'Czar'-like heavy-handed coercion, a process well described by Murphy, conflict, it seems, was inevitable. Establishing responsibility for the deleterious consequences of incoherent British government in Ireland for the longer-term future of the Anglo-Irish Union could well have been explored further in the book. The political use which Gladstone made of Spencer, finally using his loyalty to ensure his support for home rule, could have been more critically assessed. There is little doubt, however, of the outcome. Murphy convincingly argues that this conflict weakened the case for continued union. And that this also contributed to the Home Rule Crises after 1885 and the subsequent decline of the Liberal Party as Britain's dominant electoral force.

This insight is supported by similarities in other periods. The difficult situation faced by Spencer in advocating his own policy agenda, which he believed to be the right course of action in Ireland, whilst following instructions from London, was also noted as early as 1859 by De Grey, another activist viceroy who clashed with his political superiors in London:

> Every act, every decision, every thought or suggestion must be submitted to the government at home, who have to justify everything; the natural consequence of which is that he can hardly take the most insignificant step or sanction the most inferior appointment without previous communication. This is all natural, all right, and all inevitable; but the Lord Lieutenant becomes a mere cipher![1]

Perhaps, in the 1880s, Gladstone actually needed to appoint a cipher willing to take his orders without conscientious dispute. However, a 'Czar' apparently intent on running his own repressive agenda could well have been very convenient for Gladstone. Certainly, the political history of Britain and Ireland could have looked very different if he had taken a different course.

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1 Transcript of 'Memoirs of the Earl de Grey' [1859] (CRT/190/45/2) Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Sp. 64.

Liberals and Labour

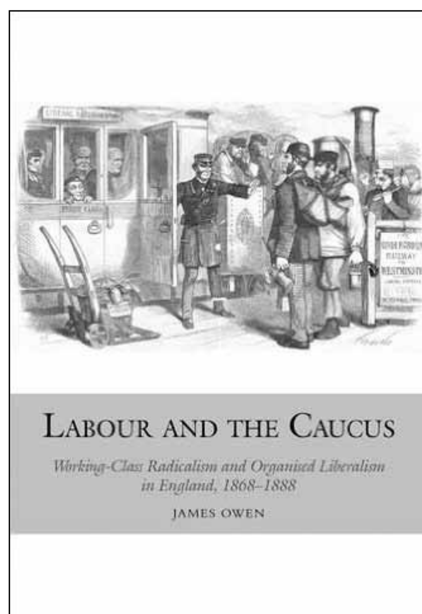
James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus: Working-Class Radicalism and Organised Liberalism in England, 1868–1888* (Liverpool University Press, 2014)

Review by **William C. Lubenow**

Too frequently the 'labour movement' and 'organised liberalism' (the caucus) are treated as two separate but unified concepts. Dr Owen, in his excellent and stimulating examination of the prehistory of the Labour party between 1868 and 1888, deconstructs these concepts by making two points. Firstly, he exposes the flexible pragmatism of labour activists in working, when and where it suited their purposes, with organised Liberalism. Secondly, he discusses the rhetorical value of 'the caucus.' The concept was a shifting one: labour activists could use it to attack establishment Liberalism when they felt it stood in the way of their political ambitions; establishment Liberals could use it as a device to defend themselves against labour insurrectionists. This study, therefore, modifies, in interesting ways, the 'continuity thesis': that popular radicalism had an ongoing tradition through the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth-century. Owen, in contrast, reveals the cleavages within working-class radicalism and official Liberalism. The point he stresses throughout is that 'place' made a difference: locality, but also the nature of the electoral environment (whether the contests were parliamentary or municipal), made a difference in the ways potential labour candidates conducted themselves in their relationship with organised Liberalism. The upshot was that neither the 'labour movement' nor 'official Liberalism' were fixed and rigid categories organising political experience.

While never taking on board the error that there is no reality independent of language, Owen gives proper weight to use of language as labour activists and members of the caucus addressed each other in their contests for political position. Yet he always engages in this analysis of the connections between the linguistic and the political and cultural environments of party organisations and elections in various places both urban and rural. He carefully shackles the more freebooting elements of what has been called the 'linguistic turn' by scrupulous attention to rigorous methods. To carry out this task Owen has consulted widely and deeply in the unpublished manuscripts and correspondence of the time: the John Burns papers, the George Howell papers, the Labour Representation League papers, the H. J Wilson papers; the national and local newspapers; the periodical literature of the time; the published autobiographies of leading and minor figures; and the extensive scholarly literature on the labour movement and Liberalism. Owen's sturdy interrogation of these materials as well as his penchant for examining the local details of political action yields a rich trove of scholarly insights into a perennial historical problem: the ways in which novelty can disrupt and the ways robust agencies can accommodate change, how there can be differences and yet there can be ongoing persistence.

