Speaking for the people

Party, language and popular politics in England, 1867–1914

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Introduction

I

Like many histories this is a work shaped in large measure by the idiosyncrasies of its author. Unlike many histories it makes no attempt to pass off a necessarily personal perspective as a definitive or comprehensive study of its subject. The account which follows of English popular politics in the half century before the First World War is partial, not simply because the subject is so vast and multifaceted that no 'final' word would be possible, but because it has been written by a 'situated author'. My efforts to make sense of the stories I have been told about my own past, and about the lives of my parents and grandparents, have necessarily influenced the ways in which I have thought about the past as a professional historian – so too have the stories I have told myself to give shape and meaning to my experiences. Rather than deny this interaction between making the self and making history I wish to celebrate it. Historical inquiry should emerge out of critical engagement with the 'myths we live by', as much as with historiographical debate.[1]

Part I, 'Rethinking popular politics', maps out the historiographical and methodological location of the present study in fairly conventional terms; this introduction offers a more personal chart of the same terrain. Since much of part I is concerned with criticising historical accounts of class and 'class politics', I should perhaps begin by emphasising that the last thing I wish to suggest is that perceptions of class and class difference have had no impact on the development of English popular politics. If years spent being bussed across Bristol to enjoy the benefits of a grammar school education did not teach me both the importance, and the ambiguities, of class identity, then growing up in a staunchly Tory working-class home certainly did. Rejecting my parents' politics from an early age, I was

[1] Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds.), *The myths we live by* (London, 1990). For attempts to rethink objectivity in the light of the postmodernist critique of universal rationality and meaning, see Wolfgang Natter, Theodore Schatzki and John Paul Jones (eds.), *Objectivity and its other* (New York, 1995), intelligently reviewed by Mark Bevir in *History and Theory*, 35 (1996), pp. 391–401.

none the less conscious that these politics had played their part in shaping my own identity. At the same time, in trying to understand the origins, the rationale, and above all the tensions of my parents' Toryism, I became suspicious of superficial assumptions about the relationship between social class and politics. This suspicion intensified when I later discovered that when I was born, in 1961, my father had been as staunchly, dogmatically Labour as he now was Tory. That he had worked for the Co-op, that he had remained unmoved by post-war affluence, and that he still cherished memories of Cripps and Stockwood as champions of east Bristol's poor in the 1930s. To this day I cannot fully explain his shift of allegiance – perhaps he cannot either – but I doubt whether his attitudes have changed greatly since the early 1960s. Those attitudes are no more naturally Tory than Labour – yet this shift of allegiance occurred, and has never been reversed.

My mother's politics, though worn more lightly, have been more constant. Like Carolyn Steedman's mother in *Landscape for a good woman*, her aspirations and her dreams found no echo in the ethos of post-war Labour politics.[2] She hankered, not for comfort or 'equality of opportunity', but for glamour and for luxury – for more than a celluloid glimpse of the delights of Hollywood or 'High society'. But she lived in the knowledge, not only that her dreams were 'mere' fancies, but that it was 'wrong' to want what she could not have. Here was a Conservatism that was easier to understand, shaped as it was by a reaction against Labour's concerns with production and *collective* consumption, but still it had no history. My parents had both grown up in working-class and strongly Labour households in east Bristol. Why, I asked myself, had they subsequently turned their backs on Labour – my mother as soon as she could vote in 1950, my father at some point in the early 1960s? It was this puzzle which first encouraged me to embark on a PhD – my project, I felt sure, must be to understand the culture of Labour politics my parents had grown up within during the 1930s. My father remembered joining a children's march through the streets of St George at the 1931 election – he was only four, but his support for Cripps still earnt him a bag of sweets. He also remembered local Labour councillors who could always be relied upon for advice or help in times of adversity. From such accounts it seemed as though Labour was deeply enmeshed in people's daily life, and that its leaders really did speak (as they claimed) for the local community. But was this simply a romantic reconstruction of the past, perhaps even a retelling of Labour's own myths about itself in east Bristol? After all, Cripps had survived by less than 500 votes in 1931.

