

towards land value taxation, land nationalisation, and the centralised planning of agriculture. The cogent analysis ranges from the age of Keir Hardie to that of Hugh Gaitskell. Finally, in a section entitled 'Epilogue', another acknowledged expert in this area, F. M. L. Thompson, turns his sights on 'the strange death' of the land question in England after World War I when the issues previously considered significant became 'politically irrelevant and electorally

ineffective', and closely bound up with the decline of the Liberal Party (p. 260). Subsequently, during the inter-war period, the impact of successive financial and economic crises, mass unemployment and social deprivation all combined to dwarf the importance of the land question.

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Dissent over the airwaves

Adrian Johns, *Death of a Pirate: British Radio and the Making of the Information Age* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2010).

Reviewed by William Wallace

STUDENTS OF Liberal history will not turn unprompted to this wonderfully entertaining book, written by a British-born professor of history at the University of Chicago. Yet it provides a fascinating insight into British political and intellectual culture between the 1930s and 1960s, and into the changing perspectives of Liberals and Social Democrats in the debate over the government monopoly over broadcasting and the control of culture and information that this monopoly implied. This is intellectual history from an unusual angle, with Beveridge and Hayek appearing on opposite sides. But the central character is a man who was at the same time a vice-president of the Liberal Party and the founder of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA): Oliver Smedley. Walk-on parts in the story include S. W. Alexander, Screaming Lord Sutch, the young Jeremy Thorpe, Richard Hoggart, Tony Blackburn (who started as a DJ on a pirate radio station in which Smedley had an indirect interest), and the Kray twins. But Smedley – whom older Liberals may remember as one of the leading protagonists in the chaotic 1958 Assembly – is the central figure.

The book opens with the incident in June 1966 that catapulted the struggle over pirate radio onto the front pages, and galvanised the

government into acting to control it. Smedley shot one of his collaborators in pirate radio, at close range, when he stormed uninvited into Smedley's home. They were in dispute over the ownership of a radio station set up in an abandoned World War II fort in the Thames estuary. Smedley was charged with manslaughter, but after the court had heard about the extra-legal activities of pirate radio and the threats that had accompanied competition for access to transmitters and advertisers – and the popular press had splashed the story across its pages – he was acquitted. The Labour government, which had until then hesitated to tackle the pirates who were catering to popular tastes that the BBC considered beneath its mission to improve and educate, responded by legislating to control offshore radio, but also by pressing the BBC to pay more attention to what young people wanted to hear. Radio One was launched in September 1967. The majority of its DJs – including Tony Blackburn, John Peel, Kenny Everett and Mike Raven (who was Smedley's cousin) – had started out broadcasting pop music from pirate stations. Although offshore radio was now outlawed, popular culture had successfully invaded official culture; the intellectual battle had been won.

Liberal historians will be most interested in chapters 2–4, which

trace the history of the BBC – which became the model for the 'public corporation', the national monopoly promoting the public interest – and the struggle within the postwar Liberal Party concerning resistance to the extension of state power over the economy, welfare, information and culture. Keynes, as well as Beveridge, was a supporter of the public corporation, and of the use of public institutions to educate and improve popular taste. Hayek, Arnold Plant, Lionel Robbins, Karl Popper, and other opponents of Beveridge within the London School of Economics, saw these as similar to the state corporations of Fascism, building a 'servile state'. The moral certainty of the BBC, which in the late 1930s offered only religious programmes and classical music on Sundays, was authoritarian; it forced independently minded people who owned good radio receivers to tune into Radio Luxemburg for entertainment.

The post-1945 Liberal Party was a party of dissenters and libertarians, opposed to state control. Smedley, a successful businessman with an impressive war record, threw himself into party activity: twice a parliamentary candidate, on the executive from 1953, a



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vice-president from 1956. But his uncompromising espousal of unilateral free trade, bitterly opposing the proposal that Britain should join the European Economic Community, provoked confrontation at the 1958 Assembly, and he moved away to found the Keep Britain Out campaign. The last party conference he attended was the first I went to, at Edinburgh in the spring of 1962; but he was by then a fringe figure. Meanwhile, the IEA (substantially funded from the fortune that Antony Fisher had made from introducing battery hens into the UK) had published a series of pamphlets attacking state monopoly in broadcasting. Ideological and business interests combined to draw Smedley into pirate radio as the advent of transistor radios freed listeners from dependence on BBC transmissions; he was involved at

different times with Radio City, Radio Caroline, and other shorter-lived stations.

Liberal Democrats today defend the BBC against the dominance of commercial interests in broadcasting. Fifty years ago, however, the BBC represented the 'nanny state' in all its glory, excluding popular culture from its airwaves – in spite of the explosion of popular music in the early 1960s. As the Labour government moved to ban pirate radio, a new generation of Young Liberals launched the 'Save Pop Radio Campaign', in autumn 1966. They announced their campaign a week after Smedley's acquittal.

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before World War I. Rather, McKibbin sees Edwardian politics as in a state of delicate equipoise, with an air of impermanence. This was capable of being disturbed by a what he terms 'structure' and 'contingency', the interplay of events and deeper social forces that is perhaps the key theme of this book.

In 1914, therefore, the Liberal Party may not have been already doomed, but its position in British politics was fragile: it risked offending middle-class voters through its welfare and social reforms without doing quite enough to win the adherence of working-class voters. The Liberals were dependent for continued electoral success on the informal Progressive Alliance with Labour. But Labour resented their junior role in the partnership, and were keen to escape from the Liberals' shadow. World War I provided the opportunity. It split both parties, but the Liberals more so, while Labour's fundamental sense of purpose as the party of the trade union movement held it together. As McKibbin points out, however, much of the discussion about Labour's rise and the Liberals' fall is guesswork.

What is clear, however, is that once Labour had overtaken the Liberals they were unlikely to offer them a hand up. McKibbin is far from complimentary about the Labour Party during the 1920s, arguing that it failed to adopt a clear political strategy that would give it a broad-enough basis of support to beat the Conservatives. As a result, in the 1929 general election, the Liberals appealed for votes on the basis of Lloyd George's semi-Keynesian 'We can conquer unemployment' policy. But the unemployed voted Labour, while Liberals gained votes from disgruntled Conservatives who didn't believe in Lloyd George's policy, but who defected in sufficient numbers to leave Labour as the largest party. Thus, as McKibbin writes:

The 1929 election brought into office a party which owed its victory largely to the intervention of another party which fought the election on a programme neither the majority of its voters nor its MPs believed in.

The author sees the crisis of 1931 as bringing the party system back into

Strange death?

Ross McKibbin, *Parties and People 1914–1951* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

Reviewed by Iain Sharpe

PROFESSOR MCKIBBIN'S work will be best known to *Journal of Liberal History* readers for his contributions to the 'Strange Death of Liberal England' debate, particularly through his 1974 book *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–24*. McKibbin argued that the growth of class politics, rather than World War I, was the main explanation for the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberal Party. Those

who have not followed his work since then may be surprised to find that his views have evolved, as he states on the first page of *Parties and People*: 'I no longer see the Edwardian system as already disintegrating.' This does not mean that he has been converted to the optimistic assessment of the Liberal Party, associated with historians such as P. F. Clarke and Trevor Wilson, that the party was in robust health