

Reviews

than a Conservative–Liberal Democrat one been formed. Prior to the announcement of agreement, the Liberal Democrats had been negotiating simultaneously with the two major parties. The final outcome was not an expression of the ‘will of the people’ but of the will of the hierarchy of the Liberal Democrats. This result was, of course, achieved within the context of the first-past-the-post system. Granted, however, that no party since the Second World War has managed to secure 50 per cent of the popular vote, it seems possible that under PR every government since 1945 would have been the outcome of a comparable process of bargaining within smoke-filled (or latterly smoke-free!) rooms. Would this have represented an advance for ‘democracy’ or a reversal to

something like the practice of the eighteenth century, with loosely affiliated MPs arriving in London to decide between themselves the shape of any new administration? And it is surely not ‘transparent nonsense’ to suggest that PR systems in countries such as Israel and Ireland have sometimes led to the formation of coalitions within which fringe parties have enjoyed an undesirable degree of influence; or to note that, at the time of writing, the Netherlands has been without a government for five months while post-election negotiations continue.

Generally, however, this is an interesting and persuasive book. The author succeeds in his declared intention of rescuing Hewart’s reputation and confirming his continuing relevance for modern

law and politics. It is well written and the whole is peppered by Hickman’s dry wit. This reviewer will long remember his discussion of s. 2(1) of the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 under which, while it is no longer necessary for the appointee even to be a lawyer, the person recommended for appointment as lord chancellor must ‘appear to the Prime Minister to be qualified by experience’. Hickman comments: ‘It may be thought that the appointment of Christopher Grayling in 2012 and of Elizabeth Truss in 2016 suggest that s. 2(1) does not unduly constrain the Prime Minister’s freedom of action’ (p. 21).

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Radicalism in England

Richard Taylor, *English Radicalism in the Twentieth Century: A distinctive politics?* (Manchester University Press, 2020)

Review by Michael Meadowcroft

The history of English Radicalism is highly significant to Liberals who grew up with an awareness that the ‘Radical Party’ within the Liberal Party of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was visibly more progressive than the early Labour Party which was weighed down by its class rigidity and its trade union sectionalism. The failure of the Liberal Party to

encompass the legitimate aspirations of working men eventually led to the establishment of a separate party to represent their interests. Even after a united Labour Party was established in 1918, open to individual as well as corporate members, it was clear that a significant number of ‘advanced radical’ Liberals espoused progressive causes unadopted by Labour.

Within this context, any prospective reader who thought that Richard Taylor’s book would follow in the footsteps of Maccoby (S. Maccoby, *The English Radical Tradition 1763–1914* (Allen & Unwin, 1957)) or or Emy (H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Reformers* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)) will be disappointed. His selection of radicals is narrow and dominated by Labour figures. Liberal political

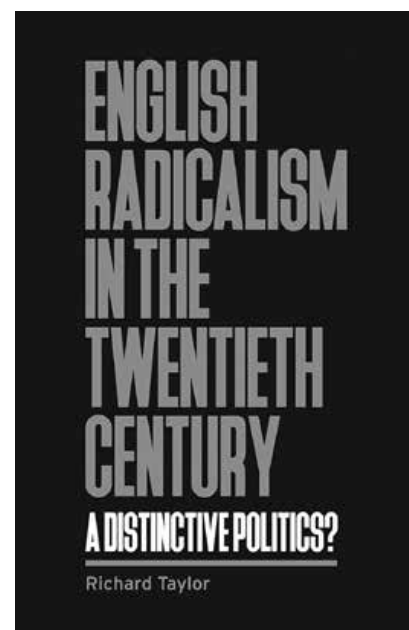
thinkers, such as Maynard Keynes, Jo Grimond and Ralf Dahrendorf, well able to stand alongside Taylor's selections are absent. Such a blinkered approach is all too typical of left writers in recent decades, aided and abetted, alas, by the failure of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats to make the case for their radical heritage and identity. Having stated this proviso, Taylor's book is a worthwhile read with many insights into the personalities he studies. It is a biographical study of ten individuals, radicals in one way or another, ranging from Bertrand Russell to Nicolas Walter, via Ellen Wilkinson, George Orwell, Michael Foot and, inevitably, Tony Benn.

Two of his subjects, Orwell and Walter, are very much in the libertarian radical camp whereas Joan Maynard – whose inclusion at all might well be questioned on intellectual grounds, pleasant and generous though she was – was solidly in the unquestioning statist left camp. Taylor certainly does not spare his subjects and his treatment of that splendid and brilliant but tortured individual, E. P. Thompson, is an excellent and balanced assessment. 'E. P.' was a very generous man. After the Liberal Party merger with the SDP in 1988 the 'continuing' Liberal Party maintained a separate party conference and it invited 'E. P.' to speak on peace and defence and he made the trek to Wolverhampton to deliver a splendid address and to take part in a passionate discussion with members.

The individual included in the book with whom I had a specific

connection was Tony Benn. Soon after my election for Leeds West in 1983, and Benn's interregnum between representing Bristol and Chesterfield, the *Tribune* newspaper called me to ask if I would be prepared to take part in 'a discussion with Tony at the Liberal Party assembly' that year in Harrogate. Always being happy to debate with anyone, I willingly agreed. I genuinely thought that there might be twenty or thirty delegates interested in discussing political philosophies. I was very wrong. *Tribune* had booked a large room which was packed to the doors with many others trying to listen from the corridor outside. Robin Day was there and tried to heavy *Tribune* into letting him chair it but was refused. It was actually chaired by Bob Cryer.

I was surprised how easy it was to deal with Benn, who was hidebound in his positions and had clearly no awareness of what political liberalism was. Benn was very hyped up with the meeting and afterwards took me to his room for tea. 'What a pity,' he said, 'that we can't repeat this at the Labour Party conference.' I replied that I would be very happy to turn up to Brighton for such an occasion. 'Oh no,' he replied, 'the Labour Party would not allow it. No one from another party is allowed to appear in the conference diary.' 'Well then, let us book a room ourselves and put it on.' 'Oh no, we could not contravene the rules!' Such was my experience of the great Labour radical and rebel! When Benn



returned to the House of Commons he would pass me in the corridor without any indication or acknowledgement.

Taylor's treatment of Benn is somewhat curious. He begins with a couple of adulatory paragraphs but then, over a further twenty pages, proceeds very shrewdly to demolish his role in radical activism and in Labour politics. Taylor is accurate in his assessment of Benn's very ambivalent role from 1968 onwards when hordes of young radical supporters would hang on his every word, however bizarre. Taylor's biographical sketches of his other subjects are equally shrewd and make the book a valuable contribution to radical biography, even though he has difficulty in tying together the diffuse threads into some coherent conclusion.

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