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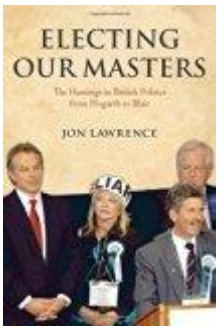

Laura Beers. *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Illustrations. x + 272 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05002-0.

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"Squaring the Contradictions"

Laura Beers's *Your Britain* examines the evolution of the relationship between the Labour Party and various forms of the British media from the turn of the twentieth century until 1945. It documents the gradual shift from suspicion and even fear of the popular press to engagement and experimentation, and demonstrates the changing mores of the British political landscape during this period. This is a colorful and interesting era, from the point of view of both political parties and trends in media, and is a subject about which there has been little scholarship. Histories of the Labour Party exist, as does some more recent work on political media strategies (for example, see Ben Pimlott's *Labour and the Left in the 30s* [1986] and Ralph Negrine's *The Transformation of Political Communication* [2008]), but there are few texts that attempt to integrate both themes, which makes Beers's book especially welcome. Other similar works, such as Dominic Wring's *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (2004), have a broader historical range and are less focused on the development of an integrated media strategy.

Structurally, the book takes a chronological approach, beginning with a useful chapter on the development of a mass media culture in Britain and the professionalization of election campaigning. The broad theme of the transition of the Labour Party from marginal to mainstream is set against the emergence of a dynamic and influential mediascape, widely perceived to be essential in attracting and maintaining voters' attention. While the chronological approach is welcome for those readers unfamiliar with either the media or political landscape of Britain at this time, it does occasionally militate against a deeper discussion of the broader themes of the book, especially the lack of an agreement on a consistent media policy within the Labour leadership.

Beers presents several detailed case studies that illustrate both the complexity of the subject

and the systematic changes in Labour's policies toward the media. Of particular interest is the analysis of the role of the *Daily Herald*, the unofficial newspaper of the Labour Party, and the party's relationship with the BBC. These examples are skillfully integrated into the text and are not presented as stand-alone studies, which is helpful when considering how the use of the *Daily Herald* and the BBC both contributed to and often seemed to undermine the electoral success of the party.

The impact of the General Strike of 1926 proved an opportunity to examine the lessons learned by the party for its handling of the media. The failure of the Labour Party to appreciate the results to be gained by engaging with the mainstream media led to the marginalization of the party and its subsequent easy demonization, largely as a consequence of the long-standing suspicion of the press. The decision of the Trades Union Congress to boycott the media during the strike was disastrous for Labour and was a turning point after which there was a determination within the party to adopt a policy of deliberate media engagement (especially with the BBC) in order to broaden its support.

Beers is realistic about the frequently self-sabotaging tactics of some factions of the Labour Party when dealing with the mainstream press, in particular. Notwithstanding the open hostility of some sections of that press in the 1920s--the *Daily Mail* was consistently antagonistic--the role of Norman Angell in persuading the party that "squaring the contradictions" of media engagement was necessary is interesting and handled well (p. 28). As a former journalist, Angell was effective in convincing the leadership that developing a coherent media policy would present Labour to the public as a valid opposition to the Conservatives. He was, however, concerned about the potential effect of anti-Labour propaganda on women voters and about how the entertainment value of the pictorial press would provide a distraction for what were perceived as unsophisticated female voters.

Labour's gradual realization of the significance of the female vote is a recurring theme of the book from the extension of the franchise to women in Britain in 1928 to the deliberate and continuing attempts to attract the attention of women during the 1930s. This was achieved mostly through visual images--poster campaigns, especially those aimed at young mothers and the inclusion of women's fashion pages (previously an anathema) in the *Daily Herald* after its relaunch in 1930. We know little about the real impact of these campaigns, as Beers admits, but the fact of their existence demonstrates that the party was developing a more pragmatic approach to its media policy. The transition of the *Daily Herald* from a heavy-handed, loss-making, and pedantic party organ to a lively and commercially successful newspaper with a two million circulation is a fascinating journey. The shift of the *Daily Mirror* to the political Left in the 1930s gets relatively little attention, which is a pity as a discussion of its relationship to the *Daily Herald* would seem to offer fruitful territory to examine the subtleties of newspapers' political allegiances.

The determination of the Labour Party in the 1930s to broaden its electoral base not just to women but to the middle classes was undertaken with recourse to advice from experts in advertising and public relations, demonstrating the professionalization of political communication strategies and the beginning of Labour's opportunity to compete with the Conservatives on an almost equal footing. We are left with the final impression of a party that had arrived at a point of the systematic and targeted utilization of the expanding media and of the consolidation of a complex media policy in the subsequent decades. A tantalizing mention of the New Labour era of Tony Blair and his election strategist Peter Mandelson (although, oddly, not Alastair Campbell, Blair's first press secretary) in the last sentence gives a

sense of potential further work on this most intriguing of subjects.

A few quibbles, such as the lack of a separate bibliography and occasional lapses in the writing style (Ernest Bevin was “hell-bent” [p. 134]), cannot be said to spoil what is a very rewarding text which adds to our as yet underdeveloped understanding of the relationships between political parties and the media. Beers has amply demonstrated how the political communication strategies of the Labour Party evolved as an act of “political desperation” in the face of the success of the Conservative Party but from such erratic beginnings grew an ability to persuade, cajole, and ultimately translate media attention into votes (p. 203).

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[1] Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 30s* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986); Ralph Negrine, *The Transformation of Political Communication* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[2] Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

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