

decline, 1970–2015’, with the last section of the last chapter dealing with ‘National disunity’.

Despite the ‘declinist’ picture suggested by these titles, *State and Society* offers an account that is far too complex and nuanced to be summarised in a formula or historiographical stereotype. For example, one important dimension of Pugh’s analysis is the full integration of gender history in the course of British political and social history: and, as far as women are concerned, this was certainly not a history of ‘decline’. Nor was there decline in terms of living standards, life expectancy, health care and many other aspects of everyday life. In Pugh’s vision, there is tension between the ground irreversibly lost by the state in the sphere of power politics and international relations, and the practical experience of most ordinary citizens – a reminder of the extent to which imperial greatness was compatible with social misery at home, while the loss of great power status (and even the crisis of the Unions in 1916–22 and 2014) was far from a curse from most Britons.

In a short review, it is difficult to do justice to the richness of the canvass painted by Pugh, which is awe-inspiring both in its breadth and depth. Interestingly, the book starts and ends with the Liberals (or the Liberal Democrats) in office, either on their own or as part of a coalition. It also sheds light on the wider meaning and context of the tradition these parties stood and stand for. Thus, he offers a brilliant analysis of popular attitudes to the state – from laissez-faire

and self-help to the Keynesian consensus. Equally relevant to Liberals is his discussion of ethnic and national tensions within the UK, and between ‘native’ British nationals and immigrants – with Jews and anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twentieth century receiving particular attention.

Immigration became a major political issue again a century later, when, however, Britain’s Liberals were no longer in a position to contain the rise of xenophobia as they had done in 1906. And it is appropriate to conclude the present review with Pugh’s assessment of the reasons behind the party’s recent debacle:

For the Liberal Democrats there was nothing inevitable about the effects of coalition; they had recently worked with Labour in three Scottish coalitions and successfully kept their vote together. However, in Scotland they had implemented progressive policies whereas the 2010 coalition meant abandoning their opposition to drastic expenditure cuts and accepting higher tuition fees and plans to expose the

NHS to private companies, to which most of their supporters were opposed. This rightward shift was in fact consistent with Clegg’s strategy since becoming leader: he had attempted to refashion the Liberal Democrats as a liberal Conservative party [Pugh’s capitalisation] ... However, the link with the Tories proved to be toxic ... from April 2012 onwards he had completely lost credibility in the country ... Clegg’s mistaken strategy had virtually undone all the progress made since the Liberal revival of the late 1950s. (p. 493)

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## Women in politics

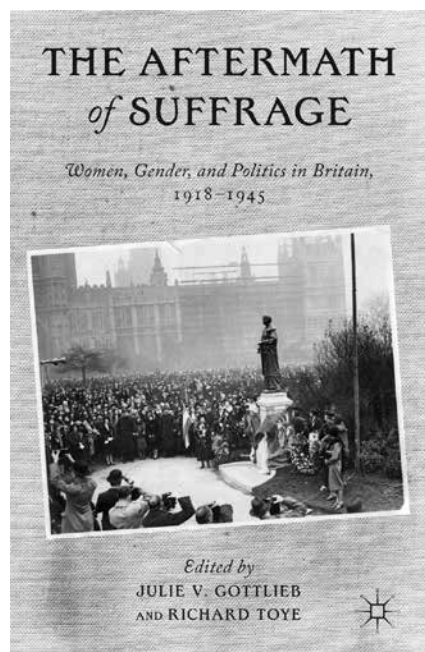
J. Gottlieb and R. Toye (eds.), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918–1945* (Macmillan, 2013)

Review by Ian Cawood

THE REPRESENTATION OF the People Act of 1918 had a greater impact on British politics than any other single piece of legislation since the Great Reform Act of 1832. The introduction of universal male suffrage and the extension of the franchise to most women aged 30 years and over significantly increased the parliamentary electorate, while a redistribution of constituencies increased the importance of large cities and industrial counties. Only one in four of the electorate in 1918 would have been on the electoral roll in 1910. In Birmingham, for example, the Act increased the electorate from 95,000 to 427,084 voters (165,000 of whom were women over 30). Across the whole of the west Midlands region the number of registered voters increased between 1910 and 1918 from 573, 231 to 1,581,439. Despite this transformation, the political system created

by the Act of 1918 was remarkably stable, especially when compared to the rest of Europe.

