

History, heritage and tradition in contemporary British politics

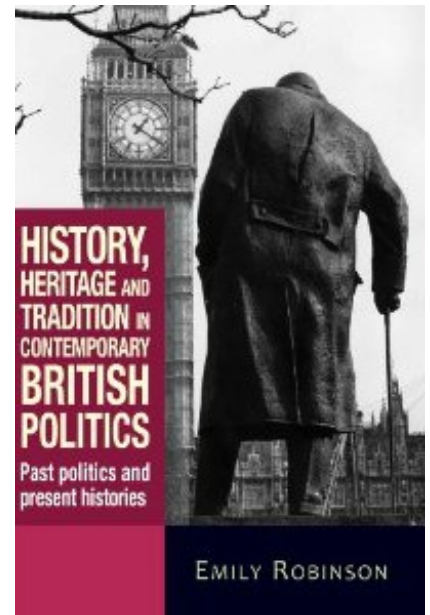
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*This book explores the use of the past in modern British politics. It examines party political perspectives on British history and the historical process, and also looks at the ways in which memory is instituted within the parties in practice, through archives, written histories and commemorations. **Krista Cowman** finds it to be of much interest.*



History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories. Emily Robinson. Manchester University Press. June 2012.

You might think that politicians engage with history at their peril. From the furore surrounding Nicolas Sarkozy's attempts to appropriate the memory of young Communist resistance martyr Guy Môquet for his centre-right agenda in 2007 to Margaret Thatcher's praise of 'Victorian values', historical figures and trends can sit uncomfortably on the lips of contemporary leaders, especially when it appears that the intention is to draw reflected glory by aligning the speaker with someone who is hardly in the position to argue back, or when the era evoked turns out to have been somewhat less than perfect.



Yet despite this, politics and history remain deeply entwined. Indeed, as Emily Robinson's new book demonstrates, their interconnection goes way beyond a penchant for placing references to historical figures into keynote speeches. Elected politicians and political activists have turned to politics, most obviously in order to legitimise contemporary actions by claiming analogies or drawing precedents, but for a range of more complex reasons. Robinson begins by explaining how, in the case of British parties between 1979 and 2010, an interest in history in a broad sense was never the sole preserve of left or right. Political traditions linking to a broader historical process that seem to lend themselves to one or other side of the left/right divide are not so easy to divide. Categories such as 'conservative' and 'progressive', with their implications of looking to the past or the future, no longer divide neatly along party lines.

Robinson dates this temporal repositioning to the first Thatcher government, which merged “aggressive modernity and...nostalgia” (p. 42) in an attempt to mould modernity to its own agenda. Robinson argues that such shifts in thinking about the past were not unique to the Conservative Party; policy debates in the Labour Party frequently retreated into the language of ‘traditionalists’ versus ‘modernisers’. The results of this could be unpredictable, as her case studies show. Very public contests over who could legitimately lay claim to the legacy of groups such as the Levellers, traditionally linked to the left, saw contributors arguing different interpretations on each side, with Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan laying claim to a Roundhead tradition of dissent for his party in the face of more predictable defenders such as Billy Bragg.

One of the book’s strengths is in the detail it provides about the various methodologies through which political parties create their own histories. Looking at the three main parties, Liberal, Labour and Conservative, it reveals a number of similarities. Each party has its own archive, albeit one which replicates certain party stereotypes. The Labour Party archive, for example, is attached to the People’s History Museum, whilst Conservative Party papers are to be found in the Bodleian Library, a site chosen in part as befitting their importance as “a collection of national interest” (p. 50). Interestingly, given the Labour Party’s own tradition as a party concerned with its own history (it began to chronicle its own key events and personalities very early on through projects such as Herbert Tracy’s edited *Book of the Labour Party* in 1925), Robinson claims that is now less linked to its own archive than the Conservative Party, which is managed by a Trust whose Secretary is “a senior member of party staff” (p. 50). Other means of collecting and preserving party history are also described. These range from official party history groups such as the Liberal Democrat History Group to the grass-roots efforts of party activists, often concentrated around commemorating a significant anniversaries like the centenary of Battersea Labour Party in 2008. Robinson demonstrates how performative memory too plays a role here, with examples ranging from [Levellers’ Day](#) to the singing of certain songs at party conferences or gatherings.

Having described the varying sources available, Robinson then goes on to offer some detailed investigations into the ways in which historical narratives function in a number of individual parties. Her main concern is their use as “signifiers of party political identity” as well as “rhetorical tools” (p. 88). She shows how parties have turned to history for many different reasons. The Conservative Party “turned in on itself” following its resounding electoral defeat of 1997 and sought both “consolation and inspiration” in the past (p. 90, 91). The Social Democratic Party and New Labour, by contrast, looked to a common Labour Party past as a means of portraying themselves as legitimate heirs to a ‘true’ political history whilst they each simultaneously presented themselves as new mould-breakers on the political scene. No party achieved full consensus around its approach to history, however, with dissent over interpretations of past events being every bit as contentious as those that sought to shape present policy. The Labour Party’s attempts to revise Clause IV in the 1990s showed the strength of the weight that history could bring to bear on present-day activists. Robinson situates her discussion of this debate in the context of an earlier

attempt at revision in 1959/60, showing similarities (with ‘modernisers’ pitting themselves against ‘traditionalists’) as well as contextual differences as, in the wake of the Conservative Party’s drive towards private ownership, discussion of how far the Labour Party should commit itself to nationalisation took on a different meaning.

Robinson offers an interesting discussion of the Communist Party of Great Britain, an organisation rarely afforded equal space in comparative analyses of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Parties. However, whilst there is fascinating detail here, the Party’s very different circumstances in the period covered by the book put this section somewhat at odds with much of the remaining text. Debates over the shape and interpretation of the Party’s own history (which a reading of certain academic history journals of the 1990s would suggest to be even more contentious than Robinson suggests here) have parallels in the other party studies, but the CPGB was not coming to terms with taking or losing power in government, which lessens the comparative value of this discussion. There is also something of lacunae here in analysis of the Liberal Party for much of the 1980s, although its entry into the coalition offers the starting point for Robinson’s introduction. Nevertheless, the book says much of interest regarding the continued efforts of politicians and parties to shape and invoke the past, and the many reasons why they do this. As the author concludes, “it is clear that the past – or at least ideas about the past – matter”.

Krista Cowman is Professor of History in the School of Humanities, University of Lincoln. She has published widely on the history of women in political movements in Britain, and on the history of women’s suffrage. Her most recent book, ‘Women in British Politics 1689-1979’ was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010. [Read more reviews by Krista.](#)

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