

and a Popular Front (1974), *Bluffer's Guide to Politics* (1976), *Liberal Values for a New Decade* (1980), *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge?* (1981), *Liberalism and the Left* (1982), *Liberalism and the Right* (1983), *Liberalism Today and Tomorrow* (1989), *The Case for the Liberal Party* (1992), *Focus on Freedom* (1997), *New Democracies: Underpinned or Undermined* (2001), *Diversity in Danger: Pluralism and Policy Development* (2009), *The Politics of Electoral Reform* (2nd ed., 2016), *The Leeds Yellow Book 2015: Essays on a Liberal Future for Leeds* (ed., with Elizabeth Bee and Ian MacFadyen,

2015), *The Yorkshire Yellow Book 2019: Essays on a Liberal Future for Yorkshire and the Humber* (ed., with Elizabeth Bee, Kamran Hussein and Ian MacFadyen, 2019).

Meadowcroft's introduction to *When We Speak of Freedom* concluded with these words:

Principally, we are summoned to foster a society in which beauty and community are as politically pressing as health or education. The modern world should never have separated well-being and aesthetics, much less wrenched economy from notions of

social good. In renewing our politics, technique is not enough. We need the breathing space to ask ourselves why we strive, and, crucially, what we strive for. For Liberals, there is no greater intellectual mission. Freedom cannot thrive in a community obsessed with 'means'. We need grand ends and compelling principles to make a better life and a better politics.

Not so much an epitaph; more a call to action! ■

Mark Smulian, Gordon Lishman
and Duncan Brack

Reviews

The General Strike, 1926

David Torrance, *The Edge of Revolution: The General Strike that Shook Britain* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2026)

Review by Hugh Gault

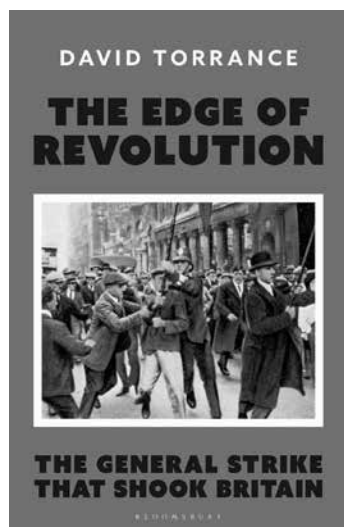
David Torrance is a constitutional specialist in the House of Commons library and so is well placed to tell the story of the impact of the 1926 general strike on the government and the country.

He is to be applauded for the huge number of archives across the country that he visited in researching the book. This led him to find an MI5 report referring to Deptford

(in London) in Glamorgan Constabulary papers and even to draw in a 1926 publication by the American Management Association quoting Keynes that coal was a 'decadent, third-generation industry'. Keynes certainly identified various third-generation industries as in decline, but whether he asserted that coal was not only third generation but decadent is more questionable.

This is indicative of my various reservations about the book. There is rather too much undigested and undistilled research that is accepted uncritically. If one did not know much about the events of the general strike, it is not certain that this book would inform you. It is stronger on the determinants of the strike and its aftermath; and, as might be expected, on the supposed constitutional effects rather than on the workers who were seeking a fair day's pay.

The order in which some of the material is presented is curious. Volunteers ('blacklegs') and Churchill (given responsibility for the government's *British Gazette* to keep him from causing even more trouble) are considered ahead of nearly everybody else, other than Herbert Samuel's



commission report, the prime minister Stanley Baldwin, and his administration.

There is much on personalities, for which the *Dictionary of National Biography* seems to have been extensively mined. This may be an artefact of our times, with people thought to be more significant than the issues that brought them to prominence. Nevertheless, Churchill, Reith and Randall Davidson (the Archbishop of Canterbury) are accorded space that they do not warrant. They all played a part, but less than the mineworkers, railwaymen and workers in the other transport unions called out.

Each of the union leaders is described in detail, but much less space is accorded to the actions of the workers or the sacrifices they made to take part.

The overwhelming impression is that 'not much happened'.

The strike may have been geographically patchy and trades union planning nationally may have been poor, but in some areas the effects were significant – notably in London, Wales, the north, and parts of Scotland. Some of this is mentioned. Although the strikers were reminded by their unions that 'disorder was treachery to the cause', and they had the Emergency Powers Act hanging over them, significant disruption did take place, and one might hope that Torrance's archival research would have uncovered more of this.