While the causes of the decision to expand the franchise a hundred years ago have been long debated by historians of the First World War, historians of the suffrage movements and historians of the working class, the effects of the decision to quadruple the electorate and to remove all but the most basic residency qualifications have been largely overlooked. This excellent collection of essays, edited by Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye aims to address this gap in the historiography of British political culture, covering issues such as the post-1918 career of Emmeline Pankhurst, the appeals to and depiction of female voters and some extremely innovative reflections on the impact of the enlarged electorate on inter-war foreign policy. The editors note, however, that the



collection is 'not exclusively concerned with women' and the crucial essays which transcend a purely gendered focus are those by Pat Thane on 'The Impact of Mass Democracy on British Political Culture' and by Richard Toye on 'The House of Commons in the Aftermath of Suffrage'.

Thane explores the development of a wider sense of citizenship, examining how the inter-war years saw a growth in non-party voluntary associations (most famously, Women's Institutes and Towns Women's Guilds). There was, Thane explains, a constant tension between these organisations and those who believed that 'good citizenship' could only be exercised through party membership. Neville Chamberlain's wife, Annie, founded Unionist Women's Institutes in Ladywood and Rotton Park in a clear attempt to hijack the growth of non-partisan women's social gatherings by giving talks on issues relevant to women over 30 and holding children's tea parties, limelight lectures and sewing parties. Neville Chamberlain was astonished when he spoke at the UWI meeting in his own constituency to find that the meeting 'seemed more like an infant welfare centre than a political gathering'. Thane seeks to remind readers of the significance of Nancy Astor in this regard, a figure whose star has fallen in feminist circles since the 1960s. Astor was hugely important in developing effective connections between the (very few) women MPs and non-partisan and party political women's organisations through a 'Consultative Committee of Women's

Organisations' which ensured that the female MPs were able to voice female concerns in the Commons, despite their small numbers.

Toye's chapter refrains from drawing facile conclusions from descriptive surveys of the 'language' of inter-war politics and uses a penetrating selection of well-chosen evidence to analyse how the work of both male and female MPs was forced to adjust to the needs of an enlarged electorate. He observes that the culture of the House of Commons itself adapted to suit the new Labour and then female MPs in the years immediately after the war, but that MPs had to endure longer parliamentary sessions and to undertake more constituency work than they were used to. The Commons itself became the nation's chief political stage in the years of political transition after 1918 and, in Toye's words, 'in the aftermath of suffrage the House of Commons remained an important focus of national political life.'

A particularly groundbreaking chapter by Adrian Bingham examines how the national popular press such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* enthusiastically welcomed the female voter and smoothly incorporated an appreciation of politics into their established coverage. From work on the media by Laura Beers, who also contributes a chapter to the collection, and from my own research, I am aware that this was not always replicated in the provincial media. During the 1918 campaign, for example, the *Rugby Advertiser* mocked the female voters' electoral choices, commenting that 'women's logic is perplexing' and citing a female canvasser who, when challenged, said 'don't ask me anything about politics!' even though there was an active branch of the Unionist Women's Citizens Association in the town. The failure of local newspapers to appeal to the new female voter may be an issue which explains the growing power of the London press in the inter-war years and the gradual decline of the provincial press, recently explored in Rachel Matthews' book *The History of the Provincial Press in England*. Much ink has been spilled recently on the advent of a 'national politics' between the wars, yet the success of the national media in adapting to meet the needs of a changing electorate remains significantly under-explored and Bingham's contribution is to be welcomed.

There probably needed to be some further reflection on the consequences

of the extension of the suffrage for all the major parties, however. After all, historians such as Ross McKibbin have argued that the expansion of the electorate was far more significant in the sudden post-war decline of the Liberal Party than the Asquith-Liberal split or canny Unionist political manoeuvring. The Labour Party has been traditionally seen as the chief beneficiary of the expansion of the electorate by those who believe in the 'franchise factor'. But, as Michael Dawson has explained, the restriction of electoral expenses also meant that 'Labour could now afford to fight more seats than before the war, which created an insurmountable challenge for a divided and demoralised Liberal Party.' David Thackeray's chapter effectively explores the ways in which Labour managed to appeal to the female non-Conservative voter more successfully than the Liberals. However, a question not fully explored by the collection is why alternative parties such as the Women's Party, the National Democratic and Labour Party or the National Party failed to develop despite the propitious circumstances of post-war Britain. As Duncan Tanner has pointed out, 'there were no inherent sociological reasons why the newly enfranchised men should have voted solidly for Labour' and there probably needs to be more attention paid to the Labour churches, which, in certain regions, were highly effective at mobilising the radical Nonconformist voters who had been such a mainstay of the pre-war Liberal Party. However, one can too easily criticise an edited collection for what it omits rather than what it includes, and there is much evidence in this text that there is still plenty of heat left in debates on modern political history, as long as historians continue to ask such pertinent questions as they attempt to address here.

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