

## **REVIEW: LABOUR IN GLASGOW**

*Ian S. Wood*

J.J. Smyth, **Labour in Glasgow 1896-1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism**, Scottish Historical Review Monograph Series No 11, East Linton: Tuckwell Press, ISBN 1 8623 213 7 228 pp, £16.99.

Labour as an aberration from Scotland's true path of entrepreneurial dynamism, Labour the creator of the stultifying 'nanny state', Labour the architect of self-perpetuating council power and patronage: all this has become a mantra in sections of the Scottish press, especially in the part of it owned by the Barclay brothers. There it is churned out with repetitious tedium by one columnist who spent his formative years as a zealot of the International Marxist Group, then as a Labour council group leader in Edinburgh. Now he thinks we should all own up to belief in the Thatcher agenda for Scotland as applied in the 1980s.

Perhaps he did anyhow, though concealing this from most of us at the time, but the history of Labour here, its failures and its successes, deserves better than what is now being heaped upon it.

What brought Labour into being was the brutal reality of the failure of uncontrolled market forces to provide thousands of Scots with the basic human rights of decent housing and decently paid employment, and we should still honour it for the vision of justice which drove its founders, here in Scotland and in Britain as a whole.

Glasgow in many ways was the epicentre of this process, and Jim Smyth's new book on the rise of Labour there can only enhance a reputation he has already secured in recent years with a body of scholarly work on Labour and working-class history in Scotland. In *Labour in Glasgow 1896-1936* he has given us the first single overview of Labour's electoral advance in what used

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to be called 'the second city of the Empire', but his narrative is far from being one of unbroken progress. Instead it unravels a complex pattern of advances, partial breakthroughs and disappointments.

Dr Smyth has made talented contributions to the historiography of the 'Red Clydeside' period of the Great War and after but, in this book, his focus is very much on political and electoral history. Indeed he argues at one point, as he has done elsewhere, that while the seeds of wartime militancy on the Clyde were planted in bitter workplace disputes before 1914, Labour activists like John Wheatley did little to draw political capital from them through preoccupation with a policy agenda dominated by issues like housing and the protection of workers in council employment.

This may well be true, though Wheatley did identify himself strongly with the wartime Clyde Workers Committee and passionately with the miners in 1926. The problem before 1914 was for Labour to make a credible challenge to a Liberal party whose hold on the city was strong despite temporary losses to Unionism in the 'khaki election' of 1900. Labour had less success in doing this in Parliamentary elections in Glasgow than it had initially at local ones, but any advances were slow and hard fought for.

A major reason for this was the electoral system itself. Unlike some recent authors, Dr Smyth presses strongly the case that the pre-1914 franchise had a clear class bias to it but, interestingly, he argues that the Labour leadership took an ambivalent view of this, voicing fears of a 'slum vote' which could not be relied on and might even damage it. They shared the ethos of respectable skilled workers fearful of the abyss into which sickness or long-term loss of work could always drag them. This was a fear, Dr Smyth stresses, rooted not in false consciousness but in lived experience. Politically, however, its result was that, unlike Sweden or Belgium, there were no strikes or campaigns launched before 1914 to demand a genuine working-class franchise, while on the issue of women's suffrage Labour in Scotland failed to give a lead, though individuals like Keir Hardie were strongly supportive.

On issues like these, war in 1914 proved to be a crucial turning point. By then Labour had won its first Scottish seats in Parliament and secured a strong presence on Glasgow's elected corporation, but the pace of change driven by war narrowed wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers, mobilised women in the great rent strikes of 1915 and strengthened Labour's relationship with the city's Irish community.

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The electoral reform legislation of 1918 made the unskilled, women, and the Irish all part of a dramatically enlarged electorate whose support Labour could bid for with enlarged confidence as the Old Liberal ascendancy in Scotland began to break up. In the December General Election of 1910, dominated by issues like House of Lords reform, Labour took under 6,000 votes in Glasgow, but in December 1918, in a lower turn-out with poorly drawn-up registers, the party polled 90,000 votes - not a result that produced scenes comparable to those four years later when the city's ten ILP members left St Enoch's Station for London, but a breakthrough all the same.

The mis-match between this ability of Labour to dominate Glasgow's Westminster representation without being able to win municipal control is fully explored by the author. Ratepaying, Unionist Glasgow under various political guises fought tenaciously to keep Labour at bay while the local council franchise, an occupational rather than residential one, worked against Labour, favouring single women and daughters of Kelvinside families and excluding young males in lodgings.

Ironically it was the rise of political Protestantism in the city which gave Labour its chance, but only in 1933, on the back of a catastrophic General Election two years earlier which had left it with barely fifty Westminster seats, as well as the ILP's vote to disaffiliate from it. Ratchiffe's Protestant League, in some respects a less malignant growth than its Edinburgh counterpart led by Cormack, ate into the Moderate party's support not just in working class wards but also in leafier suburban ones where sectarianism had an appeal too.

John Wheatley, a key player in Labour's success in Glasgow and an early advocate of the benefits for the Catholic community of supporting it, was dead by then, but the housing crisis he had devoted so much of his life to confronting was only too alive as heavy industry shed workers after the crash of 1929-30. His housing act had been passed in 1924, the one real legislative achievement of the first Labour government, but, as Dr Smyth points out, Labour could not build any houses in Glasgow under its provisions because the National Government repealed the Act the year before it took power in the city.

Nonetheless, Wheatley's commitment to housing had, as Dr Smyth argues, been a powerful factor working for Labour within the new constituency of support available to it after 1918. He avoids joining the fairly specialist debate on the merits of the 1924 act, which was of course a piece of British

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legislation, not merely Scottish in its remit, but in Glasgow and elsewhere a generation survive who still talk with gratitude of their 'Wheatley houses'. Perhaps they were not the underclass excluded from his 1908 cottage scheme and his 1924 act; nevertheless, being a man of humanitarian vision, had he lived longer, he would have extended his concern to them too.

There are numerous reasons why many council schemes under Labour control have in recent years become social disaster areas, but in the period analysed in this book Conservatives, often under other political designations, used their control of councils to outbuild Labour and took pride in doing so. Walter Elliot, Secretary of State for Scotland in 1937, felt so strongly that Labour councils were not using their housing powers sufficiently that he set up the Scottish Special Housing Association to add to the stock of state-subsidised housing.

There are matters which go beyond the scope of an excellent and readable book which will contribute much to informed debates about what the political Labour movement achieved in twentieth-century Scottish history and what its role will be in a new century, in which Scottish devolution has already shown that one-party rule on the old council model is not necessarily the only way for it to keep faith with the aspirations of the movement's founders.

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