

Parties at War. Political Organisation in Second World War Britain

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Kevin Jefferys

Andrew Thorpe's monograph is a wide-ranging, meticulously researched study of political organisation in Britain during the Second World War, one that makes an important contribution to the historiography of the period. As Thorpe points out in his introduction, the 'high politics' of the period from 1939 to 1945 have for the most part been extensively covered by scholars, with much previously published work on events and issues such as the downfall of Neville Chamberlain, the internal workings of the Churchill coalition, and the problems of leadership and policy as experienced by the major parties. 'Low politics', by contrast, have been less well served. Although there has perhaps been rather more of substance in this area than Thorpe allows (stretching back to the pioneering work a generation ago of Angus Calder on the short-lived Common Wealth party), he is right to say – notwithstanding the exception of John Ramsden's study of wartime Conservatism – that party organisation in particular has remained a significant gap in the literature.

In seeking to plug that gap, Thorpe starts out with two main assumptions, the first more implied than openly declared. He asserts early on that despite 'many common assumptions, the history of political organisation is not an old-fashioned subject that has been repeatedly covered' (p. 8). The somewhat defensive tone here appears to reflect a concern that political history has in recent times too readily followed on behind a postmodernist agenda that concerns itself primarily with discourse, rhetoric and meaning. The nature of the evidence for party organisation – minute books, annual reports, account books and so on – does not generally lend itself to fashionable 'new' political history. And yet, as Thorpe points out, unlike 20th-century scholars, historians of the 19th century have long recognised the centrality of local sources in looking to interpret and draw important inferences for the workings of politics.

The author's second starting point is that if organisational history is to fulfil its potential, it must be multi-

layered in conception and execution. He is on strong grounds in noting that assertions about party organisation in the war years (and, it might be added, for other periods), are frequently made on the basis of flimsy evidence, or at best on the back of what can be gleaned through the records of prominent individuals or national headquarters. For a more complete picture, he argues, regional and constituency records must also be taken into account, and with this in mind Thorpe has undertaken a prodigious amount of research to underpin his study. In preparing the book he travelled to consult some 30 regional collections, and at constituency level he looked at the papers of 106 divisional or borough Labour parties, 96 Conservative associations and 26 Liberal associations. In an age when primary sources are increasingly drawn with speed and ease from the internet, the author has every reason to feel justified in claiming that his hard-earned evidence base 'is sufficiently large to allow serious historical conclusions to be drawn' (p. 9).

The structure of the book follows on from this concern with breadth. Rather than looking at political parties in isolation (another characteristic of much previous writing), Thorpe tries to see organisation in the round by making as many direct comparisons between parties as possible. The first three chapters relate mainly to leaders and officials in the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties. He begins with the 'view from the centre', assessing how the war impacted on the headquarters' operations of the respective parties. This is followed by assessment of the relationship between MPs at Westminster and the constituencies (including fresh material on prospective candidates), and an overview of the role of constituency agents, charting the changing patterns across the parties from a general reduction early in the war to a modest recovery as the end of hostilities came into view. In the remainder of the book, attention turns more directly to grassroots activists, looking at levels of party membership across the board before separate chapters are devoted to the form, nature and changing extent of activity (and inactivity) in local Tory, Labour and Liberal ranks.

In terms of his central arguments, Thorpe takes issue with the orthodoxy that party organisation (especially on the Conservative side) went into abeyance during the war years. The intensity of global conflict was such that this period might have posed a fundamental threat to the primacy of parties as a cornerstone of British democracy. Aside from the need for compromises to be made when the major parties committed themselves to Churchill's coalition administration, local parties faced enormous practical difficulties in maintaining a presence at a time of huge upheaval and disruption. This established the context for a widely-discussed 'movement away from party' in the early war years, when mainstream candidates were at the mercy of independent candidates at parliamentary by-elections; Conservatives, Labour and Liberal activists were barred from competing at these under the terms of an electoral truce. Smaller parties such as the Communists found their memberships rising sharply and new forces, notably Common Wealth, sprung up to challenge the old order.

The essence of Thorpe's case is that a major factor in the rolling back of the 'movement away from party' towards the end of the war was the residual strength of the established parties. Despite all the handicaps – and the undoubted fall in memberships during 1940–2 – attachment to party remained he claims both deeper and broader than hitherto acknowledged. Falling membership was primarily due to practical problems, not to a lessening of ideological zeal. Parties were important in serving social as well as political functions (many joined for the social opportunities on offer), but at the same time many activists were spurred on by partisan attachment, whatever the dictates of coalition. The cumulative evidence points to an important finding: 'At the grassroots level, the overwhelming majority of constituency-level bodies that had entered the war did not go out of existence. This was due to pressure from headquarters and regional-level bodies, but also to the conscious commitment of thousands of voluntary party workers up and down Britain. Their continuing hard work with the minutiae of grassroots politics was at the core of the survival of the three parties' (p. 283).

In terms of the part played by organisational factors in Attlee's electoral landslide of 1945, Thorpe argues that Labour had a certain edge not because – as Conservatives came to believe – it had superior numbers on the home front while Tory activists were mostly away on war duty, but rather because its more ritualised procedures prompted greater continuity, as shown by persistence in chasing up membership fees. Labour was also spurred to greater activity by the heightened threat it felt in some areas to its core support from the Communists or from Common Wealth. While the 'myth' of Labour exploiting wartime circumstances to unfairly seize the advantage was one that Conservatives rallied behind, Thorpe is reluctant to ascribe too

much importance to organisation in explaining the outcome of the 1945 election. He restricts himself to saying that organisation was not a primary factor, but that ‘at constituency level, Labour was closer to its “normal” state than were the Conservatives’ (p. 283).

In broad terms, the conclusions of *Parties at War* are beyond dispute. What the author calls his ‘detailed empirical engagement’ with the sources shows that predictions about the demise of party have too often ignored the extent to which local organisations were ‘rooted in the political soil of twentieth-century Britain’ (p.288). This point is confirmed by the speed with which – uniquely in the modern period – the Conservative and Labour parties expanded rapidly at the same time after 1945, both building from their wartime base to reach a peak of membership by the early 1950s. Although it’s difficult to be precise with the figures, the proportion of people belonging to a political party by 1950 was about double that of the inter-war period. Yet in looking to put parties back in their rightful place as the bedrock of democracy, there is a danger of exaggerating just how deep rooted they were within British society as a whole. The Attlee years marked the closest Labour ever came to being a mass movement, but even at its pinnacle it represented only a small fraction of the party’s electorate: a membership total around the million mark in 1951 amounted to only six per cent of those who voted Labour at the general election in that year. Even in flourishing local parties, of whatever persuasion, only a minority of members were consistently active. In spite of impressive growth, parties still had glaring weaknesses – the size and effectiveness of constituency Labour parties, for example, varied enormously between and within regions and localities – and much of the electorate at large remained disengaged from political concerns. Only about one in ten adults during the 1940s expressed a serious interest in politics, and substantial numbers – up to half the population – admitted to having no interest at all. Andrew Thorpe’s work definitively establishes that parties emerged stronger, not weaker, from the war years, but in the midst of widespread apathy and indifference, they were not part of a dynamic or flourishing political culture.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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