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G. R. Searle. *Country Before Party: Coalition and the Idea of 'National Government' in Modern Britain, 1885-1987 (Studies in Modern History).* London: Longman, 1995. $81.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-20952-7; $46.40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-20951-0.

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Many monographs seek to change the way historians view historical episodes or processes. Some works which seek to change standard approaches end up merely testing the readers' patience; other attempts challenge readers' notion of order, and either the readers accept and incorporate the new ideas into a realignment of their thinking on the subject or they reject the ideas but have honed their theories on the subject, understanding their own positions better for having had them challenged. "Country Before Party," fortunately, falls into the latter group.

In the classroom, historians of post-1885 British politics tend to emphasize the development of mass political parties in the late 1800s, stressing the differences in the parties and their modernization over the last century. The material mostly falls into easily recognizable periods, often relying on vibrant and interesting personalities to keep the students' attention. The development of the political parties and their differences is extremely well-documented at all levels, adding to the appeal of this approach for the instructor of both traditional lecture classes and seminars.

Yet the problem with concentrating on the differences between the political parties has always been that while those differences have been colorful and well-documented, the party system itself was not always successful. Between 1885 and 1945, it was more common to have an informal alliance of major and minor parties or even a true coalition of major parties than government by one party alone. Traditionally, these alliances and coalitions have been ignored or explained away – with some difficulty – as mere adjustments to the system. Searle instead seeks to describe the forces which drove those ideas of temporary coalitions and of a united "national" party from the period of Gladstone through the Alliance.

Searle's descriptions of each of the major periods (1885 through World War I, World War I through World War II, post-War) work well. The major players (and many minor ones) and many of the policies which shaped the successive governments and political movements are well inter-woven (although somewhat sparsely noted). His arguments for the power of pressures pushing for coalition and against pure party interests are cogent, and scholars of British government will easily recognize the effectiveness of using at least some of Searle's ideas with their advanced students.

The importance of alliance, limited or not, in British politics cannot be easily argued away. From the Liberal reliance on the Irish Nationalists and the Conservatives' alliance (and later fusion) with Chamberlain's Unionists and reliance on Ulster Unionists before World War I, to the coalitions of the World Wars and the pseudo-coalitions and minority governments of interwar Britain, to the appeals and attempts for center political policies and parties since World War II, the evidence is there. Searle's descriptions of the political problems and pressures tending towards alliances and center coalitions are powerful for each case.

The one way the work falters is in the attempt to link all the instances. It is true that, because the language calling for the centralist non-party approach and/or call to coalition has been so similar for over a hundred years, an outside observer "might almost be tempted to assume the existence of some 'Ur-Text' from which they had been copied" (p. 270). Searle wants to show how similar the cases were in the conclusion. Instead, by his own evidence, he actually demonstrates how different each instance was, for only the rhetoric remained similar.

In conclusion, this work is not for introductory students of British politics, who would likely be confused by the rush of names and events referred to in passing. Theoretical historians will be left dissatisfied and will be challenged to come up with a set of theories which will either prove or disprove Searle's premise of 'the power of the tendency to coalition,' because those seeking a strong unified theory with which they could use to replace the

more traditional party/class theories of modern British politics will not find it in this work. Historians working from a more descriptive tradition may not find this to be a major problem, but throughout the work Searle often seems to be on the verge of outlining such a theory – only to recount the next episode instead. In any event, Searle's individual arguments cannot easily be ignored, even though, in the end, the reader is left with no convincing reasons why the pressures for coalitions and 'National Governments' have recurred so often.

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