[2] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a good woman: a story of two lives* (London, 1986).

As is the way with PhDs, especially ones begun before government funding bodies focused their attention on swift completion rates, my research eventually veered away, not only from Cripps and east Bristol, but from the whole problem of understanding partisanship between the wars. The more I studied inter-war party politics, the more I became convinced of the need to rethink our understanding of the forces which had shaped party politics in the period between the introduction of (male) household suffrage in 1867, and the First World War. Not only had this period seen the beginnings of independent Labour politics, but it was also said to have witnessed the 'triumph of party' – and with it the emergence of more national, programmatic and truly 'modern' politics. I had serious doubts about our historical understanding of both phenomena. But even though this engagement with the historiography of English popular politics altered the focus of my study, it did not lead me to abandon many questions originally formulated to decode the Labour culture my parents must have known during the 1930s. I still wanted to know how politicians had understood the claim to *represent*, and to analyse the different ways they had gone about trying to articulate that claim. I still wanted to explore the relationship between popular understandings of class and the languages of class articulated by political parties. And I still wanted to explore the relationship between local identities and partisanship. What factors might shape the emergence of a strong sense of communal identity, and under what circumstances might the idea of 'community' or 'locality' take a decidedly partisan form? Did party discourse conjure up the 'politics of place', or were the physical and demographic characteristics of a district of primary importance to their success?[3]

No less than my interest in class, this interest in locality has strong personal roots. In part this fascination has doubtless been shaped by the romantic perspective of the forced exile – it is now nearly twenty years since I left Bristol. But my interest in the 'politics of place' has also been shaped by involvement in party politics since my 'exile'. Living in the Romsey district of Cambridge during the 1980s I was intrigued to find that political activism gave me access to a version of 'community' rooted not in blood and dialect (my cherished symbols of Bristolian identity), but in party. Labour politicians had represented Romsey continuously since 1919 (but for a brief hiccup at a by-election in 1982 when the SDP

[3] For explorations of this theme, see Marie Dickie, 'Town patriotism in Northampton, 1918–1939: an invented tradition?', *Midland History*, 17 (1992), pp. 109–17; David Gilbert, 'Community and municipalism: collective identity in late-Victorian and Edwardian mining towns', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17 (1991), pp. 257–70, and 'Imagined communities and mining communities', *Labour History Review*, 60, 2 (1995), pp. 47–55. Also David Cannadine, 'The transformation of civic ritual in modern Britain: the Colchester oyster feast', *Past and Present*, 94 (1982), pp. 107–30.

band-wagon rolled into the ward), and for generations the district had been affectionately known as 'Red Romsey'. Myths of community and myths of party appeared inter-twined. By the late 1980s only one Labour councillor was a native of the ward, and he no longer lived there. But this mattered little. Labour's claim to represent the community rested not on birth-rights but on historical tradition and on its activists' knowledge of the ward and its problems (Labour's three 'outsider' councillors all lived in the ward). The party, and its local leaders, thus had every incentive to perpetuate the myth of 'Red Romsey', though by the 1980s it had clearly worn very thin. Nothing could disguise the low turnouts recorded in the ward, nor the alarming fluctuations in the Labour vote from year to year. Rapid turnover of population weakened both party resources, and the relevance of any appeal to identification with 'Red Romsey'. Apart from in a few core streets, few people had any sense that they even lived in a place called 'Romsey', whilst others who did live in 'historic' Romsey had recently been shunted into an adjacent, highly marginal ward in a cunning piece of gerrymandering which had cut across the 'politics of place' (it was rumoured that these voters proved much more reluctant to turn out in their new ward).

But even if the myth of 'Red Romsey' had not been unravelling in the 1980s, it was clear to me that at its centre lay one of the great tensions of party politics. The Romsey Labour party wished to present itself as the embodiment of an active, radical and cohesive local community ('Red Romsey'), but it also longed for such a community to exist outside the narrow, and generally rather alienating, confines of formal party structures. The problem was that by claiming to be the authentic 'voice of Romsey', the party not only tended to deny the legitimacy (or 'representativeness') of other voices, but it actively discouraged their articulation. Political influence and power may have been sought for the best of motives – to bring material improvements to the lives of people who lacked influence and power – but it was difficult to escape the conclusion that Labour's project of improving the lives of others (however benign in its intentions) was itself disempowering.

