Multi-Party Britain

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Multi-Party Britain

Edited by

H. M. Drucker

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© H. M. Drucker, Denis Balsom, R. L. Borthwick, Andrew
Gamble, Peter Mair, W. A. Roger Mullin, Sarah Nelson,
Michael Steed, Martin Walker 1979

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First published 1979 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in Delhi Dublin
Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos Melbourne
New York Singapore and Tokyo

Filmset by Vantage Photosetting Co. Ltd.
Southampton and London

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Multi-party Britain

1. Political parties – Great Britain

I. Drucker, Henry Matthew

329.9'41 JN1117

ISBN 978-0-333-24056-4 ISBN 978-1-349-16212-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-16212-3

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viii *Notes on Contributors*

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MARTIN WALKER is a correspondent of the *Guardian*. He is the author of *The National Front*.

Foreword

This book is about the British political parties, about what they stand for, whom they represent, how they are organised, how they compete for power and how they use what power they may obtain. Despite the public interest in political parties, their central place in the country's politics, and the large number of books about the two major parties, there are few books about the British party system. Moreover, the available books have been outdated by recent important changes. They are about the competition between the Conservative and Labour Parties; they are about a two-party world. This book is an attempt to make good the gap opened up by the passing of that system. In it we have tried to do two different things. We have tried, first of all, to describe the currently significant parties. Each of the chapters about an individual party describes the organisation of the party, says something about its recent history, gives a sketch of the thinking of the party, and tries to put the party's problems into perspective. This is not to say that these chapters are written to a formula. They are not, and could not be, for the parties differ considerably from one another. This is not simply a matter of some being more popular at the polls than others; but rather that different kinds of politics matter more or less to the parties. We not only have more parties that matter, we also have more diversity of party. For some parties, the Conservatives and Labour especially, forming a government is the end of their activity. For others, such as the Liberals, electoral success is all. Still others concern themselves with

elections hardly at all; they try to influence governments and the citizenry in other ways, some of which are illegal and even violent.

Despite the fact that the two-party system has lost its vigour, it remains the case that the greatest division between the parties in Britain today is between the Conservative and Labour Parties on the one hand and the other smaller parties on the other. Our book reflects this fact in that the chapters on the Conservative and Labour Parties are more interpretative essays than descriptions of their subjects. As there is already a considerable body of readily available reading on these great parties, the chapters on them concentrate on how they have adapted themselves to their newly reduced status.

But *Multi-Party Britain* is more than a textbook of contemporary British parties. It is also based on a theme: that the old system of two-party competition has been undermined and is being replaced by a different system of competition. This theme is explored in the introduction, in which the charms of the two-party model are described and the reasons for its demise examined; and in the Conclusion, in which the outlines of the new competition are summarised.

One of the bases of two-party politics, as long as it lasted, was the social homogeneity of Britain. It was possible to write books about British party politics – that is, about the Conservative and Labour Parties – and ignore the fact that the two parties competed not only in Westminster and the country, but also in England, Scotland and Wales. It was possible to speak of ‘the country’ as a homogeneous unit because the things which divided people in London also divided them (if not exactly in the same degree) in Glasgow and in Cardiff. Moreover, when people in one part of the country shifted their allegiance slightly from one party to another, it was a safe bet that people in the rest of the country were doing the same thing at about the same rate. This is no longer so.

For this reason it has been necessary for us to divide the book into parts. In the first part we deal with the two governing parties, Conservative and Labour, and the Liberal Party. These three parties compete all over Britain and each has behaved until very recently as if it expected and certainly hoped to form a government unaided by any other party after each successive general election. It may seem odd to include the Liberal Party with its much more successful rivals, but the inclusion is considered: so strong was the ‘two-party’ habit of mind that the Liberal Party leaders adopted it, and they led their party as if it were about to form a government, or at least to replace one or other

of the major parties, at any moment. So strong, indeed, was the 'two-party' model that there was little else the Liberal leaders could do, for were they to admit that they were not one or other of the two major parties they would at the same time admit that they had no serious place in politics.

