, ‘open questions are not popular; they compel a member to think for himself, which is always troublesome’ (pp. 305–6). This discipline was mirrored out of doors, as party organisation became more permanent and cohesive and national organisations emerged to co-ordinate effort. Hawkins contrasts the largely obedient Primrose League with the more proactive National Liberal Federation: the former providing a conduit for strengthening the grip of the party leadership; the latter providing a means for grass roots activists to put pressure on Liberal candidates, MPs and Ministers. Those who cried foul at supposedly unprecedented lobbying of Labour MPs on the eve of the Syria vote by committed Corbynistas would do well to consider G. Lowes-Dickenson’s observations on the NLF in 1895: ‘To organise simultaneous protests, addressed, at critical points, to [MPs] who show signs of a dangerous independence, is one of the recognised functions of the National Liberal Federation’ (p. 309).

This was just one aspect of the recognisably modern shape of politics which was emerging towards the end of the century, which included a new emphasis on the role of the party leader as repository of his followers’ hopes and trust, the personification of a system in which MPs surrendered independence of conscience in the interests of parliamentary effectiveness. However, as a well as a new relationship between leader and led, there was a new compact with the electorate. The much abused notion of the ‘electoral mandate’ first made its appearance at this time, linked to the publication of putative manifestos and the rapidly established convention that ministerial resignation was the axiomatic consequence of electoral defeat.

For all its authority, there are some weak points in Hawkins’ account. Those lured by the title who hope to find accounts of the rich extra-parliamentary political cultures developed by Chartism, the Anti-Corn Law League and sundry other extra-parliamentary campaigns and movements, as developed for example in the work of Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrell on the League, will be rather disappointed. The focus here is firmly on parties, parliament and the constitution. That is not to say that Hawkins ignores the situation ‘out of doors’: there are brief accounts of the League and Chartism, and, as we have seen, a substantial and illuminating chapter on provincial elections. Moreover, towards the end of the book, in his chapter on ‘Party, society and the state’, the author does talk interestingly about the social and cultural underpinnings of late Victorian political parties, taking the line of recent revisionist historiography that Labour’s rise was less due to increased class-consciousness and more due to its ability to tap into the traditional language of radicalism and the moral certainties of religious Nonconformity, while pointing to the continued vitality of Liberalism up to the eve of the First World War and the fragility of Conservative electoral dominance before 1906.

However, his view is firmly that Westminster set the tone, demonstrated by the fact that even the Chartists modelled their proceedings upon it – a case which could have been strengthened by an account of the Chartist conventions. This is not an novel argument: it has long been accepted that Chartism, rather than being an out and out revolutionary movement was, in Michael Mann’s phrase, ‘caged by the state’; it was more about having a seat at the banquet than wholesale remodelling of the dining facilities. Nonetheless, it is a shame that Hawkins excludes from his purview so much recent and ground-breaking research.

Less defensible is the relative neglect of three decades or more of scholarship on the place of women in British political culture, notwithstanding a useful discussion of women Chartists and a brief summary in the final chapter of women’s growing claims to inclusion in formal politics. Throughout the century, women took an active role in canvassing votes for male relatives, while, as Sarah Richardson has shown, female landowners like Anne Lister could be just as active as their male counterparts in marshalling their tenantry for County elections. Post-reform elections often included ritualistic appeals from candidates to ‘female influence’ (part of the narrative of ‘virtual representation’). And the National Liberal Federation spawned the Women’s Liberal Federation, whose members lobbied on issues ranging from the vote to imperial reform and Free Trade. This neglect is partly a result of Hawkins’ disinterest in local institutions, where women were being elected to School Boards and Boards of Guardians from the 1870s. As stalwarts of Church and Chapel, or arbiters of public morality in the campaigns against slavery or the Corn Laws, they were central
to the kinds of moral communities whose formation and maintenance Hawkins sees as the primary preoccupation of Victorian statesmen. However, even an account centred on Westminster could have found space to describe the activities of political hostesses such as Lady Palmerston (mentioned only in passing), who, in the heyday of Parliamentary government, were a vital part of the machinery of the effective management of Commons majorities; or the open admission of women as spectators in the new House of Commons, regularising a custom of the old House whereby politically-minded Ladies surreptitiously listened to debates through a grille behind the speaker’s chair. The assumption that parliamentary politics was a masculine world in which women had no place has its corollary in a lack of analysis of the masculine nature of the House and its procedures, which could have drawn for instance on Ben Griffin’s or Matthew Roberts’s work on the parliamentary performance of masculinity. (3)

The strength of Hawkins’s account, however, is in its situation of debates over the constitution and the role of the state within a complex context of philosophical, scientific, theological and sociological thought. There are important discussions of the intellectual underpinnings of belief in the sovereignty of parliament in the first chapter, and the account of the moral shift which lay behind calls for further parliamentary reform in the sixth. Key to the latter was the transition in religious thought away from an idea of divine retribution to a stress on redemption which allowed a more ameliorative attitude towards social questions. This coincided with the arguments put forward by John Stuart Mill and others that political institutions were shaped by society rather than the other way around, while anthropological studies emphasised the dynamic nature of human society. The obvious implication was that political institutions would need to adapt to social and cultural change, though in the end Hawkins concurs with Perry Anderson’s verdict that the slow evolution of British democracy was characterised by a ‘comprehensive, coagulated conservatism’ (p. 387).

Though by no means a ‘textbook’, with its clear accounts of the Victorian voting system and the workings of the various reform acts, Victorian Political Culture contrives to be a mine of useful information for those new to the subject while providing a judicious and elegant synthesis of recent research which will appeal to novices and aficionados alike. Undergraduates and time-pressed scholars will no doubt appreciate the lengthy summaries at the ends of the earlier chapters, although these contain a bit too much unnecessary repetition of detail and more diligent readers will be relieved at their eventual disappearance. Victorian Political Culture is essential reading for all students of Victorian politics, but it should also be read by anyone with an interest in the workings of Victorian society who wants to understand the central role of politics and political institutions within it.

Notes

2. Leeds Mercury, 15 February 1834; 10 January 1835. Back to (2)

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1943

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/148350