The Search for Democratic Renewal: The Politics of Consultation in Britain and Australia

Rob Manwaring (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2014, ISBN 9780719088766 (hardback), 208 pp.)

The starting point for this work is the argument that democracy is in crisis and this is particularly a challenge for the political left who have seen reductions in membership levels and an inability to connect with younger generations. The question that arises out of this is what is the core mission of Labour in the modern era and how has the party adopted new ways of engaging with stakeholders and the broader public to secure legitimacy and revitalise labour politics?

Little would Manwaring know, that shortly after the publication of this book the UK Labour party would see a rather unexpected revitalisation linked to the election of a new leader – Jeremy Corbyn. A change of rules for the election of the leader of the Labour party meant that each member in 2015 received one vote and these votes were weighed equally. Alongside these new rules was a £3 registration fee (approximately \$6) to be entitled to vote in the leadership election.

More than 100,000 registered as party supporters over the period of the leadership election. Many of these were individuals who expressed a desire to vote for Corbyn – although some newspapers (probably falsely) reported that a large proportion of these new registrations were Conservative supporters keen to get Corbyn in place and make Labour even more unelectable in the process. Whatever the motivations, Corbyn – of the old-fashioned left views such as renationalising railways, reintroducing tax rates for the richest, controlling private housing rents and nuclear disarmament - was duly elected as leader and the Labour party's membership is fast approaching the 400,000 number who were members at the 1997 election that saw New Labour elected to evangelical fervour.

Only time will tell of course whether Corbyn makes a mark as leader and truly manages to win back support for Labour. But rather curious in the context of this text is that those rushing to support Corbyn (and by extension Labour) have largely been galvanised not by the types of new innovations of consultation and citizen engagement (which given the book's findings is no surprise) but, it would seem, in equal measures as a reaction against the more pernicious aspects of the political right's efficiency agenda (which former Prime Minister Tony Abbott was also damaged by) and a promise of a return to traditional Labour values of collectivism and social justice.

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The first few chapters of the book rehearse debates relating to Labour, democratic renewal and the New Social Democracy and understanding political participation. In plotting the tale of political participation in Australia and the UK, surprisingly little is made of declining levels of union membership. In both countries there has been a sustained decrease in union membership which has important implications for the Labour party. The geographer, Jane Wills (2012) argues that the decline of organised labour has had significant implications for class politics and the mobilisation of working classes. The issue here is not simply the decline in union membership, but the ways in which the Labour party can claim legitimacy in this new era. The political right has not undergone the same sort of shift and so arguably has not needed to experiment in the same sorts of ways. The discussion of the politics of consultation is comprehensive, although focuses more on big P, party politics, rather than the micro-level political activity associated with this function – and where we have seen some of the more interesting contributions made to these debates in recent years.

Following these theoretical considerations a ‘democratic audit’ framework is outlined and this is used in the next part of the book in application to a series of case studies. The cases chosen, it is argued represent large-scale innovations such as New Labour’s People’s Panel or experiments with South Australian Labor over the Rann and Weatherill governments. In practice it is a bit of a rag-bag group of cases and strangely Chapter 5 purports to be about Australia and Britain but contains only Australian cases. However, there are a number of interesting insights within these about what to do (and more importantly what not to do) in citizen participation.

In the conclusion it is argued that the cases analysed in the book demonstrate a ‘weakening commitment to securing greater economic equality, replacing it with a greater interest in activating new forms of citizenship. Yet...overall it is clear that New Social Democracy pays very little attention to tackling structural forms of inequality of political participation and engagement. This suggests a further dilution of a commitment to wider equality in the social democratic tradition. There is then, a case for this ideal to be re-awakened. It is time to dismantle the glittering façade’ (p.178-179). Manwaring’s conclusion is that ultimately Labour’s reforms in Australia and the UK were little more than symbolic attempts to shore up the parties, but had little impact in practice. These attempts are largely described in terms of being experiments with social democracy that have now come to an end. I am not sure I would see this in quite the same way and will be interesting to see whether history will see this period as one of widespread experimentation with social democracy or a time of political game playing.

With the election of Corbyn as the leader of the Labour party it appears that Manwaring may have, to a limited extent, been granted his wish in dismantling the glittering façade. Only time will tell whether this will be another failed experiment or the start of the revitalisation of social democracy.

Reference

Wills, J. (2012) The geography of community and political organisation in London. *Political Geography*, 31, 114–126.

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