The Second Reform Act introduced a period of what might be called an age of mass politics. It offered challenges and opportunities to the two major parties of state. Both Gladstone and Salisbury embarked upon a series of strategies converting British parliamentary sovereignty to popular sovereignty. It also offered the opportunity for the likes of Joseph Chamberlain to destroy three perfectly good political parties, the Liberal party over home rule and the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties over tariff reform. It also offered new opportunities (and challenges) to nascent radical and socialist groupings. In the 1880s three socialist organisations – the Social-Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, and the Fabian Society – emerged. But these bodies neither coordinated with each other nor were they internally united on organisational policy. Some members of these groups preferred a parliamentary policy, others an industrial policy. H. M. Hyndman determined to press the SDF into a parliamentary strategy; William Morris and others resigned, regarding this policy as mere political opportunism. Within the Fabian Society Sidney Webb favoured the strategy of permeating official Liberalism, drawing it into socialism. Bernard Shaw, however, regarded the official Liberals as a 'forest of dead trees.' When John Burns, regarded as the first socialist to enter a parliamentary contest,



contested the newly created constituency of Nottingham West, he did so not as a socialist representing the SDF but rather as someone firmly established in the radical tradition. He identified himself with Chamberlain, not Hyndman.

An examination of local politics, assessing the language socialist activists used, illustrates the way socialist activists were prepared to modify their previously published positions. Further, that the local political environment shaped the ways activists engaged both each other and official Liberalism. Finally, it was not so much the 'non-revolutionary' character of the British workers which prevented their conversion from Liberalism to more assertive organisations. Rather, it was the close relations between official Liberalism, the miners, their unions, and especially Nonconformity which 'which created a formidable barrier that the socialists could not penetrate.' (185) This was not a case of working-class 'conservativism.' The relations between local Liberalism and socialist activists was an assertion of equality, not deference. Attention to the strained relationship between working-class activism, in its various forms, and the Liberal caucus, in its various parliamentary and urban and rural forms, show how the various questions of membership in various groups and their programmes were negotiated in the dynamic formation of political identities.

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Cornwall: culture, character and campaigns

John Ault, *Liberal Democrats in Cornwall – Culture, Character or Campaigns?* (Create Space, 2015)
Review by **Mark Pack**

An expanded version of the author's PhD thesis, John Ault's *Liberal Democrats in Cornwall* is a valuable addition to the relatively sparse number of detailed local histories of the Liberal Democrats. Given its academic roots, it is also much more rigorous in its research and sourcing than other local histories such as *A Flagship Borough: 25 Years of a Liberal Democrat Sutton Council, Southport Liberal Association: The first 100 years* or *The Liberals in Hampshire*. Moreover, by looking at a concentrated geographic area, yet one that is larger than a single local party, John Ault is able to provide rather more perspective on the questions of why Liberal Democrats prospered – at least until the 2015 general election – in the areas under examination.

As the title suggests, he tries out the three theories, culture, character and campaigns to explain why Cornwall remained a two-party Conservative–Liberal (Democrat) political system even when Labour was becoming one of the two main parties elsewhere. Cornwall was an area where the old Liberal Party survived better than in most places, and was then also the site of major success under the Lib Dems, including a major breakthrough in 1997 and culminating in the party winning all of the county's parliamentary seats in 2005.

In explaining the start of that run of success, the gain of North Cornwall in 1992 – one of only four gains for the party in that year's general election – is assigned particular significance as setting an example to other Cornish seats, though this does prompt the question of why gains in other parts of the country did not result in similar geographic concentrations of success. The answer in part is scattered throughout the book in the various references to Labour's failure in the early and mid twentieth century to establish itself firmly in Cornwall, leaving a much wider space in the political environment for the Liberal Party than elsewhere in the country.

More controversially, Ault suggests that the 1997 successes flowed from a strategic choice by the party: '[The Lib Dem] period of greatest electoral success has been since they abandoned equidistance in the mid-1990s. So, [the party's usual] search for an independent identity, however logical, may have been what was actually holding the party back.'

Conversely, a sense of a distinctive political culture in Cornwall is, Ault concludes, not much of a factor in explaining the Liberal Democrat successes. Feelings of geographic distance and separateness helped foster an anti-establishment mood which benefited a challenger political party, especially as, unlike in Wales or Scotland, it did not come with a nationalistic tinge which benefited a nationalist party. (The Cornish nationalists have never had anything close to the electoral success of the Welsh and Scottish nationalists.) But that was only a relatively small factor.

The character of key Liberal (Democrat) campaigners comes through as being more important, with Ault drawing many pen portraits of many of the party's MPs from the region, showing how in their many different personal ways they were nearly all something out of the ordinary. Moreover, there seems to have been something about Cornwall – perhaps its rural nature – which allowed such personal flair to flourish and gain political reward. It also, Ault suggests, was the sort of territory in which the Liberal and then Liberal Democrat emphasis on local issues could best flourish.

This seems to run slightly counter to the culture point and is a tension left mostly unexplored in Ault's book: is what is significant about Cornwall not its political culture directly, but rather that it is a culture which lets other factors be significant in ways that do not play out elsewhere? There is some evidence in support of this view in Ault's constituency