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Popular Conservatism in Imperial London 1868-1906

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Alex Windscheffel
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In 1900 the Conservatives won 51 of the 59 London parliamentary seats. Alex Windscheffel's fine monograph provides a commentary on how the party achieved such parliamentary dominance in the most busy and complex of British cities. Yet the book is much more than just a commentary, as its manifesto-like introduction makes clear. Windscheffel has a number of points that he considers need to be made firmly in his opening statement. This is a self-consciously revisionist book and its language reflects its clear intentions. Hence Windscheffel seeks to 'revisit', 'rethink' and 'relocate' the transformation of Conservatism in the late 19th century. This entails providing a clear critique of the arguments of previous historians, who Windscheffel is not afraid to challenge directly. In a thorough and critical discussion of the current historiography, Windscheffel interrogates and dismisses accounts of Conservative success based on sociological explanation. He considers that notions of 'Villa Toryism', whereby the middle class drifted inexorably towards Conservatism as they recognised their class interests, made electorally effective by successful party organisation, are an inadequate explanation for Conservative success. Such explanations were used by Liberals in the late 19th century, seeking to provide an alibi for their own poor electoral performance. If it was becoming natural for the middle classes to support the Conservatives, then Liberals were defeated not by their own weakness but because it was unavoidable. The Liberals often blamed anyone but themselves for their poor electoral showing, and historians tended to agree with the positivist Frederic Harrison that 'the sleek citizens, who pour forth daily from thousands and thousands of smug villas ... [have]

swung round to Conservatism' (pp. 1-2). Such an explanation was fully accepted and explored by J. P. Cornford in the early 1960s, becoming orthodoxy when class seemed to provide such a full explanation for politics both in the present and in the past. Windscheffel rejects such sociological explanations. He tells his readers that 'theoretical interpretations that privilege social explanation are becoming increasingly unattractive among historians of modern Britain', that 'social class no longer appears as the master category of the Victorian period', and that we have witnessed 'the de-classing of British history over the last twenty years' (p. 12).

Windscheffel therefore positions himself with the historiographical turn associated with the consideration of the importance of political discourses and vocabularies that had the power to draw to them voters who found resonance in party appeals. He associates himself with, and acknowledges his debt to, historians like Jon Lawrence, Miles Taylor and Duncan Tanner. Hence, the rise of Labour is not to be associated inevitably with the emergence of the working class in an urbanising and modernising society, but with the ability of Labour to represent themselves as a class party and then for this representation to tap into the forms of social identity that some wage earners held for themselves as working class. Hence, as Windscheffel would have it, electoral success was not based on class but on 'the dynamic and creative function of political parties' (p. 13), in this case through an appeal to vocabularies rather than sociologies of class. Likewise the success of the Conservatives is not to be located in a general drift of the propertied vote to the right based on material interests but in the successful appeal of the party to the identities of the middle and upper classes.

Windscheffel is not yet finished with presenting his manifesto. He considers that the study of popular politics needs to be shifted from where it has previously resided, in the north and on the left, towards the south and the right. Hence there is a 'pressing need' to 'reassert the importance of London' (p. 21) and to allow the study of popular politics to uncover the complexities of Conservatism as it has done for socialism. Windscheffel emphasises the importance of place in the construction of social identities to which parties then appealed and, in the context of metropolitan politics, foregrounds both local identities associated with boroughs as well as global identities associated with being the capital of the British empire. He also wants to emphasise the Conservatives' ability to appeal to working-class Londoners through a variety of other vocabularies based on, for example, the championing of working-class culture in its masculine forms of drinking and leisure.

