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By-elections in British Politics, 1832-1914

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Given the great interest in general election campaigns, it is surprising that by-elections have not been a priority for historians. This new edited collection fills an important historiographical gap whilst also showcasing some of the newest and most innovative research in political and electoral history. Indeed, there has not been a comprehensive work on by-elections since *By-Elections in British Politics*, a 1973 collection of essays edited by Chris Cook and John Ramsden.(1) Whilst groundbreaking at the time, that volume predominately focused on individual case studies with a general overview completing the chronological gaps. Other work has often focussed on one contest with a tendency to pinpoint what a specific by-election represented. For instance, the 1894 by-election in Sheffield Attercliffe famously convinced Ramsay MacDonald to join the Independent Labour Party and highlighted growing local disillusionment with Liberalism.(2) To an extent, then, by-elections have often been seen as stand-alone events in their own right, with few comparative perspectives or attempts to place these contests into a wider analysis of electoral politics.

What is initially striking is just how comprehensive a collection this is. 11 chapters, mostly structured

chronologically, cover the period 1832 to 1914, a transformative age in British politics. For, not only did it encompass parliamentary reform, it also witnessed the extension of the franchise and the establishment of national and local party organisations. By contrast, the earliest by-election in Cook and Ramsden?s collection is the 1922 Newport contest. As such, this volume illustrates that such elections are not merely a modern phenomenon. Rather, as with general elections, by-elections were an important part of political life and culture, ?central to the very stuff of parliamentary politics? (p. 5). Perhaps one explanation of the relative neglect of these contests is their perceived irrelevance to wider British politics. The very nature of by-elections means that they can occur at any time and in any constituency. Thus, when they have occurred in areas of the country that have not traditionally invited interest from political or electoral historians ? such as outside of large urban areas ? it is easy to see why they have been neglected. However, as this volume illustrates, by-elections provide an excellent focal point with which to explore British politics.

One of the most significant strands within this book is the idea that not only were these elections important local events, but that they show the dominance of national issues and politics in Britain. This is in contrast to the variegated picture of elections and local politics that has been painted by a number of historians. Indeed, the myriad of constituency and local-based studies which have appeared since the 1960s have placed an emphasis on the politics of place, highlighting regional variances and uncovering grass roots organisations and campaigns. This has particularly been the case with the Labour Party, but local work on the Liberal and Conservative parties is becoming increasingly common. By-elections, then, provide an interesting perspective with which to explore the relationship between national and local politics, and this is something which this volume does well.

The introduction notes the ?striking? relationship between these contests and national politics and contends that this indicates that ?Victorian and Edwardian politics were more national in character than some historians have suggested? (pp. 18?19). There is no denying that these contests were regarded as important by national political parties. Geoffrey Hicks, for instance, argues in his chapter on the 1874 Parliament that by-elections provided one of only a few indicators of public opinion, and shows that results were taken seriously by party leaders. Hicks effectively charts the changing electoral fortunes of the Conservative government, showing how issues such as foreign policy were blamed on Liberal victories across the Parliament. Likewise, Matthew Roberts? chapter on Unionism in the late Victorian period shows how, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, there was a ?heightened interest? (p. 178) in these elections and, although this attitude was to change in later years, by-elections remained important for the Unionists to develop their political language and identities. Similarly, Philip Salmon shows that by-elections meant voters had just one vote, something which was unusual particularly before 1885, and the experience of ?plumping? helped develop a partisanship. Following well from Salmon?s work, Angus Hawkins looks at those MPs who had to seek re-election upon taking up certain ministerial and legal posts, 504 of which took place between 1836 and 1886 (p. 51). In doing so, Hawkins reveals that Conservative candidates were far less likely to be defeated, showing the influence of by-elections on the composition of ministries.

Blaxill and Readman?s excellent chapter on Edwardian politics is the strongest proponent on this perspective, contending that by-elections were often fought on national issues. Hence, they focus on pressure groups, which formed a central part of Edwardian political culture. Hundreds of these groups sprung up across the country, the largest boasting local organisations and huge propaganda circulation, whilst smaller groups could veer into the bizarre, often representing niche interests. Pressure group ?giants? such as the Tariff Reform and Free Trade leagues had an ideal platform from which to reinforce national debates, and the smaller and often more localised groups often had a similar impact. Such groups also play an important role in Phillips Payson O?Brien?s analysis of the Bermondsey by-election of 1909. O?Brien, too, suggests that national issues were at the forefront of by-election campaigns, arguing that Bermondsey provided an opportunity to debate Lloyd George?s proposed People?s Budget.

Certainly, the link between national politics and by-elections is clear. These campaigns offered an ideal environment for the discussion of the latest national issues and debates, and were occasionally used to justify a certain platform. For example, during the by-elections of 1902?5, national issues such as the Education Act, tariff reform and Chinese ?slavery? became hotly debated political topics with particular contests

almost being single issue-based. The Chertsey by-election of 1904, for instance, took place at the height of the Chinese ?slavery? scandal, meaning the contest was dominated by the controversial debate over indentured Chinese labour in the South African mines.

This is not to say that locality has been forgotten in this volume. Indeed, most of the essays offer an interesting perspective on the relationship between national and local politics. For instance, Ian Packer, in his contribution on land reform, rightly shows the disparity that existed between these contests, with some able to influence policy making, whilst others having little impact. Gordon Pentland?s article on the ?peculiarities? of Scottish by-elections highlights the regional variance of Victorian politics. Pentland explores the Liberal dominance of Scottish elections, using by-elections to offer an alternative to this national narrative, showing how Liberals and Conservative candidates constructed campaigns which were influenced by regional issues and within a Scottish framework. Similarly, Otte explores the resonance of foreign policy during by-elections. Perhaps most interesting is the assertion that imperial and naval connections were often not used by Unionist candidates during campaigns in dockyards and other traditional bastions of support for the party (p. 148). Rather, a more complicated picture is presented that suggests candidates were conscious of the need to construct locally conscious campaigns rather than relying upon traditional appeals.

