

REVIEWS

Strange survival

E. H. H. Green and D. M. Tanner (eds.), *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Reviewed by Martin Pugh

UP UNTIL the 1960s, political scientists largely took the view that industrial societies had an inevitable tendency to develop two political parties, one based on capital and one based on labour, and that political loyalties were overwhelmingly determined by the social class of voters. They were influenced partly by models of Continental societies, where Liberal parties had dwindled earlier than in Britain, and partly by the empirical evidence in Britain of a polarisation among voters; in the elections of 1951 and 1955, 96 per cent voted for the Conservative and Labour Parties.

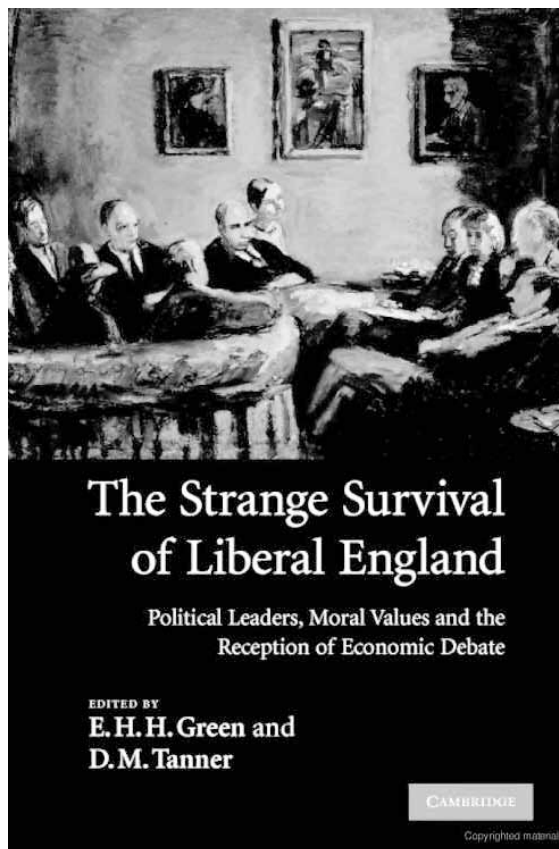
Today historians and political scientists see things rather differently. Class is far from the be-all-and-end-all that it was once thought to be. And the polarisation of the 1950s represented an unusual phase – it was not the norm. Actually, historians had always known better, in that much of nineteenth and twentieth-century history had been characterised by three or more parties, and class loyalties had remained very mixed. But it was only during the 1960s and 1970s that a huge amount of research recast our entire view of the evolution of party politics. This was partly because historians looked more carefully at the Edwardian Labour Party, concluding that it lacked a distinctive intellectual appeal, had

a very limited organisational presence in the country, was focused on limited, unionised sections of the working class, and that in electoral terms it was essentially a client of Liberalism. On the positive side, researchers argued that far from representing a survival from Victorian Radicalism, Edwardian Liberalism had successfully adapted its programme and its thinking to the priorities of the new century by getting to grips with the role of the state, social policy and progressive taxation. After 1906 Liberalism increasingly reflected the ideas of a new generation; and electorally it demonstrated its capacity to mobilise the working-class vote while retaining middle-class support. The implication of all this was that the rise of a Labour Party was not inevitable.

Peter Clarke, who retired from his Chair at Cambridge two years ago, played a key part in this process of revision, and this volume of essays represents a well-deserved tribute to his contribution to our understanding of the process of political change and the interaction between economics and politics in modern Britain. In *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (1971) Clarke employed a wealth of empirical material to substantiate a thesis about the transformation of the Liberal Party under the aegis of Progressivism. He followed this through

with *Liberals and Social Democrats* (1978) and *The Keynesian Revolution in the Making* (1988).