The essence of Windscheffel's success in his approach is his engagement with the archival sources. It is one thing to challenge previous historiographies with new ideas, but another entirely to ensure that one's challenges have sufficient evidence to support them. In each of his chapters, Windscheffel draws on extensive research to support his arguments. Chapters two and three, which follow the extended introduction, continue to fly the flag for the book's manifesto, entitled as they are 'The Making of London Conservatism: Electoral Languages and Discourses.' They carry an account of the development of the political systems and elections for both parliamentary and municipal politics that takes into account Liberalism as well as Conservatism (the chapters are divided chronologically from 1868-84 and 1885-1906). The elections of 1886 are seen as providing the 'electoral climacteric' that transformed Conservatism into the dominant force in parliamentary elections while municipal metropolitan politics was dominated by the Progressive alliance of the Liberals with a weaker Labour component. These chapters assert the fluidity of London, in its geography and in its cultural meanings, and Windscheffel considers that 'It is only through an investigation of the political archaeology of London post-1868 that its political cultures can be uncovered' (p. 35). He then shows how in 1868 London Conservatism was weak, holding only two of London's 22 parliamentary seats, but was able to advance in subsequent elections: ten seats in 1874 and to eight in 1880, until in 1885, with the expansion of the number of London seats to 59, the Conservatives won 36 seats. Windscheffel suggests that the real electoral turning point came in 1886 when the party won 48 of the 59 seats, allowing the Liberals to hold only 11. The issue was not social class but Irish Home Rule. And 'For Conservatives, Home Rule foretold the disintegration of empire, the spoliation of property rights and the desertion of the Irish protestants to the "odious domination" of Catholicism' (p. 56). The Conservatives were able to position themselves not just as representatives of class interest but as patriotic defenders of national and imperial interests. There was some Liberal revival in 1892 and Conservatives bemoaned the lack of

impact that Home Rule for Ireland had on the election of that year, suggesting instead that the Liberals had made a successful appeal to the electorate on the basis of a programme for London. This elaborates a theme that Windscheffel carries throughout the book - the continuing importance of localised political cultures even in a period that Jose Harris has characterised, in *Private Lives, Public Spirit: A Social History of Britain, 1870-1914* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), as seeing the 'nationalisation' of politics. This is a book about London *qua* London in national politics.

In 1895 and 1900 the Conservatives, with the Liberal Unionists, reached their apotheosis, winning 51 seats in both years. Windscheffel discusses the electoral registration system and arguments about the value of each vote (Conservatives wanted to see London benefit from the reduction of the number of Irish MPs), drawing out the range of appeals the Conservatives made to the electorate in the *fin de siècle*. The Conservatives valorised masculine political and cultural virtues, rejecting temperance and opposing pauper alien immigration. There was nothing inevitable about Conservative success, instead 'Party messages - whether Conservative or Liberal - needed to be adapted, recalibrated and renegotiated in successive contests' (p. 83).

Having fully established this argument, Windscheffel relegates the importance of party organisation, pointing out that the historiography that has emphasised organisational efficiency has usually downplayed the importance of ideology to the Conservatives. Two chapters follow which suggest that 'the claims made for the effectiveness of party organization ... cannot be sustained' (p. 88). There is evidence for local disorganisation, skeletal associations and defective registers, failings which emphasise the importance of locality in politics. There was not a pattern of national development but instead an attempt at a local level to meet the challenges of a mass electorate. The redistribution of 1885, creating single-member constituencies, amplified the importance of the politics of place: candidates who failed to respond often had to bear the electoral brunt of voters who considered their districts and neighbourhoods to have an importance beyond the national in elections.

In a chapter on 'Municipal Conservatism and London Local Government,' Windscheffel draws on his perspective involving the importance of place. The chapter considers London in the imagination of politicians seeking to represent the metropolis as municipality and points out that often this entailed 'an attempt to visualise an artificial unity when no-one could be sure where the geographical boundaries of the city lay: literally, a process of inventing London' (p. 131). Reforms of local government are discussed, as well as relations between the new London County Council (LCC), the City of London Corporation and the London boroughs. Conservatives disliked the LCC not least because of the paradox that while they dominated London in the parliamentary arena, at council level, the Moderates, as the Conservatives were known, did far less well. The Progressives were able to develop a vision for London that appealed to working-class voters, including fair wages which outflanked Moderate calls for economy. Additionally, the Progressives viewed London as a whole, while Conservatives portrayed it as unstable, preferring instead organisation through boroughs. There is a further paradox here, in that the Conservatives celebrated London's role as imperial city and capital, a celebration that implied London's unity.

