

PARTY, PERSONALITY AND PLACE: RESEARCHING THE POLITICS OF MODERN CORNWALL

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INTRODUCTION

One of the central features of Cornish Studies over the past decade has been a growing interest in political issues. Topics ranging from Cornish electioneering at the end of the eighteenth century to the rise of anti-metropolitanism in the last century have been studied by a wide variety of scholars. The first part of this article will explore the role of the Institute of Cornish Studies in providing an interdisciplinary framework as this process developed in the early 1990s. By bringing together a variety of perspectives, not least through the second series of *Cornish Studies*, it has been possible to consider the wider implications of research in the new field of Cornish political studies. Consideration will then be given to the principal areas of interest over the past ten years, noting various changes of interpretation and pointing to the recognition of anti-metropolitanism as the core dynamic of the region's distinctive political culture. Indeed, the article will then conclude on the point that it is this ethno-regionalist factor, in both a historical and a contemporary context, which is likely to witness still further research over the next ten years as Cornwall attempts to meet the challenge of the new constitutional reorganization that is currently developing throughout the United Kingdom.

ESTABLISHING FRAMEWORKS

Philip Payton's 1994 article on Cornwall's radical tradition provides a useful starting point for exploring the emergence and development of

Cornish political studies. Recognizing the growing interest in Cornish politics at that time, ranging from Edwin Jaggard's consideration of the continuity and change debate in the nineteenth century to the work of scholars looking at issues of alignment and mobilization after 1900, Payton constructed a concise synthesis of ongoing research. He emphasized the remarkable survival of Cornish radicalism from the Age of Reform in the nineteenth century to the eve of the Second World War. Not only did this explain the failure of the Labour Party in Cornwall, it also indicated 'an intimate relationship between a distinctive Cornish political culture and the wider Cornish identity'. Although in the long term it was the Conservatives who, paradoxically, became the main beneficiary of this process, it was significant that the Liberal Party was able to survive the so-called Age of Alignment after the First World War as a major force in Cornwall. Payton added that this reflected the Liberal Party's ability 'to project itself as both the plausible radical alternative to the Conservatives and as the "Cornish party"'. It was well-placed to exploit the trend towards anti-metropolitanism after the Second World War, even 'co-opting where electorally appropriate the rhetoric and even policies of Cornish nationalism'.¹

The result was the creation of a unifying or core narrative that could explain the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the absence of a specific political research unit, on the lines, for example, of the Institute of Welsh Politics at Aberystwyth, such an interdisciplinary perspective was valuable. Although at this time Cornwall was certainly attracting the attention of both historians and political scientists, it appears that there were different reasons for this interest. Researchers from the discipline of political science offered an early perspective. Even in the late 1970s Colin Rallings and Adrian Lee were presenting papers on Cornwall that noted both the region's distinctive electoral behaviour and the rise of anti-metropolitanism.² This led in 1993 to Lee's statistical survey of electoral politics in Cornwall during the post-war era. Basing his study on an application of Miller's method of assessing the statistical measure of voting deviation between one area and another, Lee compared Cornwall with other areas of the United Kingdom. He concluded that the extent of the region's diversity was directly comparable with the 'deviation' in Wales from voting behaviour in England detected by Miller. The deviation figure for Cornwall did not fall 'below the Welsh' for a single post-war election and from 1959 to 1966 was 'substantially above'. Lee added that at the local government level, '[c]ounty elections in Cornwall display the greatest variety of patterns of contestation to be found anywhere in the United Kingdom'.³

Lee's approach was set against the wider background of a growing interest in issues of regional diversity and centre-periphery politics. By 1970 an upsurge in support for separatist parties in Western Europe, combined with signs of a general realignment of electoral politics, appeared to undermine the conventional belief in unified and homogeneous states. This coincided with new research into the long-term relationship between the 'centre' and its 'peripheries' by academics like Stein Rokkan and Derek Urwin who pointed to the significance of state-building processes dating back to the medieval period.⁴ Such ideas were central to Payton's *The Making of Modern Cornwall* in 1992. Adapting and developing Sidney Tarrow's idea of various 'phases of peripherality', he concluded that 'in each historical period the experience of Cornwall has been highly individual when compared to that of the English "centre", or indeed other areas of Britain'. The changing phase of 'second peripheralism' as a result of the effective collapse of mining in the second half of the nineteenth century was to lead to 'social and economic marginalisation' for Cornwall.⁵ This phenomenon, as we shall see later, provided the basis of Payton's explanation for the survival of the Cornish Radical Tradition.