There are some contradictions in the proof copy I read. Hopefully, they will have been edited out from the published version. They seem to be due in part to uncritical acceptance of assertions by secondary sources. For example, was it the Flying Scotsman that was derailed at Cramlington or only an unnamed passenger train operating the same service?

There is also an absence of 'why' explanations. For example, if the civil commissioner for the North-Eastern Division refused to distribute the government's mouthpiece *British Gazette*, why was this and why does it appear only as a footnote? Similarly, why were three divisions (including the North-Eastern one) omitted from the chapter on civil commissioners? No explanation is offered in the footnote that mentions their omission.

Presumably archives in these three areas were visited. But were there no confrontations between strikers and the authorities, especially as at least two covered substantial mining areas?

Overall, the strike was not general – neither in terms of the unions called out to support the miners nor in terms of geographical impact. As it was called off after little more than a week by the TUC without consulting the miners, it is difficult to justify the 'revolution' sub-title. Rather, it seems to have been an appeal for help from downtrodden and exploited miners that the establishment found it could ignore. The government were better prepared, and better supported legally and administratively, than the unions. That in ignoring the miners' appeal, the political and judicial establishment bolstered the coal owners, the 'stupidest men in England' as they were described, rather than those who generated their and the country's wealth, quite eloquently sums up the reality of 1920s Britain.

In terms of the Liberal Party, Herbert Samuel's roles before, during and after, are covered in detail including a fourteen-page chapter entitled 'The Judgement of Samuel'. Baldwin's deputy cabinet secretary Thomas Jones believed that, had Samuel included his views towards the end of the strike in his original Commission report on the organisation of the industry, the

strike might have been avoided. Samuel ended up leading the pro-government Liberals after the 1933 split in the National government. He was home secretary in 1931–32.

Similarly, Sir John Simon, who had declared the strike illegal and published a book of his speeches to this effect, served in four cabinet posts across the fourteen years of the 1931–45 National and other governments. He led the Liberal National Party in the Commons between 1931 and 1940. Archibald Sinclair was an MP until 1945, in the National Government cabinet 1931–32 and in Churchill's wartime coalition cabinet 1940–45.

Asquith is alleged to have used the strike's aftermath 'to move against Lloyd George' (p214). This is curious as Asquith had been in the Lords as Earl of Oxford and Asquith since 1925, and two years before his death in 1928 had largely given up political scheming. Certainly, Torrance's bald assertion requires further explanation.

Lloyd George remained an MP until he was ennobled in 1945, the year of his death. As the political wizard par excellence, he had long since seen off the Asquith faction but had torn the traditional Liberal Party apart. He would suggest solutions for unemployment in the 1930s, but National government politicians were wary of his reputation and even Churchill, a fellow maverick,

considered but eventually resisted bringing Lloyd George into his wartime cabinet.

Keynes gets credit for his role in the party's inquiry report *Britain's Industrial Future* (better known as the 1928 Yellow Book). As the *Journal of Liberal History* website puts it:

the report made a compelling case for state intervention in the economy and planning and advocated great programmes of public works, it also contained detailed proposals for profit-sharing and co-ownership.

None of this applied in the coal, dock or major transport industries in 1926. Had it done so, the strike would likely not have happened.

There are clear parallels with the 1984 miners' strike in that coal

stocks were built up in advance, government planning was far ahead of that of the miners' union and its trades union supporters, and the strike was undermined by the action of 'blacklegs'. The major difference, of course, was the government, police and judicial response. There was no Orgreave in 1926. The latter certainly did shake Britain, and its continuing aftermath (community blight and unemployment hotspots) is still evident today. By contrast the general strike soon faded from memory and generally is resurrected only when historians and publishers mark major anniversaries such as 2026. ■

Hugh Gault is an independent writer and historian. His most recent book is *Then ... And Now Again: Trauma and turbulence in 1931 and today* (Gretton Books, 2025).

Coalition and cooperation

Alan Wager, *Cross-Party Politics in Britain, 1945–2019* (Oxford University Press, 2024)

Review by William Wallace

What if Britain's two-party system is broken, in spite of the cultural and institutional foundations that have maintained it for the past 200 years? Alan Wager took this question as the focus for his PhD, now published as an Oxford academic book. He

starts from Disraeli's famous quotation that 'England does not love coalitions' and from David Butler's assumption that the electoral system has built-in resistance to coalitions, and goes on to explore seven attempts at cross-party cooperation since 1945 – in all of which, except