Such confusion and complexity emerged in the way in which the Conservatives tried to emphasise London's links to empire. Windscheffel discusses the Unionist candidacies of Henry Morton Stanley and Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownaggree, at Lambeth North and Bethnal Green North East respectively. Stanley's candidacy drew empire into metropolis through emphasis on his heroic explorations in Africa ('the man who found Livingstone and enjoyed his friendship, who opened up the Congo river', one supporter called him) (p. 168). Bhownaggree 'held intermeshing Indian and British identities, and claimed to articulate simultaneously the interests of Bethnal Green and India' (p. 177). Yet neither candidacy was straightforward. Stanley failed to win the Lambeth seat in 1892 and while he won in 1895, Liberals challenged the benefits of empire to the British working man, so Charles Trevelyan dismissed Stanley's claims by saying 'your life has been spent in Africa; your knowledge is of Africa, and not of England' (p. 175). Bhownaggree won Bethnal Green in 1895 ('I was kicked out by a black man, by a stranger from India', complained his defeated opponent, George Howell) (p. 176). Yet Bhownaggree's vision of India's relationship with Britain was challenged by Dadabhai Naoroji, the veteran Indian nationalist. There were opposing versions of empire, and the Unionist grip on imperial London was never complete.

Windscheffel does add weight to the recent historiographical controversy over the impact of empire inside Britain. He considers that 'Late-Victorian London was imbricated with the cultures of imperialism' (p. 163), using the Khaki election of 1900 to show the ubiquity of imperial and patriotic rhetoric. The Unionists emerged with 51 London seats to the Liberals' poor showing of only eight. That Liberals and Labour were keen to engage Unionist imperialism strengthens Windscheffel's claims.

After 1900, things fell apart for London Conservatism. Empire played a part in encouraging the adoption of tariff reform as a policy, embraced wholeheartedly in the London party but allowing Liberal fortunes to revive, there as elsewhere. Here again, ideas and policies mattered more than sociology, though how one viewed the 'dear loaf' of protection was shaped by material interests as well as political ideas. The number of London Unionist MPs fell from 51 in 1900 to only 19 in 1906. Recovery in January 1910 to 33 was spoilt by the loss of three seats in December, with the Liberals and Labour almost matching Unionist numbers. Yet Windscheffel's approach, seeing electoral fortunes as contingent on parties' abilities to resonate with voters' identities, means that he does not share the view of a systemic Conservative crisis in Edwardian Britain, but instead considers misfortune was due to 'short-term political choices and decisions, and as such the [Conservative] party's position was far from irrecoverable in 1914' (p. 205).

In his admirable conclusion, Windscheffel takes us once more through his methodology and applies it firmly to his conclusions. He once more rejects 'Villa Toryism' as an explanation for Conservative success and instead suggests that he has recovered 'the uncertainty, fluidity and indeterminacy of late nineteenth century politics' (p. 206). Conservative success at parliamentary level was due to the party's ability to 'forge a viable Conservative political culture' and to do so through a 'vision of London as an imperial and financial capital, and the emphasis on the inter-section of empire with daily routines of Londoners' (p. 207). For Windscheffel, the articulation of political languages was the key factor in Conservative success, and such language had to be restated repeatedly and shifted in new directions in response to an electorate which was also fluid and unstable.

This is a remarkably strong book, fully representative of the rigour of the new historiography of modern British politics. It has taken the linguistic turn yet by firm adherence to the empirical imperatives of archival research, is firmly grounded in testable evidence. It is because of this that Windscheffel is right to be confident about his determined critiques of previous historians' account of Conservative electoral performance in particular and materialist accounts of politics generally. He takes due account of identities associated with class, gender and place - factors that went far towards limiting people's adoption of allegiances detached from the social surroundings in which they lived, but shows that there was nothing deterministic about the way in which the working class, or women, or Indians in Britain, would respond to politics. This enables a fuller understanding of the Conservatives' success in London in the late 19th century, based as it was on their ability to persuade voters that they understood London's place in the nation and the empire.

The author thanks Professor Ward for his generous review and summary of the book, and does not wish to comment further

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