For some historians, however, there was a different motivation for studying the events of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1970s Edwin Jaggard had become very interested in local-level electoral politics as a result of his studies for a Masters degree on 'The 1841 General Election in England and Wales' at the University of Western Australia. Under the Ph.D. supervision of Professor Richard Davis at Washington University in St Louis he began to study the electoral politics of Cornwall over the period from 1760 to 1910. Just a few years earlier Davis had played a leading role in a major scholarly debate over the political power of the aristocracy in England during the years before and after the 1832 Reform Act. Davis encouraged Jaggard to study Cornwall in this context on the grounds that the region 'had plenty to offer, not least because of its pre-reform reputation. It would be a challenge to see what happened after 1832'.⁶ Cornwall was, therefore, regarded by Jaggard as a case study that enabled him to 'enter debates about the working of the electoral system in England'. This interest has led to an impressive list of journal articles, which culminated in 1999 with a book entitled *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform, 1790-1885*.⁷ Mention should also be made of the late Brian Elvins, who sadly died during 2001. He was a pioneer in the study of the political history of the region and in 1959 completed an influential M.A. thesis, which was entitled 'The Reform Movement and County Politics in Cornwall, 1809-1852'.⁸ Interestingly, it appears that it was the launch of the new *Cornish Studies* series in the 1990s that encouraged him to

rekindle his interest in the events of the first half of the nineteenth century. The result was that he became a regular contributor to the series with a number of informative and stimulating articles on the political developments of this early period.⁹

This example of the influence of *Cornish Studies* is a reminder that the local field of political research is constantly developing and expanding. With the series acting as a platform for the work of both historians and political scientists, a positive exchange of ideas is now possible. Jaggard, for example, is currently considering ways of engaging with the core debates initiated by New Cornish Studies as a parallel project to his current focus on the politics of small towns in England and Wales in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Given the interdisciplinary nature of the work of the Institute of Cornish Studies, it is also not surprising that ideas from other academic debates, such as spatial considerations or the subjective methodology of oral history, are being used to build on the framework of Payton's core narrative. In order to explore these issues in greater detail, we must now consider some specific examples of recent work on Cornish politics in three areas: party identity; spatial diversity; and personality studies.

RECENT TRENDS IN CORNISH POLITICAL STUDIES

Issues of party identity in a Cornish context tend to be focused on the electoral experience of the Liberal Party. A good example of this approach can be seen in the work of Elvins, whose collection of articles in *Cornish Studies* traced the origins of Cornish Liberalism during the first half of the nineteenth century. In his 1998 study of Sir John Colman Rashleigh he focused on the emergence of a sustained challenge to the aristocratic establishment. He analysed the activities of Rashleigh's 'Friends of Parliamentary Reform', which was formed in 1809 with the intention of removing the defects of the notorious rotten borough system. Elvins pointed to the long-term significance of this move by stressing that Rashleigh, along with his 'group of like-minded friends, broke the existing mould of politics in Cornwall, laying the foundation for Liberal supremacy, and establishing a tradition which lasted into the twentieth century and which exhibited a revival in the recent 1997 General Election, with four of Cornwall's five MPs being Liberal Democrats'.¹¹ In subsequent articles Elvins went on to discuss both the contribution of the Lemon family interest and the emergence of the *West Briton* newspaper in the context of early Liberal politics.

The focus on Cornish Liberalism is perhaps even more evident with regard to studies of the twentieth century. Over the past decade there has been a natural tendency to concentrate on this party, given its ability to survive as a major force following Cornwall's apparently

unique experience during the Age of Alignment. Sustained by their continuing links with Methodism and the relative weakness of local trade unionism, the Liberals remained the obvious alternative to the Conservatives and the natural heirs of the Cornish Radical Tradition. The triumphs of 1923 and 1929, when the Liberals completely monopolized Cornwall's parliamentary representation, pointed to the electoral vitality of the party at the grass-roots. Indeed, it was no wonder that some contemporary observers remarked that Cornwall in the 1920s was the 'last refuge of Liberalism'.¹² For Payton, this was a product of the 'paralysis that had afflicted Cornish society and economy'. De-industrialization in the era of 'second peripheralism' prevented the development of Labour and left the Liberal/Methodist nexus 'fossilized' after 1918 'as the only viable radical alternative to the Conservatives and, indeed, as the "party of Cornwall"'.¹³

This theme has been continued through my own research into Cornish politics.¹⁴ By seeking to place the experience of Cornwall within wider debates surrounding the dramatic decline of the Liberal Party after the First World War, I have attempted to move away from the conventional focus on urban Britain to the neglected world of rural politics. A constructive model for this approach has been provided by Rokkan's views on the formation and consolidation of core political cleavages.¹⁵ This interpretation was based on the political history of Scandinavia, where socialist parties, the New Left, had established an early supremacy at the state level through support in urban and industrial areas. In peripheral areas, however, an inherent combination of regionalist, rural and religious discontent offered a more secure environment for the Liberals and other parties of the Old Left. When applied to Cornwall, this model helps to explain the survival of traditional politics in the first half of the twentieth century. Even in 1945, when Labour formed its first majority government at Westminster, the Liberals still came second in Cornwall in terms of their overall share of the popular vote.¹⁶ By building on this hard core of support, the Liberals were able to stage an early recovery in the Duchy during the late 1950s. Victories by Peter Bessell and John Pardoe in the 1960s were followed by the triumph of David Penhaligon in the following decade, and these events arguably created a cultural and historical context for the dominance of the Liberal Democrats in the parliamentary elections of 1997 and 2001.