In the second part we deal with the Scottish National Party (SNP) and with Plaid Cymru (PC). These parties compete for votes only in Scotland and Wales. The fact that they have been able to compete successfully for votes and seats recently has made the party competition in Scotland and Wales distinct from that of England. At the same time the successes of the SNP and PC in winning parliamentary seats has made it more difficult for the Conservative and Labour Parties to form a government unaided. But the nationalist parties must not be considered simply as Celtic versions of the British parties. They do not aim to form British governments, nor do they wish to form a part of any British government. On the contrary, they wish to use their political muscle, at the ballot box and at Westminster, to break up the United Kingdom.

In the third part we deal with the extra-parliamentary parties – the Marxist parties and the National Front. Here we are dealing with organisations which are very considerably more removed from the old 'two-party' model than the SNP and PC. The extra-parliamentary parties engage in electoral competition only sporadically, and then usually for the purpose of gaining publicity for themselves or exposing the opportunism of the more conventional parties. These extra-parliamentary parties have been gaining prominence in recent years. The Marxists have learned to infiltrate the Labour Party, to the irritation of their host, and the National Front has shown the ability to organise sizeable cadres within the cities of England. These parties are attracting hard working activists at a time when the older parties have trouble retaining their membership. The success of the extra-parliamentary parties indicates the failure of the conventional parties, and conventional governments; and the ability of governments to deal with their extra-parliamentary opponents within the law is increasingly open to question.

Britain is not the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is part of the Kingdom as well; it has twelve seats in the House of Commons. Until the recent troubles in Northern Ireland the Unionist MPs elected to these seats voted regularly with the Conservative Party, and governments of both parties let the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland

rule the province as they wished, provided only that they did not bring themselves to the attention of the British public. The British parties do not, and did not, compete for votes in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the culture of the province differs so much from that on the mainland it is hard to believe that any political party could successfully compete in both arenas. Precisely because party competition within the province is so different from that in Britain, it has not been possible to include chapters here about the many Northern Irish parties. Any remotely adequate description of them would have taken up disproportionate space. One reason why so much space would have been needed is that the issues which divide the parties in Northern Ireland are so very distinctive. Instead we have included a fourth part, setting out schematically the differences between the politics of the province and that of Britain and indicating the main lines of recent changes within the province.

It was easy a decade ago to write about British parties and exclude not simply the Northern Ireland parties but also all of those discussed here in the second and third parts. Since then the existing dominant parties have been unable to prevent newcomers from taking the field and scoring some successes. We make only passing reference to the less successful and less important of the new parties, such as the Democratic Labour Party and the Scottish Labour Party. Neither have we been able to include a description of each of the small cadre parties which is operating on the Marxist Left. These omissions are regretted, but it seemed to us that the lessons which might be learnt by discussing these minute organisations did not justify the space necessary to accommodate them.

We have been aware in preparing this book that there is a serious argument for presenting the material in it in a quite different way. We could have presented it topic-by-topic rather than party-by-party. We might, that is to say, have had chapters on the breakdown of the two-party voting in England; the rise of the national parties in Scotland and Wales; the breakdown of intra-party discipline in the House of Commons; and so forth. We have decided not to proceed in that way for three reasons. Firstly, a book written on that principle would not meet the need for information about the minor parties. Secondly, since the changes we are describing in the book are still continuing, we thought it would be easier to grasp them if their effect on particular institutions such as the parties were made explicit. Thirdly, we have tried to make the material in the book as easily

comprehensible as possible, and this can be better done by discussing the recognisable parties than the recondite themes.

The ideas advanced in this book were discussed by the contributors during a seminar in Edinburgh in December 1977. The costs of that seminar were borne by the Nuffield Foundation, to whom we are most grateful. We have had the benefit, both at the seminar and subsequently, of comments on our ideas from John Bochel, Andrew Bolger, Alan Cairns, James Cornford, Carol Craig, Ivor Crewe, Dennis Kavanagh, Ian McAllister, John P. Mackintosh, James Naughtie, Peter Pulzer and Fred Ridley. My wife, Nancy, helped with some of the editorial chores and Helen Ramm has typed the book more than once. I am indebted to them both.

The text was at proof stage when the Callaghan government fell. We are grateful for the forbearance of Rob Shreeve and Tim Fox of Macmillan, who allowed us to bring it up to date after the 1979 election.

May 1979
Edinburgh

H. M. DRUCKER