

The Age of Consolidation: South-western Constituency Politics and Electoral Change in the Age of Alignment

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The historiography of the decline of the Liberal party is extensive, so much so, we might think, that there is little kick left in the subject. The story of how, during the 1920s, the Liberal party declined as a political force and, as if by way of concomitant, the Labour party gained in strength, has been told many times and from a variety of angles. But in recent years appeals have been made to shift the focus of interest away from 'high politics' towards more detailed study of the local or regional aspect. Paul Adelman makes such an appeal in his *The Decline of the Liberal Party 1910-1931*, as does Chris Cook in his *The Age of Alignment*.¹ Hence a study of constituency politics and electoral change in the south west during the 1920s can be justified in terms of its contribution to this prescribed need.

Upon this prescription what needs to be looked at can be easily expressed. There were a lot of general elections in the 1920s (1922, 1923, 1924 and 1929) and therefore a good deal of constituency politics in the south west as elsewhere. What needs to be looked for appears, in the first instance, equally unproblematic. In general terms the elections of the 1920s have been studied for the purchase they can offer on the wide debate over the decline of the Liberal party and the rise of Labour as a party of government. House of Commons seat distribution at the end of the 1920s compared to it at the beginning indicates a substantial realignment of voting behaviour and defines that which is of interest in a localized case-study. The work which needs most obviously to be done, it seems, is to plot the extent to which regional variations in the fortunes of Liberal and Labour parties changed in line with national trends and tendencies to build-up a more composite, detailed picture.

If the above offers some justification for sub-national forms of enquiry and is consistent with the generalized view that the social bases of party support in a decade of change merit more detailed attention, it is important to stress the limits of local-level work when

the parameters of what needs to be looked at and looked for have been so firmly established. In the first place, to suppose from the outset that a region like the south west will exhibit the persistence of difference is to beg questions about yardsticks and comparative indicators. After all, an established national picture, from which the regional scene may differ, is less a standard norm than a calculated average. Hence, micro-studies may fail to conclude anything beyond the banal; that different parts of the country experience different levels, rates and directions of change. Secondly, and of greater importance, a regional case-study is not *prima facie* a good platform for challenging prevailing orthodoxies about the nature and dynamics of electoral change. Lines of enquiry may be pursued and conclusions reached which though they may clash with mainstream explanations, make little impact on the central debate precisely because that which stems from the periphery can always be allowed to be eccentric.

Yet for all this a regional case-study can make its small contribution to global theorizing. Broad hypotheses and formulations can be weighted and tested more easily at the sub-national level. When the horizon is limited in space and time the material can be rendered more manageable and the sweeping generalization qualified or tempered with caution. In this sense the purpose of this paper is to make a contribution to a wider historical debate and is intended more as a challenge from the periphery than a peripheral supplement to work already done.

This position of challenging prevailing orthodoxies about electoral change and the social bases of party support is not taken lightly. There do exist several made-to-measure modes of enquiry which, without too much trouble and with due acknowledgement, could be taken-up and applied to the local scene. Simply to deploy a borrowed methodology would certainly make things easier for reader and writer alike. Yet despite the attractiveness of plunging straight into the empiricism of case-study work, it remains true that certain theoretical issues need an airing before an appropriate mode of analysis can be formulated and applied to the region's constituency politics. What follows is a brief outline of positions taken by leading historians in the field which points to the key assumptions of points of orientation underpinning their works.

In his influential essay, 'Labour and the downfall of Liberalism', Henry Pelling bequeathed two things to the next generation of historians of party politics. His famous formulation that, '... the Victorian alignment of religion gave way (at some stage) to one founded on class', sparked a reaction against 'high politics' explanations of changes in party fortunes and, in furthering an interest in

the social basis of party support, furnished scholars with the language of class and class analysis.² This notion of transition from one form of alignment to another has been enormously influential, so much so that debate has tended to coalesce around the issue of timing; of when one form of alignment gave way to the other. Pelling himself has little to say on post 1918 developments but others apply his implicit model to the 1920s. Ross McKibbin, for example, stresses the importance of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, under which the national electorate nearly trebled in size and was, he says, '... of first importance in Labour replacing the Liberals as the principle party of progress.'³ Martin Pugh, less certain about the primacy of class, uses the idea of a radicalized political generation to argue that as the 1920s unfolded, '... national events and trends helped to mould a generation predisposed to Labour sympathies.'⁴ David Marquand, however, is most explicit. To him it was, '... the explosion of class consciousness which took place immediately after the war ... which destroyed the Liberal party ... and made it possible for Labour to replace it as the main progressive party in Britain.'⁵

These historians do not agree on everything, but they are put in the same bracket here to highlight two sets of common assumption which require some unravelling. The first concerns the extent to which the categories of the social and the political are run together, as if to say that a certain kind of social formation requires a particular type of political expression. This, when it breaks the surface, tends to reinforce the expectation that Labour was well-placed to benefit politically from the new social alignment founded on class whereas the Liberals were not. The second set of common assumptions is more explicit. This is that during the 1920s Labour replaced the Liberals, that the decline of the Liberals had its counterpart in the rise of Labour, that Labour displaced the Liberals as the principle party of progress in Westminster and the country at large, and even that as the decade unfolded the political vehicle for the expression of the radical vote changed.

To seek to take issue with such pervasive assumptions and question basic points of orientation on which there seems an overwhelming consensus might appear strange. Nevertheless, such theoretical groundwork is necessary considering the implications these sets of assumptions carry with them for any case-study work on electoral change. The first set, concerning the notion of Labour as the obvious or natural beneficiary of a new class alignment is dangerous and crude. Not only does it raise the paradoxical picture of Ramsay MacDonald and the party leadership eschewing class politics while, at

the same time, apparently, benefitting from increased working-class support. It also imposes a peculiar reversibility on the relationship between the social and the political such that the latter can be read-off in terms of the former and *vice versa*. Hence the geographic distribution of Labour, and for that matter Liberal, electoral support is conveniently interpreted as a measure of the distance a place has travelled along the transitionary road from one form of alignment to another. Where Labour support is high, the process of class alignment is deemed all but completed and where Liberal support is high, residues of the Victorian alignment of religion are eagerly detected. Such binary thinking, dangerous at the best of times, can only mislead when sociological comment is made on the basis of electoral outcomes.

