

The Origins of Community Politics

Report back from the History Group's first witness seminar - with Gordon Lishman, in June.

The plethora of historic leaflets, booklets and motions laid out by Gordon on the table indicated that this would be an historical feast for History Group members while producing some valuable food for thought in the party's current internal debate on the future of community politics.

Gordon began by discussing the background to the Eastbourne resolution passed at the 1970 Assembly and how its component parts had been determined by negotiations with the party managers of the day. Particularly interesting in view of the party's subsequent identification of community politics with local government was that references to Europe, an international strategy and the need for the party to build a power base in industrial areas were defeated.

The main emphases of the community politics motion had been set out at a fringe meeting earlier in the week. These were that it gave the party a strategy it badly needed in the wake of the disaster of the 1970 election and that in the context of the NLYL 'Red Guard' era, it was not one that threatened the party's establishment.

Gordon then detailed the origins of community politics in the municipal and student liberalism of the late 1960s. It stressed the role of the councillor as the political arm of his/her people, increasing the effective participation of individuals in forming the Liberal society. Gordon rejected any suggestion that community politics was an ideology, but saw its roots as a reaction to the changes in the moral, social and economic climate which gathered force during the 1960s. It was a response to the ultimate failure of the Orpington revival; emphasising the dual approach and seeking to show that the party could be successful without relying on the whim of the floating voter.

There were three key components to community politics. Firstly, taking up casework and grievances on behalf of the electors and encouraging them to solve it themselves. Secondly, encouraging participation in the political process and finally doing all this within a framework of representative democracy. In practice, however, it depended on the rise of cheap offset litho technology which allowed multiple leaflets and the creation of a personal campaigning style.

The neglect of community politics by the party's leadership began in the 1970 Assembly itself, when Thorpe ignored it in his closing speech. Thereafter the strategies of the Lib-Lab pact and the Alliance sought to realign the old political forces. Gordon's view was that only under Ashdown's leadership was there now the potential support at the top for a national community politics strategy.

To conclude, Gordon linked the idea of community politics to the ideas of T H Green on the positive use of liberty.

Community politics was inherently liberal because it was quintessentially democratic, challenged the rigidity of party boundaries and accepted that politicians of their nature had no right to unfettered power. A lively discussion followed, which dwelt more on the problems of community politics in the 1990s than on its origins. Nevertheless, the evening was a stimulating and successful one, and will encourage further witness seminars of this type.

Book Reviews

Money and Power
by Tony Little

Dudley Bahlman (Ed):

The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton
(University of Hull Press 1993; £19.95)

Hamilton was Gladstone's principal private secretary in the period up to 1885 and moved on to become a senior Treasury official after the government's fall. Despite his status as a civil servant, he managed both to serve his new Tory masters and retain close personal contacts with senior Liberal politicians. This selection from his diary covers the period in which he rose to become the joint permanent head of the Treasury.

It is important for the insight it gives into the preparation of the Budget over a twenty year period. By today's standards, the figures were minute, hardly enough to cover the spending of a district council. Shortly after the year end, a balance was quickly struck and arrangements made to meet the next year's deficit, or, more frequently, to dispose of the surplus. For most of the period, there was little to distinguish between the approach of Tory or Liberal administrations as both stuck to the tenets of Free Trade. As the new century dawned the strain of financing the Boer War, the naval race and the prospect of some form of old age pension opened strains in the system. Hamilton illustrates orthodox Treasury thinking in the face of Chamberlain's protectionist challenge, which destroyed Balfour's government.

The diary is even more important for its portrayal of the relations between senior Liberals. He mediated between Gladstone and Rosebery in Gladstone's final premiership and was the official responsible for Gladstone's funeral arrangements. As one of Rosebery's closest friends he foresaw his rise to the party leadership and brings out the depth of the antagonism between Rosebery and Harcourt, which scarred Rosebery's government, but he remained on good terms with both men. Despite his friendship, he recognised the failure of the Rosebery government and he even gives us reasons, principally insomnia, which explain Rosebery's otherwise baffling withdrawal from effective public life. With that retirement and with his own increasing illness, Hamilton finds himself further from the centre of Liberal activity and we get only fleeting glimpses of rising new stars such as Asquith.

Bahlman has also edited the Hamilton Diary for the period 1882-5 which has been published in two volumes, though these are currently out of print.