

# H-Net Reviews

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Ross McKibbin. *Parties and People: England, 1914-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. viii + 207 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-958469-7.

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## Where Did All the Liberals Go?

Ross McKibbin, now an emeritus research fellow at St. John's College, Oxford, based this work on his 2008 Ford Lectures, *Parties, People and the State: Politics in England c.1914-1951*. Like most such lectures-turned-monographs, this work has the feel of the formal lecture in many places, including a few attempts at rhetorical flourishes which might give some readers pause. McKibbin was of course no stranger to the study of class and modern Britain when he decided on this topic for his lectures, having published *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (1994) and *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (1998). Likewise, he has also contributed to the formal historiography of modern British political parties with his 1984 *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* and by co-writing the 1982 book *Labour Government 1945-1951* with Kenneth O. Morgan. While advertised as a "sequel" to *Classes and Cultures*, *Parties and People* really combines themes from all of the above works to discuss the creation and implications of the opening up of full voting rights in Britain between 1918 and 1928, especially in terms of the changes in national party politics. From at least George Dangerfield's 1935 *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, pundits and scholars have sought the reasons behind the Liberal Party's near total collapse as a party of government. Based on his previous work and a great deal of reflection, this work represents McKibbin's views and speculations on the subject. The types of questions McKibbin asks in this work—(for example, why did formerly Liberal voters largely turn to the Conservatives in the 1930s and Labour in the 1940s?)—are ultimately unanswerable, at

least in any definitive sense. Still, evidence and tendencies can be identified, and if there is any format available for academic veterans to speculate on the great questions in their fields, it is this one.

In one sense, McKibbin finds himself tracing a change in political identification, from the Edwardian political identities based on religious affiliation, English/Celtic Britain, and an urban/rural split more than anything else, to a post-Great War situation where the idea of socialism was largely rejected, to the immediate post-Phony War world where socialism was a fully viable, and at times preferred, option for a time. McKibbin is not presenting new, let alone startling, ideas. What he is instead trying to do is create a synthesis of known suggestions, tendencies, and projections within a coherent set of theories to try and account for the Liberal Party's dissolution as a factor in elections when, by McKibbin's account, the general electorate was not really willing to fully consider Labour as a party of government until after the events of April-June 1940.

For McKibbin, as for many other historians of British politics during the first half of the twentieth century, all three political parties stood on various precipices of their own devising in 1914. Even the Conservative Party, the "natural" party of England, with its failed opposition to free trade and stand against Irish Home Rule, lacked any truly positive positions. The gathering momentum towards universal adult suffrage, one of McKibbin's focal points for the interwar period, could have broken to the

advantage of any of the three parties had the Great War not occurred.

Instead, of course, the war split the Liberal Party in such a way as to prevent it from recovering in the 1920s, sliding in the 1929 general election towards the position it maintained throughout the rest of the century. From 1922 until 1940, Labour largely moved into the Liberal's place in Scotland, Wales, and working-class urban England, while the Conservatives soaked up much of the Liberal vote in the rest of urban and suburban England and such Liberal votes as had existed in the countryside.

Ultimately, the place McKibbin wants his readers to follow him to may be summed up with a brief quotation from near the end of the work: "The Liberals, as the party of non-conformity and Celtic Britain, to some extent stood outside the hierarchies of the English state.... This was much less true of Labour. The Conservatives and Labour disagreed about the economic function of the state, not about the state and its institutions as such. The Labour Party's definition of the state was largely Tory.... It was thought possible ... to create a democratic state by redistributing wealth but not social or political authority" (pp. 198-199).

McKibbin points to Labour's collapse in the 1931 election and poor showing in 1935 as the events which allowed middle-class party members like Clement Attlee to come to the leadership. With a leadership that then mostly shared the underlying Conservative conception of "the state," Labour became an ever more viable alternative to the Conservatives for swing voters.

McKibbin spends much time detailing how the Conservative Party managed to define itself as the party of national consensus in the 1920s, becoming the predominate party of the 1930s. While he spends some time on why Labour's 1945 electoral victory should not have been a shock, McKibbin is surprised that he could trace the main turning away from the Conservatives to Labour to

the end of May through the fall of France: "[W]e are left with the awkward fact that, as I see it, the end of the Conservative political and ideological supremacy—regardless of who was the beneficiary—was extraordinarily sudden" (p. 117).

McKibbin states, without going into detail, "The trouble with appeasement, both as policy and as rhetoric, was that it could not partly fail" (p. 119). Much ink has been expended on why appeasement failed and why its failure destroyed the reputation of Neville Chamberlain and his followers. For McKibbin's purposes, the downfall of Chamberlain and his policies meant that Labour was able to enter Winston Churchill's government as an equal partner in 1940. Although McKibbin does not directly draw the parallel, following his arguments would lead to the supposition that just as the Conservatives were able to redefine both themselves and the political arguments of the next generation by joining the coalition government during World War I, so Labour was able to do by joining the government during World War II, with its emerging ideas defining British politics until the premiership of Margaret Thatcher.

As McKibbin notes at the end of his preface, "This is not a text book. It does not pretend to be a political history.... It is ... an interpretation of what happened" (p. viii). This should not be the initial work consulted by students approaching British party history of the first time. For those with more than a nodding acquaintanceship with the subjects under discussion, however, this will be a fascinating read. There will be times when expert readers may roll their eyes at what they consider obvious (to them, at least) or have eyebrows raised at juxtapositions they had never considered. In the end, no matter if they largely agree or disagree with McKibbin's interpretations, they should have had to at least reconsider their own theories on the questions raised here in light of the chains of arguments presented. In short, this is an excellent contribution to the historiography of British political and party history.

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