The second set of assumptions, to do with the notion that Labour displaced the Liberals as the 1920s progressed, also carries with it serious implications. If Westminster politics alone were the focus of discussion, the notion of 'displacement' might be made to stick, but it is anything but problem-free when applied to a consideration of the social bases of party support. At one level, these words 'progressive' and 'radical' are pretty vague at the best of times. If they do carry weight and meaning in any sphere their usage is best reserved for discussion of development within political society. It is less than certain that such words carry the same weight or convey the same meanings to voters whose chance of expressing a party preference occurs infrequently and, more often than not, on terms of political society's choosing. At another and more important level, the more the focus of historians' interest is turned to the means, or just the timing, of Labour's displacement of the Liberals, the more it tends to be accepted that the Conservative party was, in its appeal and in the social composition of its support, a fixed point of stability when all around was a sea of change. In 'high politics' terms we know this simply was not the case. We know that the language as well as the identity of Conservatism went through an uneven and often painful process of adjustment during this period.⁶ But because aggregated levels of support for the Conservative party appear reasonably stable throughout this decade of realignment, the impression ossifies almost into a certainty that the country-wide Conservative vote retained its relative size and was therefore substantially unchanged in terms of its composition. Pugh's famous generalization, that the Conservative-Liberal-Labour national vote-share was distributed in 4-3-3 proportions at the beginning of the 1920s but had changed to a 4-2-4 formation at the end of the decade, not only highlights the impression of Conservative stability but also prescribes that which is of interest

and needs explanation; the movement of support from Liberal to Labour.⁷

This notion that there is nothing to be discussed or examined about the nature and composition of Conservative support in the 1920s, but a great deal to be researched about movement from Liberal to Labour, conspires, for all its widespread pervasiveness, to impose a stultifying narrowness on any local-level enquiry. Having been told what needs to be researched and what should be looked-out for, it is as if any regional case-study has its site and orientation already mapped out for it. Yet the notion of 'displacement' misleads us quite fundamentally. If one actor changes in a two-party system, something more than a simple process of substitution (Labour for Liberal) has been effected. The decline of one party and the rise of another is, of necessity, relational, but in ways which transform the nature of the party system itself. In other words, we need to look further than the Labour party if we are to explain and understand what happened to the Liberal inheritance in the 1920s. The transformation of the party system need not refer to Westminster practice, parliamentary procedure, or even the agenda of politics. What it does refer to is the proper concern of a regional case-study; the social bases of party support.

This notion of 'displacement' is, for all its insidious connotations, central to those made-to-measure methodologies which, as mentioned earlier, beckon invitingly to the local-level researcher. For all practical purposes it is assumed that while Labour was displacing the Liberals as the 'principal party of progress', both parties were competing for the hearts and minds of the same 'radical' or 'progressive' vote which, set against the stability of the anti-progressive vote, deprived the Liberals of office altogether, prevented the Labour party from forming majority governments, and afforded the Conservatives a position of dominance from the decade's beginning to its end. The translation of this 'displacement' notion into practice underpins mainstream interpretations of party politics and electoral change in the 1920s. Pugh's from 4-3-3 to 4-2-4 model of change in national party vote-share distribution, referred to earlier, dovetails neatly with the overall theme that this Conservative 'hegemony' was not attained on the basis of a natural electoral majority in the country but was achieved instead through, '... the division of the progressive vote between Labour and Liberal (giving) the Conservatives a major advantage.'⁸ Chris Cook is as heavily reliant on the same notion of 'displacement'. He maintains that by 1929 the Liberals were a spent force. After the events of 1922-24, the key period in his 'age of alignment', he argues that Labour emerged as the beneficiary of a process he calls, 'the redistribution of the radical vote'.⁹

In his own way Chris Cook has been as influential as Henry Pelling among historians of Liberal party decline. This is so as much for the force of his arguments as for the statistical means he deploys to reinforce his claims. For our purposes this is useful for because of his self-consciously scientific approach to data Cook's methods of experimentation can be reproduced at the local level. In other words, to reproduce Cook's mode of experimentation is to shift the focus from unravelling basic assumptions about the dynamics of electoral change, to case-study oriented examination of the methodology which permits Cook and others to claim that the 'redistribution of the radical vote' was the central feature of 1920s electoral change.

The table reproduced below is drawn from Cook's study. In it he effects a comparison of 1929 electoral outcomes with those of 1923 in forty five constituencies.¹⁰ This base set is composed of the forty five county seat gains made by the Liberals in the 1923 election. What he seeks to demonstrate, of course, is the impact of Labour, not the impact of Labour in Maurice Cowling sense, but in terms of the 'redistribution of the radical vote' at constituency level.

Table 1

1923				
	Total Votes	% Share	MPs Elected	No of Candidates
CON	505027	43.4	—	45
LIB	585899	50.4	45	45
LAB	71728	6.2	—	16
	1162654	100.0	45	106
1929				
CON	723379	42.5	33	45
LIB	608732	35.7	8	45
LAB	370852	21.8	4	44
	170963	100.0	45	134

The visual impression conveyed by the table is very strong. It seems that the Liberals were unable to hold or reclaim more than eight of the forty five seats gained in 1923 for the obvious reason that Labour fielded many more candidates in 1929, candidates who, in this 'redistributional' sense, siphoned-off support which would otherwise have gone to the Liberals. The visual proof of this is, as it were, supplied by a comparison of Conservative vote-share figures. As we see it remains more or less the same. The resultant impression is inescapable. Labour must have queered the Liberal pitch in 1929 by splitting the non-Conservative vote and the Conservatives were able to pick-up seats even though there was no 'swing' towards them. The 'redistribution of the radical vote' thesis appears to have strong empirical foundation.

Just as it is easy enough to set up a reproduction of Cook's 'redistributional' experiment, it is unsurprising that results are very much in line with his overall thesis. From a region defined to comprise the twenty seven county and borough constituencies of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset established in the seat distribution clauses of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, eighteen were taken to constitute the base-set. These eighteen were those seats won by the Liberals in the general election of 1923. This selection did involve a slight departure from Cook's method as he takes only county seat gains, but the modification seems reasonable. Then 1929 outcomes were compared with those of 1923. Findings are tabulated below.