Moving to Liverpool in the early 1990s did nothing to challenge my sense of the tensions at the heart of party. It did, however, confirm my conviction that whilst these tensions might have a common source in the ambiguous nature of the claim 'to represent', the problems of party were not timeless and immutable. The relationship between politicians and those they claim to represent must always be studied within the context of time and place. Liverpool was not Cambridge; the late twentieth century is not Edwardian England. It did not take me long to realize that whilst political myths about 'community' were no less important in Liverpool

than in Romsey, these myths could not easily accommodate a southern, and by now decidedly middle-class, white male. And hence the paradox that whilst I now lived on a street that was more genuinely communal and inclusive than any I had known in Cambridge – so much so that it is almost a parody of the romanticised view of community – I none the less felt cut off from the conceptions of 'community' embedded in *political* mythology. Nor, it seemed to me, could party provide a point of access to this mythology (as it had in Romsey), since, on my reading at least, party appeared a largely peripheral force – its power to forge new myths blunted by extreme instrumentalism thanks to the jobbery and clientism practised by all parties for generations.

These, then, are the personal influences which I feel have done most to shape the present study. I am conscious that in discussing them in this manner I lay myself open to many charges: that I wish to close down the scope for alternative readings of my text, that I naively believe one can know one's 'true' self, or that I have no interest in historical 'truth' (ie. in offering the most convincing interpretation of the past which can be constructed from available sources). Naturally I would refute such charges, but not more strongly than I would refute the suggestion that my reading of late Victorian and Edwardian popular politics is somehow 'definitive' – that it is, in effect, the only interpretation of the subject possible. Such a claim would be at least as imperious as the politician's claim to represent a community.

II

We move now from the confessional to the 'user guide', since I would like (briefly) to explain the structure of the present volume, mindful that in these hard-pressed times it is becoming increasingly rare for a monograph to be read from cover to cover. Part I, as suggested, contains much that one might normally expect to find in a lengthy introduction. Reviewers in a hurry to find rash statements about the underlying assumptions of the book may choose to skip chapters 1 and 2 (which examine the problems inherent in arguments about, respectively, the 'rise of class politics', and the 'homogenisation' of working-class life), and move straight to chapter 3. Besides offering a critical assessment of recent trends in the history of nineteenth-century popular politics, this chapter ends by explaining at some length the approach to popular politics which has informed the present study. Particular attention is given to interrogating the ambiguities at the heart of the claim to 'represent' – the claim, that is, to 'speak for the people'.

Part II uses a case-study of popular politics in Wolverhampton to

explore the ambiguities and tensions of party politics at greater length. The intention here is not to argue for the 'typicality' of Wolverhampton, but rather to use the in-depth local study to explore the dynamics of urban popular politics in a manner deeper and more contextualised than is possible through a general survey of many cases. The latter approach may appear more definitive, but in truth it must rely either on the questions pursued by other researchers, or on whistle-stop tours of the country's archives. There is nothing wrong with this, of course – I rely on such strategies myself in part III which looks at party politics on a national scale – but it does seem unfortunate that historical fashion has turned so resolutely against the local study since the 1970s. In part, this probably reflects little more than the commercial realities of academic publishing (after all, regional and local history journals continue to flourish, apparently oblivious of 'fashion'). But there are other reasons. On the one hand there is the ever-present danger of slipping into 'mere antiquarianism', on the other the trap of drawing unsustainable conclusions from the particular to the universal. In recent years, however, there has been a significant revival of interest in the ways in which locality has helped shape political cultures and party allegiance.[4] And whilst this revival has as yet spawned few detailed case studies of popular politics, it has highlighted the need for extensive new research into the 'politics of locality' which recognises, rather than disguises, the peculiarities of place.[5]

