

Parties and People, England 1914-1951

Review Number: 985

Publish date: Monday, 1 November, 2010

Author: Ross McKibbin

ISBN: 9780199584697

Date of Publication: 2010

Price: £20.00

Pages: 192pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Laura Beers

In 1914, as in 1882, it was still close enough to true to suggest that ‘Every boy and every gal/ That's born into the world alive/ Is either a little? Liberal/ Or else a little Conservative’. 37 years later, the English political landscape was radically changed, although arguably its continuities were more remarkable than its disjunctures. For one thing, the political reforms of 1918 and 1928 gradually saw nearly every gal over the age of 21 granted the right to express her political conviction at the polls, a right that had been denied to all women in national elections, and to a majority of women in local politics. But, while the enfranchisement of women transformed English politics in many respects, it cannot be credited with the other biggest shock to the political system in this period: the rise of the Labour party, and the concurrent collapse of the Liberals. For, while ‘votes for women’ did not revolutionize English politics as much as either the suffragettes had promised or the anti-suffragettes had feared, the one notable difference between male and female voters in the interwar period is the latter’s apparent greater preference for the Conservative party. In order to explain the rise of Labour and the collapse of the Liberals, we must, then, look to a different set of explanations, and, it is with these that Ross McKibbin opens *Parties and the People, England 1914-1951*.

McKibbin begins by positing two competing theories: first, that the rise of Labour was an ‘inevitable development’, accelerated but not determined by the outbreak of the First World War; and, second, that ‘the political system was stable in 1914 but buckled under the remorseless pressure of war’ (p. 1). The reality, unsurprisingly, lies somewhere between the two. However, in laying out these competing hypotheses on the opening page, McKibbin points his readers to one of the major themes of the book: ‘the relationship between structure and contingency, that is, the extent to which party politics was determined by fundamental social changes on the one hand, and by contingency, historical accident on the other’ (p. 177).

The author’s first work, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924*, published 35 years ago, essentially took the former position.⁽¹⁾ The title’s encompassing dates, 1910 to 1924, emphasized that the rise of Labour was a process well in hand before August 1914; and the study, when it was written, was partially a response to Peter Clarke’s *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* which had asserted the vibrancy of the New Liberal program and the centrality of the war to the Liberal party’s demise.⁽²⁾ 35 years on, however, McKibbin has seemingly come a long way towards Clarke’s view of Edwardian politics, admitting that he now thinks that the inevitably thesis ‘inadequately represents the reality of Edwardian politics’ (p. 1). Instead, he argues that the pre-war system was in a state of equipoise. The progressive alliance, in which the

Liberal party played the dominant partner to its Labour ally, was undergirded by a political system in which religion still played a larger role than class in informing political allegiances.

For those who have followed McKibbin's work over the past four decades, this reassessment will not come as a surprise. Both in his 2008 Ford lectures, on which *Parties and People* is substantially based, and to a lesser extent in his earlier *Classes and Cultures, England 1918-1951*, McKibbin showed an appreciation of the interdependence of nonconformity and the Edwardian Liberal supremacy which had been largely absent from his earlier works.⁽³⁾ For those familiar with the full McKibbin oeuvre, the book offers many such opportunities to track the evolution of this distinguished scholar's thinking on a subject that has formed a basis of his academic career.

From the fragile equipoise of the pre-1914 party system, the book goes on to discuss the volatility of inter-war politics in two chapters titled, respectively, 'Unstable equilibrium, 1918–1929' and 'The crisis of Labour and the Conservative hegemony, 1929–1939'. The latter chapter returns to an argument McKibbin made famous two decades ago in his essay, 'Class and conventional wisdom'.⁽⁴⁾ Namely, the Conservatives' hegemony owed much to their ability to devise 'a form of social politics driven partly by an overt anti-socialism and partly by a broadening of the Party's elites' (p. 90). But, to a lesser extent than he does in 'Class and conventional wisdom', and to a much lesser extent than Philip Williamson has done in his *National Crisis and National Government*, or in *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values*, McKibbin does not present the Conservatives' success as the result of their own clever strategy so much as of Labour's lack of one.⁽⁵⁾ Those who read his current *London Review of Books* columns well know the low regard in which he holds New Labour. Old Labour, here, fares little better. The party is censured for failing to embrace any coherent strategy in the 1920s. Its leaders could not settle on whether they should be 'the party of the whole of the working class; ... the party of useful citizens[; or] ... a party which served the specific interests of the unions and their members' (p. 72). In trying to be all things to all people, it failed to hold the loyalty of any viable majority, and its fragile plurality quickly collapsed under the weight of the 1931 financial crisis.