Table II

		1923		
	Total Votes	% Share	MPs Elected	No of Candidates
CON	200533	45.9	—	17
LIB	225799	51.8	18	18
LAB	9845	2.3	—	4
		436177	100.00	18
				40
		1929		
CON	276490	45.0	11	18
LIB	251875	41.0	7	18
LAB	86407	14.0	—	18
		614772	100.0	18
				54

It could no doubt be argued that these regional findings bear-out the centrality of Cook's 'redistribution' thesis and vindicate his methodology as in both base-sets the picture is substantially the same. That in 1929 the Conservatives possess eleven of the eighteen seats originally held by the Liberals, points apparently to the crucial importance of Labour interventions. That the number of Labour candidates increased from four to eighteen appears especially significant, indicating that in many constituencies they attracted a portion of the 'radical' vote sufficient to let the Conservative in.

And yet it is unsurprising that the tables offer such similar findings. Firstly and most obviously, this is because the two base-sets are composed of the same type of constituencies. Indeed, many of those in the smaller south-western base-set are incorporated in Cook's larger one. In a geographically diffused sense, Cook's original base-set of forty five constituencies constitute what he calls 'rural England'. Hence we would not expect major differences of trend and tendency in a non-urban, or at any rate not pronouncedly industrial region such as the south west.

However this is only part of the reason for the tables' similarities, for while Cook does display considerable ingenuity in devising statistical means whereby, in a best-case sense, he can demonstrate and seemingly prove his 'redistribution' thesis, his criteria of selection are such that no other results are possible. It is noticeable, for example, how consistent the Conservative vote-share figure is in both tables over the two elections. This is highly convenient as instanced here is the fixed point of stability in Conservative support when all around was a sea of change central to the notion of 'displacement.' Instanced too is the impression of Labour queering the Liberals' pitch and effecting a 'redistribution of the radical vote'. That which seems confirmatory is actually a case of testing a hypothesis through means verging on the fraudulent.

There are two sides to this. First, the voting publics in the 1923 and 1929 general elections were very different in their physical composition. A clue to this is offered by a comparison of the number of votes cast columns in both tables. That there was a 46% increase in the number of votes cast in 1929 for Cook's 'rural England' base-set, and a 41% increase in the south western constituencies shows how, in a tip-of-the-iceberg sense, the two electorates are too different to permit meaningful comparison. On top of the usual factors of replacements, differential turnout and varying degrees of efficiency in registration, the 1928 Equalization of the Franchise Act had considerable impact. This so increased the size of the national electorate as to transform it in its composition. This is not to suggest that the

enfranchisement of 21–30 year old women created a ‘flapper’ vote as such, rather to remember that the electorate, ever the ‘residential hotel’ with guests arriving and departing all the time, now had a new wing built on to it.¹¹ Nationally, out of every ten electors who voted in 1929, fewer than six could also have voted in 1923. In some south western constituencies, taking changes in electorate size and differential turnout into account, it can be calculated that fewer than half those who voted in 1929 could conceivably have done so six years earlier.¹² In other words, in seeking to prove his ‘redistribution’ thesis Cook draws comparisons between two non comparable outcomes. His reliance on a simple measure of ‘swing’ to plot net volatility is of dubious utility at the best of times, and is especially so when the two voting publics are so different in their physical composition.

In the second place, if the 1929 election is deemed so critical as an end-of-decade point and it is therefore considered necessary to compare constituency outcomes with a previous contest, it would make more immediate psephological sense to draw comparison with the election immediately preceding, that is, with the general election of October 1924 and not that of December 1923.

It is not as if Cook has forgotten about this particular contest. Elsewhere in *The Age of Alignment* he has a great deal to say about the ‘red scare’ election. However, from his point of view the trouble is that 1924–29 comparisons do not offer indications of electoral change that can be used to sustain his ‘redistribution’ thesis. In order to prove his thesis, Cook has to compare electoral outcomes in which the Liberals performed relatively well. Had he set his starting-point at a moment of Liberal catastrophe (1924) his analysis would have had to contend with a substantial recovery in 1929 which, apart from anything else, is hardly a good basis for arguing the ‘redistribution’ case. Basically, the Liberals were hammered in 1924 and, in the south west at any rate, it was the Conservatives not Labour who did the hammering. Scarcely was there such carnage. In possession of eighteen of the twenty seven regional seats from December 1923, the Liberals were left holding only one barely ten months later (Leslie Hore-Belisha in Devonport). Hence the misleading impression created by table II. It implies that the Liberals’ rate of retaining seats in the south west was better than elsewhere when actually it was no better. Six of the seven Liberal victories in the region in 1929 were seats gained not seats retained.

Very often the 1924 ‘red scare’ election is written of as if it was a one-off, a distasteful affair from which no person or party emerged with credit. Some historians detect in the manner of its timing a tacit

Baldwin-MacDonald understanding to squeeze the Liberals, while others refer to the high hysteria quotient of the contest with abnormal atmospherics producing freakish results.¹³ Yet for all these one-off features, the 1924 'red scare' election did mark the beginning of a trend of some historical importance. It registered the establishment of a plateau of electoral strength for the Conservative party from which it did not descend until 1945. Moreover, this plateau was established through the identification of a clear enemy, the 'socialist menace'. The impact of this on the fortunes of the Liberal party in the south west was critical.

Critical-ness here does refer to the impact of Labour on the region's constituency politics but not in the sense envisaged by Pugh and Cook. It has to do with Labour's rhetorical as opposed to redistributive challenge. The basic idea is this; that in 1924 the 'socialist menace' was perceived so widely and feared so deeply that it brought about a veritable stampede of Liberal voters into the Conservative camp. Of course, many of these renegades would have been birds of passage, but many more would have found that having tried Conservatism once they continued to regard it as an acceptable repository of their political expression thereafter. On the grounds that the Conservative party was the country's best bulwark against the 'socialist menace', many south western Liberals transformed themselves into Conservatives.