This is the approach adopted in the case-study of Wolverhampton presented here. The intention is to examine the shifting fortunes of party within a framework which is sensitive both to local social, economic and cultural context, and to the impact of developments at the national level. Local politics are seen not as the antithesis of Westminster politics, but as a specific, and electorally very important, facet of the 'party game'. This case study is therefore able to explore the vital question of how national politics were refracted through local political cultures and traditions, and how this process of mediation helped to shape patterns of allegiance within a constituency. In chapter 4 attention is focused on the long period of Liberal hegemony in Wolverhampton between 1832 and 1885. In Wolverhampton, it is argued, popular liberalism developed in spite of, rather than because of, the actions of the local Liberal leaders, whose

[4] See especially John Agnew, *Place and politics: the geographical mediation of state and society* (Boston, Mass., 1987); Mike Savage, 'Political alignments in modern Britain: do localities matter?', *Political Geography Quarterly*, 6 (1987), pp. 53–76, and 'Urban history and social class: two paradigms', *Urban History*, 20 (1993), pp. 61–77; Duncan Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990).

[5] A notable exception is Michael Savage, *The dynamics of working-class politics: the labour movement in Preston, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987).

greatest concern appeared to be to guard their oligarchic control of the local party. Chapter 5, examines the rise of popular Toryism in Wolverhampton in the later nineteenth century, demonstrating the considerable appeal of the party's claim to defend male leisure culture from the interference of nonconformist Liberalism. This chapter also shows how the rise of popular Toryism determined both the context and the tenor of early Labour politics in Wolverhampton. Concluding this section, chapter 6 focuses in detail on pre-war Labour politics, and in particular on the tensions inherent in the party's claim to represent a heterogeneous social constituency. It is shown both that few Labour activists lived in the older, more solidly working-class parts of the town, and that the politics they embraced tended to marginalise both women and the urban poor – two constituencies vital for the party's long-term political success.

In part III, the focus shifts from local to national, but still the central concern is to explore the problems of party. Each chapter can be read as a free-standing essay on an aspect of party before 1914, but taken together they are intended to show how problematising the role of party can provide new insights into the shifting currents of popular politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 7 offers a sustained critique of the idea of the 'triumph of party' in the years between the Second Reform Act and the First World War. In fact, it is suggested, the power of party remained strictly circumscribed, not least because politicians themselves continued to show a surprising degree of tolerance towards robust forms of popular politics such as the disruption of political meetings or the symbolic 'conquest' of public space. Popular politics remained far from 'tamed' before 1914, a point which perhaps helps to explain why so many politicians remained fearful about the implications of mass democracy. Chapter 8 looks in detail at the problems facing the Liberal party in the twenty years between the Home Rule split of 1886 and the landslide victory of 1906. The discussion is intended to complement my analysis of Tory hegemony during the same period published elsewhere.[6] It focuses both on dissension within the Liberal coalition, and on the specific problems faced by party propagandists searching for a popular voice with which to counter the strident appeals of Tory populism, and its critique of their party's 'nonconformist agenda'. It is argued that the nadir in Liberal electoral fortunes came in 1895, rather than in 1886 or even 1900, and that reactions to this defeat, particularly within the labour movement, did much to shape the subsequent development of

[6] See Jon Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 629–52.

English popular politics. Liberalism was increasingly perceived as a spent force, both electorally and ideologically, but with the workers apparently in thrall to Toryism and jingoism, few within the Labour movement felt confident about the prospects for popular politics. Hence the growing conviction of many socialists that social reform must take precedence over political reform – not because economic equality was more important than political equality, but because such reforms were seen as the only means of creating a rational democracy. The final chapter, which focuses specifically on Labour politics, explores these themes in greater depth. It examines the importance of the 'politics of place' to the party's faltering first steps, suggesting that Labour found it very difficult to develop a natural, 'organic' relationship with its putative constituency. It also charts the rapid decline of anti-party traditions within Labour politics before 1914, and concludes by offering a critical reading of Labour autobiography and popular biography. The aim here is to identify the myths which helped to shape the early Labour party, in order to shed new light on how Labour activists perceived their mission to 'speak for the people' (and how they legitimated that mission in the face of frequent popular rejection).