Elsewhere, in an insightful chapter Antony Taylor looks at ?radical? independent candidates at by-elections in Southwalk, Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester. In doing so, he uncovers the impact of these later and often forgotten figures in the labour movement whose independence from Liberalism was influential in the changing nature of working-class representation. In turn, Taylor?s comparative methodology illustrates how the electorate and other parties reacted to these candidatures in different areas and casts an alternative perspective on by-elections. Kathryn Rix offers a fascinating insight into party organisation in order to explore the importance placed on by-elections and how national organisers as well as party agents saw them. This provides both an innovative way of looking at the relationship between grass roots and national politics and a much-needed exploration of local Liberal and Conservative organisations. She shows that there was often a dislike of ?imported? party agents (p. 171), who came to run by-election campaigns, suggesting that many constituency organisations desired autonomy and did not conform to a national blueprint. This demonstrates that the study of by-elections is important in showcasing the activities of parties outside of general elections ? enabling a deeper insight into the nature of constituency party organisation.

The influence of the ?linguistic turn? is particularly evident throughout many of the essays, the best of which utilise thematic and comparative methodologies with an emphasis on how political support was constructed. Pentland?s chapter, for instance, is based around the claim that parties needed to construct identities for themselves which were conscious of changing political circumstances. Such an emphasis, of course, is in contrast to the ?electoral sociology? / focus on socio-economic factors approach which defined much early political history. This has particularly been the case in regards to the now staple debate on the decline of Liberalism and rise of Labour, which was initially marked by an overwhelming sense of inevitability. Today, the debate is unpopular and definitely out of fashion. Historians have rightly turned to underexplored themes, including some excellent revisionist work on the Liberal and Conservative parties, as well as work that suggests that Labour?s appeal was not easy to construct at a local level. Whilst the Hebert Gladstone papers were once frequently used with regard to the Lib-Lab pact, they have been used by contributors here (namely Blaxill, Readman and Rix) to emphasise and acknowledge the electoral organisation that facilitated success. Such influences can also be seen in a reappraisal of Unionism. Matthew Roberts, in particular, offers a revisionist approach, adding to an swelling literature which questions E. H. H. Green?s contention of a ?crisis? of Conservatism during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, by emphasising that the party were ?architects of their own electoral fortunes? (p. 196). Similarly, Blaxill and Readman contend that tariff reform has masked the fact that by 1914 ?the Unionist position was one of underlying strength?, (p. 247) with the party in an ideal position to react to the changing nature of politics and ?rise? of Labour.

It is hard to criticise such a strong and well-thought-out volume. One possible area where the authors could have dedicated more attention is cross-party comparative work, particularly in regard to Labour. Even though Labour has often dominated political history, some interesting perspectives about how the party

emerged and constructed a space for itself nationally and locally can still be revealed. This is particularly the case in regards to its organisation, localism, identity and electioneering tactics. For instance, Labour was often effective at mimicking the electoral organisation of its rivals in the Edwardian period, and although it was limited by organisational and financial constraints, it fully engaged in the popular politics of the period and understood the importance of elections. Those important by-elections that encouraged the formation of local labour groups in the 1890s, as well as those between 1902 and 1904 which helped bolster Labour before 1906 (Clitheroe, Barnard Castle and Woolwich) are notable omissions. Of course, this book covers a time period which predominately pre-dates Labour?s formation which, along with the influence of the ?linguistic turn?, may explain why the party has not been explored to the same lengths as the Conservative and Liberal parties. However, it would have been interesting to see new perspectives on these by-elections, as well as those where the party was unsuccessful, which have often been only fleetingly referred to by historians in charting the ascent of the Labour Representation Committee.

Other questions regarding the relationship between candidates and locality are also raised. For instance, were certain areas, such as Southend in the inter-war period, more likely to have ?celebrity? candidates? Moreover, although ?carpetbagger? candidates are referred to, it would be interesting to explore the relationship between candidates and their constituencies further. Did these ?carpetbagger? candidates possess other local connections besides residence? For example, in many areas, Liberal and Conservative candidates were able to maintain strong links to local employment and industry. A contrast with general election candidates may also have be useful in seeing the extent to which the unpredictability of by-elections skewed the number of ?outsiders?, as well as adding to our understanding of the unique nature of these contests.

Of course, it is impossible to be comprehensive in every regard, and these are more suggestions for future avenues of research rather than criticisms of an excellent edited collection. Regional variances will always persist, and election campaigns were dominated by a mixture of local and national issues. What this volume reminds us to do is to question localism, increasing our understanding of Victorian and Edwardian politics as a complex interchange of national and local identities. By illustrating a move away from analysing elections only through results, this is a strong collection that showcases some of the latest and innovative work in political history. Making a strong and convincing claim for the significance of by-elections, it is an important addition and therefore comes highly recommended to academics and students alike.

Notes

1. *By-Elections in British Politics*, ed. C. Cook and J. Ramsden (London, 1973).Back to (1)
2. J. Brown, ?Attercliffe, 1894: how one local Liberal Party failed to meet the challenge of Labour?, *The Journal of British Studies*, 14, 2, 48?77.Back to (2)

The editors are happy with this review, and do not wish to respond.

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