To translate an idea into a proposition is one thing and to fashion it into a testable hypothesis is another. Yet the idea-proposition is consistent with an abstract point made earlier, that when one of the actors in a two-party system changes something more than a simple process of one-for-one displacement or substitution has taken place, rather a transformation in the social basis of the party system itself. This raises the possibility that the 'age of alignment' in the south west did not consist of a redistribution of the radical vote whereby Labour became identified as the party of progress and absorbed the support of those electors who possessed a progressive cast of mind. Instead, the region's 'age of alignment' consisted of a preponderant movement in another direction; that is from Liberal to Conservative.

Whereas Martin Pugh and Chris Cook maintain that, in national terms, the Conservatives emerged as indirect beneficiaries of the disappearing Liberal vote in the 1920s, the basis of this peripheral challenge is that benefit to the Conservatives was of a far more direct kind. The hypothesis is this; that in the behavioural instance of voting, the disposition of one-time Liberal supporters to choose the Conservative alternative was far greater than any tendency for the 'radical' vote to redistribute itself from one progressive party to

another. What follows may appear to stand things on their head but it is actually to place things properly on their feet. What took place in the south western 'age of alignment' was redistributional in kind but the form it took was in the consolidation of the anti-socialist vote.

In a sort of tit-for-tat sense the obvious site from which to extract evidence for this 'consolidation' hypothesis would be to compare 1924 with 1923 constituency outcomes and measure the scale of Liberal defections to the Conservatives. This would be to do a Chris Cook in that it would comply with his selection criterion of choosing best-case illustrations while ignoring that which does not fit too well. But to do such would be neither wise nor necessary. Just as different people will entertain quite different notions of critical-ness, there will always be arguments over which one election should be compared with any one other. That there were many general elections in the 1920s means the range of possible comparison is wide, but with so much to be able to choose from, arguments over selection can reduce themselves to the level of circularity.¹⁴

It seems preferable therefore to try and construct a mode of analysis that goes beyond comparing one set of election outcomes with another, which looks at trends over a longer term, and yet which affords reasonable deductive grounds for assessing where this disappearing Liberal vote went. The plotting of average vote per party candidate over several elections meets these criteria. In choosing to do this over the 1923–31 elections inclusive, a period of time is isolated in which there was recognizable three-way competition for the vote in the majority of seats contested. The plotting of average vote per party candidate has two further advantages over the method applied in tables I and II. It places less reliance on reducing numbers to percentage levels, and thus avoids imposing a simple measure of 'swing', and it permits us to consider all twenty seven of the region's constituencies. This is advantageous in that individual peculiarities emerge less obtrusively than in a small base-set which can apply as much to differential turnout as to the odd freakish result.¹⁵

The four county definition of south western region was decided on the grounds that a sizeable but manageable number of seats was required. This does mean the region has a heavy preponderance of county seats, all but five (the three Plymouth seats, Bath and Exeter) being of this classification. County constituencies in the 1920s did tend to be geographically extensive, but such extensiveness should not be equated too readily with agriculture or rurality. If Kinnear's *The British Voter: Atlas and Survey since 1885* offers anything to go by as a work of reference, Frome is designated a mining seat in the 1920s and Penryn an industrial one.¹⁶ Comparing rates of growth in

constituency size over the period is instructive. It is noticeable that those constituencies containing seaside towns (Torquay, Dorset East, Weston-Super-Mare) experienced fast rates of growth compared with low growth inland (Bodmin, South Molton, Dorset North). While it may be an obvious thing to say that migrational and demographic factors involve changes in the physical composition of constituency electorates, it is worth bearing in mind that they do so differentially.

Table III is relatively easy to read. It comprises base totals for votes cast over the four elections of the period, numbers of candidates, unopposed returns and numbers of MPs elected by party. Only two columns contain figures reduced to percentage levels, one the more usual party vote-share figure and the other the less than usual candidates' vote-share figure. The penultimate column, referring to average vote per candidate, is that to which most attention is paid.

As can be seen, a total of 61 candidates contested the region's twenty seven seats in the 1923 election. There was only one unopposed return (George Lambert, the Liberal, in South Molton). Labour fielded candidates in fewer than half the region's seats but even in these the average vote per candidate was less than half the average totals achieved by Liberals or Conservatives. In vote-share terms, the Conservative percentage figure looks impressive, but so it would given the greater number of seats the party contested. For although they fielded three fewer candidates, the Liberals achieved the highest average vote per candidate total. There might be the argument that in the 'special' campaigning circumstances of 1923 the Liberals were able to benefit from Baldwin's blunder over tariffs and gained in popularity through their defence of Free Trade. In which case, Liberal successes in that year might have been boosted to create an artificial illusion of strength. This is a tempting verdict given the benefit of hindsight. But just as every election has its 'special' characteristics, at the time there was little to suggest that the regional position of the Liberals was not founded on real and well-rooted popularity.

At any rate, there is little to suggest the contrary of this until 1924 percentage figures and numerical totals are considered. The sizeable increase in the number of votes cast looks, initially, to have to do with a higher turnout but it owes more to a 9% increase in electorate size and the contestation of every seat. If the most obviously dramatic aspect of the 1924 election was the Liberals losing all but one of the eighteen seats they had gained or held the previous December, the most striking feature as to the manner of their losing was the marked increase in the average vote per Conservative candidate. Elsewhere, it is maintained that the haemorrhaging of Liberal support in 1924

Table III

1923							
Total Votes		MPs	Candi- dates	Unop- posed Returns	% Vote per Can- didate	Av Vote per Can- didate	Av Vote % per Candidate
CON	313894	8	26	—	47.5	12072	39.2
LIB	266580	18	23	1	40.4	12117	39.3
LAB	79695	1	12	—	12.1	6641	21.5
Totals	660169	27	61	1	100	30830	100
1924							
CON	382385	26	27	—	52.7	14162	46.6
LIB	239104	1	23	—	32.9	10396	34.2
LAB	103907	—	18	—	14.3	5773	19.0
Totals	725396	27	68	—	100	30331	100
1929							
CON	416152	17	27	—	44.4	15413	43.8
LIB	334565	8	26	—	35.7	12867	36.5
LAB	186082	2	27	—	19.8	6891	19.5
others	9598	—	2	—	—	—	—
Totals	936799	27	82	—	100	35171	100
1931							
CON	479299	22	23	1	56.1	21786	49.2
LIB	231600	5	16	2	27.1	14475	32.7
LAB	142867	—	18	—	16.7	7937	17.6
Totals	853766	27	57	3	100	44198	100

consisted of defections to the Conservatives and to Labour in more or less equal proportions, as if right-wing Liberals blamed their party in parliament for having put a Labour government into office in the first place, while left-wingers punished the party they had supported for being instrumental in pushing Labour out. This does appear initially plausible given the 30% increase in the total Labour vote set against the 22% increase for the Conservatives. However, this instances the danger of imagining that electorates behave as if in response to parliamentary developments and, more particularly, of relying too heavily on vote-share figures. The average vote per candidate totals tell a different story and discount any such impression.

