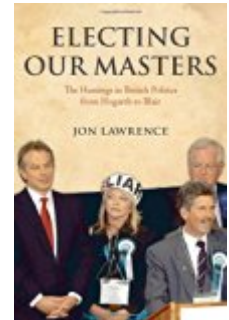


**Laura Beers.** *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Illustrations. x + 272 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05002-0.



**Reviewed by** Martin Farr

**Published on** H-Albion (March, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Thomas Hajkowski (Misericordia University)

More than for any other political party in Great Britain, the cultivation of modern communications was essential to the Labour Party's development as a national organization. "An expansion of Labour's efforts at mediated political outreach," and its effect on public opinion, however, no more explains the party's electoral fortunes than does any other single factor, but it has to be as significant a consideration as the traditional ones of high politics and contingency, or, more recently, social forces, localism, and language (p. 140). Yet the sense remains that the case continually needs to be made that examining mass media is essential to understanding modern politics and society, and particularly mass democracy. It certainly took Labour long enough to "come to appreciate the importance not only of a national political appeal, but of the effective propagation of that appeal through the national media" as well (p. 119). But appreciate it it did, and did so earlier than is usually held to be the case, Laura Beers contends. This is "Labour's media revolution," dated from 1906 to 1945 (p. 203).

"Suspicion of the media"--its ownership and its influence--has been a recurrent feature of Labour's history. Indeed, Ed Miliband's position as leader was cemented in 2011 by an assault--and a highly opportunistic one--on the most important media owner of the twentieth century, Rupert Murdoch. When leaders have sought to adapt to and even exploit the press, broadcasting, and advertising ("pictorial politics"--and it is a great pity that the publisher chose to reproduce so many beautiful images in gray scale), it did nothing for their reputations. For Harold Wilson, Neil Kinnock, and Tony Blair, "Selling Socialism" came to be damagingly emblematic, a product of ideological rootlessness. As Beers demonstrates, it was ever thus: it is no coincidence that the first leader to conceive of such a purpose was Ramsay MacDonald ("public opinion [is] the only creator of social change which is to last"), the first in a line of infamy leading, for many in the party--and many who left--to Peter Mandelson (p. 83).

Yet attempts first to cohabit with and then to influence the media stemmed from both the general and the particular: that as a national parliamentary party, fixated on Westminster, Labour should seek to mediate politics through national channels, and in so doing could preempt or neutralize misrepresentations of the party through those channels, as experienced during the 1919 rail strike; Poplarism; the Red Scare of 1924; and, above all, the General Strike (“not only a disastrous failure from the point of view of industrial organization, it was also a disastrous failure from the point of view of publicity and public relations” [p. 115]); not for Labour the quiet complacencies of enjoying a “kept press.” The effects of anti-Labour propaganda were therefore most limited “when Labour’s actions accorded least with Conservative depictions of them,” which could be said of any era but is here of the 1920s (p. 66). To the baleful influence of Lord Beaverbrook’s presses there came Sir John Reith’s transmitters, and new skills had to be acquired; not for the last time, the typically perspicacious Tories had acquired them first. From the outset, suspicions developed on the part of the Labour movement toward the BBC that for some never abated.

So the party, and particularly MacDonald, Arthur Henderson, and Herbert Morrison, extemporized what would later be called a media strategy. We see MacDonald’s innovative leaflets and posters of 1906 and 1910; Henderson’s grasp—in 1921—of the news cycle; Morrison’s mobilization of the iconography of war for winning the peace; and the discovery of such improbable media stars as Philip Snowden, Stafford Cripps, and Harold Laski (Clement Attlee was perhaps too improbable). All were leading figures, and a disjunction with the wider membership over what to think and how to deal with the press was significant, and remained so. Yet the policy was pursued because of the role media could play in the education of a still-young electorate, and the contaminating consequences of prejudicial journalism—not least on women

(thus Rebecca West was appointed women’s editor of the *Daily Herald*, the Labour paper whose vicissitudes are chronicled here). The attempts at rapprochement with Fleet Street after 1926 floundered in 1931, and confirmed the party’s “anxieties about the corrupting influence of commercial culture” (p. 139). The triumph of 1945 duly required a “process of public conversion” on the part of the Left Book Club, the *Daily Mirror*, and, so the Tories came to think, the BBC (p. 166). Labour, finally, had a “national propaganda organization ... much more active than that of its rivals” (p. 167).

Done well, the study of national media relations with political leadership, and its effect in the country, should provide a study as vital as it is valuable. Beers has done it well. She has synthesized a range of sources—political and cultural, press and broadcast—in a way that seems obvious, except that it has not been done before. Much is familiar, but only from unconnected readings over the years. Moreover, public opinion, and the impact on it of a media strategy, is hard to measure, and Beers spends a chapter bravely admitting as much, but manages to do so nevertheless. She convincingly establishes that there was a link between publicity and public opinion, and that Labour was more aware of it than is usually thought. This is a subject that cannot fail to be absorbing, but has been written about here clearly and broadly enough so as to satisfy the general reader, and sufficiently rigorously for specialists. It is another quality of the book that the author does not belabor—indeed scarcely mentions—the timelessness of the issues and the debates they engendered. They are conspicuous, though: one reads often with a smile of recognition (for if one did not smile one might cry), and on finishing one hopes that the author takes them up in a subsequent volume, albeit at the risk of repetition.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Martin Farr. Review of Beers, Laura. *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33562>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.