The previous chapter, on the 1920s, is not much kinder to the Labour party, who are again accused of several failures of omission – they were unable to look past the shibboleths of free trade and free collective bargaining to a new economic order that might have been more advantageous to the organized working classes; they were unable effectively to marshal a coalition of producers against the rentier classes; and they invested too much energy in revenging themselves on the Liberal party for the perceived slights of the Edwardian period. The chapter begins by presenting three 'roads not taken' in the aftermath of the First World War, political structures that, McKibbin argues, would have been more 'logical' outcomes of the conflict. These were: 'complete fusion of the Conservative and Liberal Parties ...; or the abandonment of free trade and the reshaping of the country's political economy behind protection; or the creation of a cross-class alliance of 'producers' against 'rentiers', the useful against the useless; or a combination of the three' (p. 34). The first failed because of the hatred of many Conservatives both for Lloyd George personally, and for the expansionist policies which the Coalition increasingly pursued in the early post-war years. The second failed because the British working-classes were, perhaps irrationally, but nonetheless deeply, convinced of the Victorian argument that free trade delivered the large white loaf. And the third failed in part due to Labour's inability to rally together such a constituency around either a program of state expropriation of unearned wealth (through their proposed capital levy), or anything else. As a result, while the Labour party grew in size and strength in this period, they never became strong enough to displace the Liberals fully. Hence, the three parties hobbled on, each pursuing more or less the same policies as they had before the war in an economic and social climate that was increasingly unsuited to them. Until, of course, 1931 came and swept the old order away.

Chapter four deals with the war and landslide Labour victory in July 1945. As Helen McCarthy wrote in a recent review for this website, 'The Second World War has long occupied a privileged place in narratives of change and continuity in mid-century Britain'.⁽⁶⁾ While the solidity of the 'swing to the left', its permanence and its significance have all been debated, scholars are agreed that the war was critical to the shift in opinion

which made possible both the Labour landslide and the consequent birth of the British welfare state. Yet, despite this general agreement, there has hitherto been no one that I can recall who has argued, as McKibbin does here, that 'Labour would have won any election held after July 1940 – a consequence, *ex hypothesi*, of the swift conversion of many voters from Conservative to Labour' (p. 119). His rationale in selecting July 1940 as the pivotal date is that, after Dunkirk, the British public's perception of the Conservative leadership changed rapidly. The collapse of faith in Chamberlain was swift and total, and the publication of *Guilty Men* in July 1940 put in words what millions of Britons now felt about their former leaders.

There is doubtless truth in this assessment. British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) and Mass-Observation sources confirm the swift change to Chamberlain's fortunes. What they do not show, however, is that the Labour party was the obvious and immediate beneficiary of that change. Given the heavy reliance that he places on BIPO data in this chapter, it is surprising that McKibbin does not address the signal reality that BIPO continued to forecast a Conservative victory up until May 1943. While people may have blamed the Conservative leadership for the events leading up to the war and its initial setbacks, they did not yet believe the Labour opposition competent to form an alternative government. It is my opinion that the Labour victory cannot be accounted for solely by disillusionment with the 'Guilty Men', but instead owes much to the Labour party's active efforts during the war both to associate itself with new radical sentiment and to show itself competent to govern.

McKibbin's unwillingness to credit the party's own agency in bringing about the 1945 election victory is par for the course in a book in which the Labour party is afforded little credit for doing much of anything right, and in which it is charged with numerous failures of omission. Nowhere is this more true than in the chapter on the Attlee governments. Here, the party is taken to task for its failure seriously to broach the possibility of constitutional reform and its failure to develop any particularly profound or useful conception of socialism. As McKibbin states, the Attlee government held the rather narrow-minded belief that 'public ownership was socialism – its irreducible minimum – and that a commitment to public ownership was a confirmation of the Party's socialism' (p. 152). In all other areas, the government did little to challenge prewar orthodoxies. While industries were nationalized, their administration was not revolutionized. By and large, the same managers remained at the helm of the new industries, and the government did not use its position to 'achiev[e] any kind of strategic direction of the economy' (p. 151). Economic planning was largely abandoned after 1947. The public schools were allowed to remain intact. The constitution went similarly untouched, with House of Lords and voting reform both quietly swept under the rug. Not even the much-vaunted welfare state should be viewed as a real break with the past. The Beveridge system, as Pat Thane, Noel Thompson and others have noted, was based on Edwardian principles of social insurance, more than on social democratic ideals of a social minimum. Further, the one truly revolutionary component of the pre-war Labour platform, its adherence to the international socialist movement, suffered an unexpected blow from the war. The party, ironically, emerged from the international struggle against fascism reinforced in its parochialism and 'increasing reluctance to believe that the political and constitutional practices of continental socialism had anything to offer it' (p. 147).