As can be seen, the Labour vote in 1924 was spread pretty thinly across eighteen candidates such that the average vote per candidate was actually less than it had been in 1923. This is one item of evidence which suggest Labour's interventions had little to do with the disappearing Liberal vote in 1924. Another is that in thirteen of the eighteen seats Labour contested, the Conservative vote-share was in excess of 50%. If there ever was such a thing as the 'radical' vote, it did not redistribute itself in 1924, it simply shrank. In other parts of the country things may have been different but the regional response to the 'red scare' election was of an emphatic transfer of erstwhile Liberal supporters into the Conservative camp. In the south west the anti-socialist vote was consolidating itself.¹⁷

There is something to be said for the view that the 1929 election represented a kind of 'return to normalcy' after the frenetic period of three general elections in as many years. Here was Baldwin's Conservative government going to the country in defence of its record after a full parliamentary term of office. Here was Labour as the chief party of opposition able to field nearly six hundred candidates, and here too were the Liberals fully united and generously endowed under Lloyd George's leadership. If ever the Liberal party was going to stage its 'revival' this was the moment for it. Cook maintains that the 'revival' turned out to be a damp squib because with the 'age of alignment' now past and the process of redistribution all but completed, no amount of Welsh wizardry or intellectual clout could rescue the Liberals from their fate. In other words, he holds Labour interventions responsible for Liberal disappointments.

That such was not the case in the south west is evidenced, once again, by average vote per party candidate totals. When it is remembered that the size of the region's electorate had grown by some 25% since 1924 and that the number of votes cast increased by some 30%, the average vote per Labour candidate total show that the party's overall position in the region was no stronger at the end of the

decade than it had been at the beginning. Labour victories in Frome and Plymouth Drake (both three-cornered contests) offered some comfort to the party faithful, but the loss of ten deposits out of twenty seven seats contested must have caused concern. In the six constituencies fought for the first time, all six deposits were forfeited, Honiton's welcome to Labour coming in the form of 900 princely votes. These things hardly add-up to an image of Labour splitting the 'radical' vote or otherwise acting as a decisive agent of 'redistribution'. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Labour achieved some of its best regional results in seats regained by the Liberals (17% vote-share in St Ives, 25% in Camborne and 29% in Penryn).

If this last point serves as a reminder that three-way party competition for the vote can lead to perverse constituency outcomes, the fact is that Labour did not blunt the Liberals' 1929 'revival' in the south west, the Conservatives did. They did so most noticeably outside Cornwall and the city of Plymouth. In Devon, Dorset and Somerset it is difficult to find signs in any constituency of Labour interventions so dividing the 'radical' vote as to present the seat to the Conservatives. It was their capacity to retain much of the support obtained in the 'special' circumstances of 1924 as well as their persuasiveness with first-time voters which were the factors of decisive importance.

In general terms 1929 is recalled as an election that no party won but which did, nevertheless, represent a Conservative defeat. A lot of seats did change hands, yet any post-mortem conducted by the Conservatives would have concluded that their party had performed creditably in the south west. The loss of some seats had probably been anticipated given the glaringly disproportionate ratio of votes cast and seats distributed five years before. If the number of regional seats lost was disappointingly high (seven to the Liberals, two to Labour and one, Exeter, to the repudiated MP standing as an independent), a more sober appraisal of the situation would have revealed the underlying strength of the Conservative's position. The firmest indication of this is provided by the average vote per candidate totals in which the margin of Conservative superiority over all rivals was maintained. The 1929 general election was one in which the 'perverse disproportionality' of the British electoral system told against the Conservative party, and at a tactical level it cannot have escaped the notice of regional party managers that all the seats lost had been in three-cornered contests. This was the lesson learned by the Conservatives in 1929. In future steps would be taken to avoid any division of the anti-socialist vote.¹⁸

The final election of the series to be considered, that of 1931, offers

a fitting conclusion to the theme that the south west's decade of realignment consisted of the consolidation of the anti-socialist vote. It was, to be sure, another of those 'special' elections held in snap circumstances at a moment in time when the Westminster party system was in considerable disarray. Charles Loch Mowat has 'high politics' in mind when he characterizes the 1931 contest as, '... the coupon election all over again', but the comparison is not inapt for regional constituency politics.¹⁹

It has been said that the Liberals entered the 1931 election in the hopeless condition of attempting to travel in three directions simultaneously, that of the Liberal National Simonites, the 'official' Samuelites, and the Lloyd George family group which had opposed the National government from the outset, and was even encouraging Liberals to vote Labour in the absence of a Liberal candidate.²⁰ Yet however disorganized and inauspicious this three-way stance was, it did not lead to wholesale disorientation at the local level. The search for the 'doctor's mandate' in the south west amounted to a well thought-out, and even strategic, seat-sharing arrangement between Conservative and Liberal constituency associations. The sharp drop in the number of three-cornered contests (from twenty six to eight in comparison with 1929) should be viewed as part of this strategy, for it owed less to Labour fielding fewer candidates than to decisions taken by Conservatives and Liberals not to oppose each other in thirteen constituencies.²¹

The Conservatives had everything to gain from such 'coupon' arrangements. The experience of 1929 had taught them the dangers of three-cornered party competition, so they could look forward optimistically to straight-fights with Labour in eight constituencies. Among these were Frome and Plymouth Drake, seats lost to Labour in 1929. In addition, as this was an election called to endorse a National government coping with a national emergency, some deeds had to be done to match the rhetoric of the moment. Hence there was a convenience attached to Conservative withdrawals in St Ives, Plymouth Devonport and South Molton as it gave safe passage to the prominent Liberal Nationals, Sir Walter Runciman, Leslie Hore-Belisha and George Lambert.²²

As far as the Liberals were concerned, such seat sharing arrangements carried with them the advantages and disadvantages commensurate with their junior partner status. On the debit side, withdrawals from seats like Bridgewater, Tiverton, Taunton, Torquay and Weston-Super-Mare – all of which had witnessed famous Liberal victories barely eight years before – meant meek surrender to the Conservatives. On the credit side, the Liberals were guaranteed a

regional presence of sorts. Their 'celtic fringe' was indeed created for them out of the circumstances of 1931. Yet junior partners though the Liberals most clearly were in the strategic campaign to consolidate the anti-socialist vote, the 'coupon' arrangements with the Conservatives offered a satisfaction that was probably more emotive than rational; here was a chance to settle old scores with Labour and banish the 'social menace' from the regional scene.

