BOOK REVIEWS

Stuart Mitchell, *The Brief and Turbulent Life of Modernising Conservatism*, (Newcastle:Cambridge Publishing Scholars Press, 2006).

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Stuart Mitchell's foray into the first decades of post-World War II British history is a welcome addition for those scholars who took an interest in the burgeoning historiography of this period. Mitchell's main focus is on the administrations of Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) and Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1963-1964), whose brand of 'modernizing Conservatism' antagonized both traditionalists and neoliberals within the Conservative Party. Mitchell thus seeks to painstakingly illuminate Macmillan's attempts to 'modernize' Britain during a period when its postwar consensus – dictated by the 1944 White Paper on Employment Policy - was beginning to unravel.

Mitchell's primary concern is to illuminate the trajectory of Macmillan's modernizing agenda within the Conservative Party, conceived as a form of "creative dirigisme" needed "to maintain state legitimacy and social harmony during a period in which such blessings were being assailed by considerable cultural and social change, and as a domestic statecraft strategy designed, foremost, to secure the perpetuation of the Conservative Party in power" (3).

The fact that Macmillan was able to steer the Conservative Party away from certain electoral defeat in the aftermath of Anthony Eden's failed attempt to impose imperial discipline on Egypt during the Suez Crisis (1956), speaks to his acumen as a politician according to Mitchell. Although a supporter of the brutal British, French and Israeli aggression on Egypt (claiming an estimated one-thousand Egyptian civilian lives in one week of fighting), Macmillan was nevertheless able to redirect the British public's attention to domestic issues and

the pressing need for both external and internal modernization.

In fact, under Macmillan the British outlook on the imperial rhetorics of 'kith and kin' and the attendant domestic anxieties over British 'decline' were radically redefined as Mitchell shows. It was in this period that a fateful turn to the European Common Market was attempted as means of adapting to Washington's newly acquired superpower status around the globe and to Britain's "loss" of Empire (represented by Suez and other successful anti-colonial struggles curtailing Britain's attempts to exert control over its alleged 'Commonwealth').

Though the discussions of Britain's attempts to recalibrate its international relations are illuminating, Mitchell's main concern is with the peculiarities of Macmillan's brand of Toryism – which drew on the traditions of 'One Nation' Toryism and Tory Socialism– when applied to the 'home-front.' Along these lines, he takes particular issue with later Tory historians who dismiss the legacy of this period by refracting it through the light of later Thatcherite austerity: "This brand of modernizing Conservatism was not the milky, dewy-eyed, spendthrift creed that some later commentators have been wont to portray… [Instead], the state was to be a tool to effect a transformation of Britain, not a cash cow for the pitiable and hopeless" (7).

Throughout his text Mitchell highlights the complex internal dynamics animating the turbulent relationship between Party-cadres and civil society actors faithful to Macmillan's modernizing agenda and those who opposed it. To this end, Mitchell weaves together a narrative that attempts to reconstruct the social, political and cultural environment within which Macmillan's agenda unfolded through the use of contemporaneous media accounts, leaflets, political cartoons, and social movements. As Mitchell contends, while "High politics may create a fascinating narrative…its power to illuminate the workings of government is limited: Other quarters must also be investigated" (8).

It is through such cues that Mitchell navigates us through the initial period of Macmillan's 'minimalist statecraft' (1957-1959) to the drama of the 'night of the long knives' (the mass-dismissal in July 1962 of key government Ministers), the 'Profumo affair' (one of Britain's most infamous Cold War sex and spy scandals), the politics of Britain's attempted turn to the European Common Market (in the end vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle), and the pitched polemics that characterized debates over the abolition of resale price maintenance (leading to one of the largest back-bench rebellions in postwar British history).

Overall the book achieves what it sets out for itself: providing a detailed account of a critical period in Britain's postwar history that sheds light on a Conservative Party at odds with its later neoliberal and Euro-skeptic incarnations. The book is particularly captivating in its discussions of the cultural milieu in which Macmillan's modernization agenda was employed. Here, the influence of right-wing extra-Party movements – particularly on the Douglas-Home administration - over issues such as national and moral 'decline,' youth delinquency (compounded by the panic caused by the 'Mods-and-Rockers' riots during the spring of 1964 in places like Clacton, Margate, and Brighton), Mary Whitehouse's campaign to 'Clean Up TV' (CUTV), etc. are expertly recovered from the archives by Mitchell in an engaging way (see discussion in Chapter Six).

Along these lines, it is perhaps apropos to inject some mild criticism into this review. While Mitchell is not insensitive to the gendered aspects of postwar British electoral politics - interesting, in this regard, is Mitchell's discussion of the class character and profile of female Tory voters - he nonetheless fails to take into consideration important feminist typologies of the postwar welfare state. It is hoped that Mitchell can expand on such research in future works given the attention he does give to the particular role of 'housewives' and newly professionalized women in setting the tone of debate throughout postwar Britain. Here the pioneering work of feminist political scientists like Linda Gordon (1990) and Jane Lewis (1992) on the gendered dynamics of the welfare state

would have been useful in illuminating how the paternalism of Macmillan and Douglas-Homes' 'modernizing' vision may have contributed to the alienation of an increasingly empowered female electorate.

Similarly, although infused with references to Empire, Commonwealth and Macmillan's turn to 'Europe,' the text lacks a more detailed discussion of how Commonwealth and immigration policies were redefined during this period. Here the insights of postcolonial theory, British cultural studies and anti-racist historiography could have cast greater light on the racialized aspects of Macmillan and Douglas-Homes' modernizing agenda. Decolonization is thus merely portrayed as a top-down process coming from the Prime Minister and his inner circle at the Foreign Office and not the product of broader anti-colonial movements – primarily those in the colony, but also some within the British polity – that sought to terminate the violent legacy of such segregationist statecraft.

Nevertheless, Mitchell's text does provide us with hints concerning the internal dynamics of Conservative Party discussion on the shifting grounds of British identity and illuminates the sources of some of the more reactionary interests seeking to stall 'modernization.' In fact, Mitchell does a remarkable job at both illuminating the class profile of some of the more intransigent elements within the Party that opposed Macmillan's agenda and in questioning the ready assumption that this pressure was coming from the 'grassroots' of the Party.

Summing up, Mitchell's text draws an elaborate picture of a critical turning point in the British social-history through an examination of the complex internal political dynamics that animated policy discussions within the ruling Conservative Party in this period (1951-1964). In particular it lays an important background to understanding the later administrations of Edward Heath (1970-1974) and the constituents and pressure groups that would later consolidate around the policies of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.