Clarke's interest in the relationship between politics and economic ideas is well represented throughout the collection. Boyd Hilton, for example, examines the heyday of orthodox Treasury Liberalism based on balanced budgets, a minimal state and free trade, in an essay on Robert Lowe, who served as Gladstone's Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1868, rather surprisingly in view of his role in wrecking Gladstone's 1866 Reform Bill. In an interesting chapter on minimum wages and the labour movement, James Thompson rightly points out that Ramsay MacDonald was sceptical about minimum wages and the trade boards introduced by the Asquith government in 1909, although he does not explain the political significance. MacDonald actually concluded that it would be best if the low paid or 'sweated' industries went bust, destroying jobs in the process. This attitude was



a telling indication of the extent to which Edwardian Labour was out of touch with the bulk of the working class; trade unionism was simply absent from the 'sweated' trades – which is why the only way of helping the employees was through the Liberal legislation that doubled their wages

Moving on chronologically, Duncan Tanner revisits the vexed question of the collapse of the 1929–31 Labour government, but puts the focus on leaders as opposed to simply MacDonald himself or the party generally. The result is a graphic picture of a dysfunctional government due to Snowden's aversion to communicating with colleagues and MacDonald's inability to consult with or accept criticism from the unions, the Independent Labour Party, the MPs or the intellectuals. In his excellent contribution, Richard Toye considers the role of Keynesianism in Labour Party politics. It was from the start a love-hate relationship. In the 1920s Labour appreciated Keynes's criticism of the return to the Gold Standard, but MacDonald et al. shrank from talk about not balancing the budget as giving an unwanted impression of radicalism. Actually, by the 1930s Keynes's influence was hampered by the fact that Labour had a battalion of its own academic economists, several of whom, such as Hugh Gaitskell, were quite conservative and orthodox, and suspected Keynesianism of causing inflation. Despite this, Toye explains how, after 1936, the party increasingly adopted Keynes, effectively claiming that his ideas were really common-sense Labour ones. All that is missing from this account is the important role of Ernest Bevin and the unions in pressurising Labour into adopting what they saw as a more realistic approach to unemployment and thus embracing Keynes.

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In a companion essay, E. H. H. Green considers Keynes and the Conservative Party – a more fraught relationship partly because of the dominance of Treasury orthodoxy in the party and partly because Keynes never hid his contempt for the Tory intellect! He shows how three Conservatives, Arthur Steel-Maitland, Harold Macmillan and J. W. Hills, were chiefly responsible for familiarising the party with Keynesian thinking in the 1930s and that the turning point came with acceptance of the 1944 White Paper committing the government to maintaining a high and stable level of employment.

Other chapters in the collection are John A. Thompson on American Liberals and entry into the First World War, Eugenio Biagini on the influence of Keynesianism on post-1945 Italian politics, Stefan Collini on cultural criticism of decline and modernity in inter-war Britain, and Barry Supple on the long-term performance of the British economy, structural change, and attitudes towards the distribution of the fruits of economic growth.

Despite the title of the volume, only a few of these essays are likely to be of interest to readers of the *Journal of Liberal History*. There is very little

attempt to examine the strictly *political* implications of the revisionist work on the Edwardian era with which Peter Clarke was so involved. This is a pity because the impact of Liberalism and Liberal personnel on the other parties after the Liberal Party's post-1918 decline is a major formative force, and, in particular, its impact on Conservative politics in the Baldwin-Macmillan era is of crucial importance to the long-term success of Conservatism. Yet it is largely taken for granted and has never been the subject of systematic study. 'National Liberals' were still standing as late as the 1964 general election and they were of considerable importance in sustaining Conservatism in Scotland, at least until 1955 when the party won 36 of the 71 constituencies. The Strange Survival of Liberal England remains to be fully explored.

Martin Pugh was Professor of Modern British History at Newcastle University and is now a freelance writer. His most recent books are Hurrah for the Blackshirts!: Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars (Cape, 2005), and We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain between the Wars (The Bodley Head, 2008).

No end of a lesson

David Marquand, *Britain Since 1918* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008)

Reviewed by Tom McNally

PROFESSOR DAVID Marquand is a curious hybrid: part philosopher, part academic historian, part political adviser and part sharp-end politician. Such a mixed pedigree makes him particularly

suited to being the chronicler and interpreter of twentieth-century Britain. It is a story which he himself describes as 'a story of courage, perseverance, wisdom, selfishness, folly and self-deception.' In his book