Thus far the story of the 1931 election in the south west has been told as if from a regional 'high politics' perspective, to do with decisions reached, assumptions made and deals struck within a relatively closed world of party agents, benefactors, candidates and party connected worthies. The term notable, more usually used to describe provincial political bosses in France and Italy, sounds odd in an English context. But as a collective expression it approaches accuracy in outlining the role and power of a recognized and self-conscious regional elite. Of course, there is often a great deal of difference between what the notables of a region or locality expect to happen and what the 'civil society' make happen in the behavioural instance of voting. But for all this, one thing emerges clearly; that a seat-sharing 'coupon' like arrangement was rational in its conception and execution because it could be expected to consolidate something that existed, the anti-socialist vote.

The circumstances of the 1931 election were in their way 'special' but not so extraordinary as to deny rational calculation of the odds. Provided certain choices of candidate were offered, definite outcomes could be predicted. What lay at the heart of the Conservative-Liberal seat-sharing arrangement was the expectation that Liberal candidates would receive the support of Conservative voters in some seats while Conservative candidates would be supported by Liberal voters in (a large number of) others. The last thing that Liberal voters seem to have been expected to do was to vote Labour or otherwise express their party preferences in ways consistent with the 'redistribution of the radical vote' thesis. What the notables of the south west lacked in psephological sophistication they made up for in on-the-ground knowledge and years of campaign experience. Like the Gava clan in Naples or the proverbial Tammany Hall machine boss, they knew that the way to obtain desired electoral outcomes was to be concerned less with who did the voting than with who did the nominating. In the circumstances of 1931, the arrangements made to decide which candidate was to fight what seat was a means of conferring party possession.²³

An analysis of what happened in the three Plymouth borough seats offers an illustration of orchestrated seat-sharing, reveals the stra-

tegic nature of the arrangement and, incidentally, confirms the accuracy of on-the-ground expectations about voting behaviour. In 1929, three three-cornered contests had produced three different winners, Conservative in Sutton, Liberal in Devonport and Labour in Drake. In 1931, three straight-fights ensued, Liberal-Labour in Devonport and Conservative-Labour in Drake and Sutton. The manner of Labour's defeat in each of the contests is revealing and significant. In Devonport, turnout was only marginally lower than in 1929, nevertheless Hore-Belisha increased his majority from 4,000 to over 14,000. He received 23,000 votes instead of the 15,000 he had polled in 1929. Of course, indications of straight 'swing' and measures of 'net' volatility can produce a misleading image of voting movements. But it is difficult to resist the impression that what happened in Devonport was precisely in-line with what was expected to happen; that thousands of electors who would ordinarily have voted Conservative, voted for the National Liberal. That the Labour vote in Devonport increased from 7,000 to 9,000 was, under the circumstances, creditable. It hardly indicates though that there was much cross-party solidarity among the so-called 'radical' vote. The notables of the region's political society had founded their strategy on the assumption that the anti-socialist vote existed and that it could be consolidated. The electorate did not let them down.

All the appearances are that the arrangement was reciprocated in Drake and Sutton, that is that Liberal supporters chose to vote rather than abstain and that they voted overwhelmingly Conservative. As for Devonport there were only minor reductions in turnout and Liberal voters in Drake (6,000 in 1929) had the choice made easier for them in that the Conservative candidate, F.E. Guest, was himself a former Liberal. As it was, a Labour majority of 2,000 in 1929 was transformed into a Conservative majority of 12,000. No doubt this outcome stemmed from a complex series of movements, but a factor of major significance was the way in which Liberal voters behaved in the way expected of them, for the size of the Conservative majority cannot be accounted for by the 6% 'swing' against Labour. The scene in Sutton was much the same. There, Lady Astor defending a majority of 200 had it boosted to 10,000, and this was obtained despite a low 'swing' of 5% against Labour.²⁴

Seat-sharing as a means of consolidating the anti-socialist vote was not confined to Plymouth. Although the orchestration of the strategy was probably easier in an urban environment, it was made to work in constituencies as diverse as Frome and South Molton. In Frome, the mining constituency which had first elected a Labour MP in 1923, turnout was actually higher than it had been in 1929. This might have

been in-part responsible for the very small 'swing' of 3% against Labour, but the factor of decisive importance in the Conservative obtaining a 7,000 majority was the transfer of erstwhile Liberal support into the Conservative camp. In South Molton, George Lambert's campaign to woo the Conservative vote was, no doubt, made easier now that he was a Liberal National. He had first been elected to represent the constituency as far back as 1891 and had been returned unopposed on numerous occasions. But he had recently learned the lesson that the key to success in constituency politics lay in putting as much distance between the self and the 'socialist menace' as possible. In the run-up to the 1924 election his voting record in parliament had attracted the interest of the pro-Conservative *Devon and Exeter Gazette* which, in its public-spirited way, had led readers to believe that Lambert had connived in the formation of the first Labour government and was generally soft on socialism. He had lost his seat in the election of that year. In this sense, 1931 was not so much Lambert's re-election as his moment of political rehabilitation. The short memories of many of his constituents would have been gratifying, as thousands of those who had voted him out in 1924 must have contributed to his thumping majority and massive 88% vote-share in 1931.²⁵