The Labour party went into the 1950 and 1951 elections handicapped by the fact that it could not agree on a new direction for the party now that its limited program of nationalization had been achieved. McKibbin attributes the party's loss in 1951 to public frustration with continued austerity, the ideological bankruptcy of Labour, and the fact that the Conservatives successfully accommodated themselves to the new welfare state. He writes: 'In my view the Conservatives fought the elections of 1950 and 1951 on two slogans: the welfare state is safe in our hands *and* we will set the people free' (p. 167). In making this argument, he is setting himself apart from Ewen Green and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, who have argued that the Conservative campaigns in 1950 and 1951 were run on a platform of 'set the people free', of capitalism versus socialism and consumer interests versus the interests of production. In support of this argument, he cites the published and private statements of Cabinet ministers Harold Macmillan and Anthony Eden, as well as the party's 1947 *Industrial Charter*, which he argues was 'seriously meant despite its obvious cosmetic implications' (p. 167). But, while it is true that the Conservative party in practice had reconciled itself to the welfare state and the mixed economy by 1950, when one looks at the posters, election literature and party political broadcasts

produced in the 1950s, it is clear that Green and Zweiniger-Bargielowska are right in stating that the party ran those elections on a straight platform of opposition to the new 'socialist' state.

Once the Conservatives won the 1951 election, they were able to remain in power for the next thirteen years on the strength of an ostensibly apolitical mix of patriotism, hierarchy and small-c conservatism, which succeeded in attracting not only the vast majority of the middle and upper classes, but a strong minority of the working classes as well. McKibbin devotes only a few paragraphs to the post-1951 Conservative governments. However, the suggestion that the Tories succeeded in post-war politics, as they had in the inter-war period, in large part because of their ability to make Conservatism appear non-political has been a recurrent theme in his work, and has recently been developed by scholars of postwar political culture.

In the final chapter, McKibbin returns to the theme with which he opened the book: the relationship between social change and historical accident in shaping Britain's political destiny. The answer, of course, is that both were important. While class became the 'dominant variable' in party politics in this period, it was by no means determinant (p. 185). And, in understanding the persistence of a constitutional structure largely intact from the days of Gilbert and Sullivan, we need to appreciate not only the conservatism of the British working classes, but also the role played by Britain's success in both the First and Second World Wars in reinforcing political and social structures that might otherwise have been viewed as outmoded and in need of reform, if not revolution. It is an obvious conclusion, but one no less important for its obviousness.

Most readers will likely find points to take objection to with this work. Such is the case with any such sweeping study in which a scholar presents his own version of an extremely contested historical narrative. Some will also likely argue that there is little new to be gleaned from *Parties and People*. It is not a work of primary scholarship, and in fact the first primary source footnote does not appear until the bottom of page 42, when McKibbin notes John Maynard Keynes's snarky comments about Lord Leverhulme to a private session of the Macmillan Committee in October 1930. Its presence in the book is an anomaly, and presumably reflects the fact that McKibbin had already begun research on his next project on Keynes while writing up *Parties and People*. But the book was not meant to be a work of new research. Like many books that have emerged from a series of prestigious lectures, it reads as a sort of valedictory, the summation of an impressive career. Readers who have followed McKibbin's thinking from *Evolution* to *Ideologies of Class* through *Classes and Cultures* will recognize both those topics on which McKibbin's ideas have held fast, and those on which his views as evolved with time. They will also recognize McKibbin himself in the book. The voice of the book is distinctly his, and for those who know and like him, and presumably also for some of those readers who have come to know him through the pages of the *London Review of Books*, reading the book is actively heartwarming. To a greater extent than his earlier published work, it is written as he speaks, and as he writes his *LRB* columns, and in flipping through the pages it is hard not to feel as if he is in the room with you. His frustration with and disappointment in the Labour party on which he has long pinned high political hopes is evident. So too is his fascination with counterfactual electoral sociology (if Liberal voters had had to cast an alternative vote, who would they have chosen?); his fondness for middle-brow inter-war fiction, particularly A. J. Cronin's *The Citadel*; and his biting, but too often apt, turns of phrase. At one point, he refers to the longtime Tory MP for Barnard Castle as 'that old grouch, Sir Cuthbert Headlam'; and his comment on the ubiquity of what historians often condemn as political 'apathy' is: 'that's life ... Hardly anyone leads a purely 'political' existence, and those who do are usually dangerous' (pp. 166 & 129).

Unfortunately, the book also showcases one of McKibbin's weaknesses, his willingness to hold an intellectual grudge. In a book that is only 202 pages long, Robert Skidelsky comes in for a full page worth of abuse for his persistence in believing that the Labour government realistically might have behaved any other way in 1929 to 1931; and over three pages are given over to an argument ostensibly against the entire 'apathy school' of Second World War historiography, but in fact primarily against the work of Steven Fielding. Both Skidelsky and Fielding, however, are doubtless big enough to take the heat, and, if they choose, will have ample forums to fire their own counterblows at McKibbin. In the meantime, those of us who are not left licking their wounds after reading *Parties and People* can only be pleased to have such an elegant and engaging addition to the history of English democracy.

Notes

1. Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–1924* (Oxford, 1975).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Peter Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ross McKibbin, 'Class and conventional wisdom: the Conservative Party and the 'public' in interwar Britain', in Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 259–93.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Philip Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992); *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Helen McCarthy, review of *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*, (review no. 937) < <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/937> [2]> [accessed 24 August 2010].
[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/04/england-1914-labour-liberals> [3]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/985#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5082>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/937>

[3] <http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/04/england-1914-labour-liberals>