There were, to be sure, many things weird about the 1931 general election. The manner of its timing, the suspension of 'normal' party competition in so many constituencies, and the overall outcome combine to make it so. Yet while rich in mythology, very little research attention has been paid to this election. So widespread is the acceptance of the year's *annus terribilis* qualities, that even the general election is deemed so abnormal as to be beyond the scope of meaningful comparative analysis. This is, to an extent, understandable, but it does nevertheless reflect a peculiar view that on-the-ground constituency outcomes are but knock-on consequences of developments in 'high politics'. Myths, by their very nature, do not die because they are not subject to scientific refutation. This does not mean though that a study of the 1931 election cannot contribute anything of significance about general trends and tendencies in voting behaviour.²⁶

For our purposes concentration on the 1931 election in the south west has yielded findings that are both significant and rewarding as regards long-term tendencies of 'consolidation'. That the anti-socialist vote was most effectively consolidated in that election was, far from being a one-off, the confirmation of a process unfolding over the previous decade. As was said at the beginning of this paper, a regional case study is not a good platform for challenging prevailing

orthodoxies about electoral change for the simple reason that what takes place in the periphery can easily be dismissed as being of peripheral importance. Nevertheless, the theme of 'consolidation' raises challenging questions about generalized notions of Labour displacing the Liberals as the party likely to attract the 'progressive' vote and, more particularly, confronts Cook's thesis of 'redistribution' in a quite fundamental way. To agree that there was an age of alignment in the south west as elsewhere is to highlight the debate as to the form this realignment took. It could be that 'consolidation' was the localized exception while 'redistribution' was the general rule. This is possible but it seems somehow unlikely that a regional-national difference could be quite so clear-cut. What is evident is that the method of analysis chosen and the *a priori* assumptions that fashion approaches to data are of crucial importance. Made-to-measure methodologies, as we have seen, hinge on the assumption that the major dynamic of electoral change in the 1920s consisted of a movement from Liberal to Labour. Our objection to them was not that they did not work when applied to the regional case-study, indeed, they worked if anything too well. It was rather that they 'screened-out' the possibility of detecting different trajectories of change. Of course, we would argue that the plotting or average vote per party candidate over a series of elections is a better mode of analysis than effecting a straight comparison and calculating a simple measure of 'swing'. We would also advocate its overall utility on the grounds that any realignment of voting behaviour must involve more than one section of the electorate and actually transforms the social bases of the party system itself. Our chosen mode of analysis permits the confident conclusion that the benefit the Conservative party drew from the electoral impact of Labour was of a far more direct kind than the advocates of 'displacement' or 'redistribution' would have us believe.

Closer than usual analysis of the 1931 election also suggests that the state of the Liberal party at that time needs qualifying. For while it is usual to read of the Liberals' plight in terms of a top-to-bottom disorientation and disorganized humiliation, there is no evidence from the south west that the Liberals were any more confused or disoriented in 1931 than at any other time over the previous decade. The rationality of seat-sharing arrangements with the Conservatives is one pointer to this, the average vote per Liberal candidate total is another (see Table III). In 1931 the rhetoric of national party leaders, Lloyd George excepted, and the behaviour of regional constituency associations left friend and foe alike in no doubt that Labour was considered the enemy to be defeated. The strategy may have been

mistakenly conceived but it was coherently and consistently executed. As far as can be judged, Liberal voters were not subject to the kind of dissonance that made them liable to abstain from voting or vote in ways other than was expected of them. If the 'socialist menace' could be banished only through surrendering the seats to the Conservatives, there must have been many south western Liberals who considered the price worth paying. After all, they could say, Labour had no regionally based MPs whereas the Liberals could build on their power base of five. By the same token, so the argument of the pro-Liberal *Western Times* went, the election had promoted the Liberals as the second party of state in that while there were only fifty two Labour MPs in the new House of Commons, the various denominations of Liberal added-up to a total of seventy two elected members.²⁷

As far as Labour's impact in the region's constituency politics is concerned, it has to be said that it was, in two senses, paradoxical. First, Labour attracted little positive support. Areas of strength were patchy and any successes were localized and temporary. But in terms of the rhetoric of anti-socialism, Labour's impact in the south west was decisive. Labour changed the discourse of regional constituency politics and effected changes in voting behaviour. The 'socialist menace' so conspicuous in its on-the-ground absence, yet such a constant feature of local press coverage of general elections, frightened sufficient numbers of Liberals into the Conservative camp and, as table III indicates, their disposition to stay once they had arrived grew stronger, or at any rate more pronounced numerically, with the passage of time. In this sense, 1931 did not represent a sudden departure brought on by special circumstances. Instead, the consolidation of the anti-socialist vote in that election was the fulfilment of a longer term process.

The second paradoxical aspect of Labour's impact on the region's constituency politics has to do with this easy to imagine but difficult to pin-down notion of the 'radical vote'. How Liberals voted in those contested seats where Liberal candidates were fielded in 1929 but not in 1931 has been labelled a 'crucial question'.²⁶ Yet no less crucial is the question of Labour voters' behaviour in those contested seats where Labour candidates were fielded in 1929 but not in 1931. Once again, the plotting of average vote per party candidate on a comparative basis proves useful. There were six straight-fight Conservative-Liberal contests in 1931, in constituencies contested by all three parties in 1929. In these (Barnstaple, Honiton, Totnes, Dorset North, Dorset West and Wells) the average vote per Liberal candidate increased from 13,720 to 14,412. This is not a large increase, but

given the overall consistency of turnout, it seems reasonable to suggest that Labour voters were disposed to support Liberal candidates in the absence of one of their own to vote for. Yet looked at from the other direction, whether Liberal voters were as disposed as their Labour counterparts to exercise an alternative party preference along radical solidarity lines, the fit is not nearly so good. There were six straight-fight Conservative–Labour contests in 1931 in constituencies fought by all three parties in 1929. In these (Plymouth Drake, Plymouth Sutton, Torquay, Frome, Taunton and Weston-Super-Mare) the average vote per Labour candidate was slightly reduced (11,429 in 1929, 11,118 in 1931). With the sole exception of Frome, turnout was much lower in these constituencies which suggests that while the Labour vote remained pretty solid, Liberals who voted Conservative or chose to abstain far outnumbered those who voted Labour.

Perhaps it is a phenomenon of such small importance that it is scarcely worth mentioning. But instanced here, in a lop-sided non-reciprocal way, is what Chris Cook believes was the major dynamic of his ‘age of alignment’ – a redistribution of the radical vote. How paradoxical that the only evidence of this happening in the south west takes the opposite form to that he supposes. Perhaps it is salutary to bear in mind that the political word ‘radical’ and the sociological term ‘class’ are not co-terminous.

Notes

¹ P. Adelman, *The Decline of the Liberal Party 1910–1931* (Longman, 1981), p. 65. C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922–24* (Macmillan, 1975), p. 27.

² H. Pelling, ‘Labour and the Downfall of Liberalism’ in H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (Macmillan, 1968), p. 120.

³ R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party* (OUP, 1974), p. xv.

⁴ M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867–1939* (Clarendon, 1982), pp. 256–257.

⁵ D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (Cape, 1977), pp. 234–244.

⁶ The obvious work is M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge, 1971). From a different perspective, K.O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: the Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922* (OUP, 1979). From a still different perspective, B. Schwarz, ‘The Language of Constitutionalism: Baldwinite Conservatism’, in *Formations of Nation and People* (Routledge, 1984).

⁷ M. Pugh, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁹ C. Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ D. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918* (OUP, 1963), pp. 9–10. Also

F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–1945* (Political Reference Publications, Glasgow, 1969).

¹² Rates of growth in electorate size varied considerably, as high as 44% in Dorset East and as low as 21% in Devonport (1923–29). On a rule-of-thumb basis it seems reasonable to suppose that 30% of those eligible to vote in 1929 were ineligible in 1923. This combined with a 10–12% replacement rate due to deaths and removals and a further 10% differential turnout rate (voting in one election but not the other) adds up to a large margin of difference. On differential turnout and replacement, see M. Moran, *Politics and Society in Britain* (Macmillan, 1985), pp. 76–77.

¹³ See, inter alia, R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (Fontana, 1985), p. 225. C.L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (Methuen, 1968), pp. 191–194. B. Schwarz and M. Durham 'A Safe and Sane Labourism: Socialism and the State 1910–24' in M. Langan and B. Schwarz (eds) *Crises in the British State 1880–1930* (Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 143–145.

¹⁴ M. Pugh, *op. cit.*, p. 243 compares 1929 with 1922 electoral outcomes and, quite satisfied that Lloyd George and Asquithian Liberals adhere to the same progressive camp, argues that there took place, 'a re-alignment of the non-Conservative vote' over the decade as a whole.

¹⁵ The decision not to include 1922 electoral outcomes in the analysis is taken on the grounds that there were too many candidates and too many different types of contest to allow effective comparison. M. Kinnear, *The Fall of Lloyd George* (Macmillan, 1973), pp. 142–143, calculates that with all the possible permutations there were seventy eight different types of contest in the election of that year. In the south west there were sixty three candidates but in only seven constituencies were there Conservative–Liberal–Labour contests.

¹⁶ M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: Atlas and Survey since 1885* (Batsford, 1981), pp. 122–125.

¹⁷ C. Cook, *op. cit.*, pp. 319–328 argues that Liberal defectors in 1924 voted Conservative and Labour in more or less equal proportions.

¹⁸ The local press coverage of the 1929 Exeter election was intense as Sir Robert Newman was standing for re-election as an independent having fallen out with his constituency association. The *Devon and Exeter Gazette* kept reiterating that a vote for Newman in Exeter or for a Liberal in another constituency could only increase the chances of a Labour victory. Maybe this was a stock-in trade Conservative argument, but one which did preoccupy the *Gazette's* editorial board to an inordinate extent before and after the election. See editions of 25/5, 27/5, 30/5 and 1/6 held on microfilm, Western Counties Library, Exeter.

¹⁹ C.L. Mowat, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

²⁰ C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900–1984* (Macmillan, 1984), p. 117.

²¹ It could have been more. R. Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 222, relates how Alec Glassey, the Simonite member for Dorset East, was set to be returned unopposed, even to the extent that he had his nomination papers signed by local Conservatives. In the end though the Conservatives did field a candidate who went on to win.

²² Isaac Foot, a Samuelite Liberal, was also unopposed in Bodmin, an exception to the general rule that pro-protectionist Liberal Nationals were better able to make pacts with Conservative constituency associations. The only Liberal able to obtain election was the Samuelite Sir Donald Maclean, who won North Cornwall in a three-cornered contest.

²³ P.A. Allum, *Politics and Society in Post-War Naples* (CUP, 1973), pp. 106–108.

²⁴ 1929 and 1931 results in the three Plymouth seats were as follows:

Devonport

1929		1931	
Turnout 82.3		Turnout 78.2	
L. Hore-Belisha (L)	15233	L. Hore-Belisha (NL)	23459
S. Gluckstein (C)	10688	P. Reed (Lab)	9039
Rev. D. Fraser (Lab)	7428		
	4545		14430

Drake

Turnout 80.5%		Turnout 79.6%	
J. Moses (Lab)	16684	Rt. Hon. F.E. Guest (C)	25063
Sir A. Benn (C)	14673	J. Moses (Lab)	12669
H. Pratt (L)	6309		
	2011		12394

Sutton

Turnout 81.1%		Turnout 80.1%	
Viscountess Astor (C)	16625	Viscountess Astor (C)	24277
T. Westwood (Lab)	16414	G. Ward (Lab)	14073
T. Aggett (L)	5430		
	211		10204

²⁵ *Devon and Exeter Gazette* editorials of 24/10, 28/10 and 29/10/24 pointedly raised the issue of Lambert's voting record in the House of Commons, and in particular his having voted for the amendment in January 1924 which led to Baldwin's resignation as premier and Ramsay MacDonald taking office. Needless to say the *Gazette* applauded the Conservatives' decision to oppose Lambert and highlighted the virtues of their candidate, Cedric Drewe.

²⁶ T. Stanhage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition: The British General Election of 1935* (Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 11–12 writes, 'to the present writer it seemed that in his book *Nineteen Thirty One: Political Crisis* (Macmillan, 1958) Reginald Bassett has put and answered the more interesting questions about the (1931) election.' This is an odd judgement about a strange book. Only nine pages out of 450 are devoted to what might be called an analysis of the results.

²⁷ *Western Times* 30/10/1931.

²⁸ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Allen and Unwin, 1977), note 29, p. 212.