Recent work, however, has started to highlight the need for detailed studies of the other principal parties. For the twentieth century, this is certainly the case with the Labour Party. My article in *Cornish Studies: Seven* suggested that Cornwall, far from being a political backwater for socialism, was briefly at the forefront in the rise

of socialism during the period immediately after the First World War. Labour's share of the vote in West Cornwall in 1918 was actually higher than in many industrial areas of Britain destined to become Labour strongholds.¹⁷ In order to fully understand the nature of Cornwall's Radical Tradition, it is essential that researchers look in greater detail at the paradoxical history of Cornish socialism. One might add that we also need to look at the changing fortunes of the Conservative Party. Despite the academic interest in issues relating to the survival of Liberalism, the practical reality is that the Conservatives were the dominant force in Cornish politics from 1931 until their disastrous setback in 1997. Besides, such an approach will also enable scholars to redefine the position of the Liberals within the context of Cornish politics as a whole. The sweeping Liberal landslides of the 1920s make it tempting to interpret that party's subsequent survival as a Cornwall-wide phenomenon. In reality, however, the Labour Party had emerged by 1945 as the main alternative to the Conservatives in the West Cornwall constituencies of Truro, Camborne and St Ives. Only in Bodmin and North Cornwall did the Liberals remain ahead of Labour during the dark days of defeat in the early 1950s. The revival of the latter part of that decade was shared more with Devon border seats like Torrington and North Devon than with West Cornwall, which might lead us to apply the term of 'Tamar Liberalism' rather than 'Cornish Liberalism'. Indeed, it was only with David Penhaligon's historic breakthrough at Truro in 1974 that the Liberals started to break the mould of West Cornwall politics.¹⁸

This reference to spatial diversity brings us to the issue of place in political research. Bernard Deacon in *Cornish Studies: Eight* pointed out that 'the Cornish Studies researcher must stay alert to processes that operate at different scales: the global, the Cornish and the local'. Such an approach would go beyond the usual tendency of concentrating on Cornwall as a single entity and provide a framework for exploring the interconnections between 'these different scales'.¹⁹ Although there has been no formal application of the spatial turn to studies of Cornish politics, it appears that researchers in this area are already operating at different levels. For the nineteenth century we can point to Jaggard's recognition of the need to give equal consideration to the mining, fishing and agricultural parts of the region. Ignoring the tendency to focus on the cultural and economic predominance of mining, his *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform* pointed to intra-Cornwall differences between the county divisions of East and West. The political implications were significant. Rural issues were much more to the fore in East Cornwall, with the farmers developing a reputation as an independent force and challenging the official

Conservative candidate and his gentry supporters in 1852. The subsequent victory of the agricultural candidate in this election came over thirty years before C.A.V. Conybeare's popular victory over the middle-class establishment in Camborne.²⁰ Similarly, David Thomson's recent study of municipal politics in Truro in the 1830s is a reminder of the need to investigate developments at the micro level. His consideration of the theme of civic pride placed Truro within the context of comparative work on borough politics in West Yorkshire.²¹

Analytical work on the twentieth century is also incorporating the role of space. It was mentioned earlier that the Liberal Party fared better in the rural divisions of East Cornwall after the 1920s than in the industrial communities further west. My own research on this subject suggests that this reflected the failure of the Labour Party to establish a secure base from which it could expand into the rural hinterland of the region. A model for this process can be seen in Wales, where Labour first established a core base in the mining valleys of the south before expanding into the remoter parts of the principality.²² This was not really an option for the Cornish Labour movement, a result of the failure of what Treve Crago describes as the period of 'proto-alignment' in the years immediately after the First World War.²³ After Labour's temporary breakthrough in 1918 the party's progress in West Cornwall was more gradual and this enabled the Tamar Liberals to survive on the rump of the Radical tradition until their first post-1945 revival. In that sense we must link internal spatial diversity to economic factors if we are to explain the politics of the periphery. Yet we also need to consider the global aspects of the Cornish experience. This was addressed in a recent article by Payton who focused upon the transplantation of the Cornish Radical Tradition to South Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Liberal/Nonconformist nexus, as in Cornwall, played a critical role in shaping progressive politics, leading eventually to a distinctly Cornish image for the state's United Labor Party. Payton concluded that there are clear 'parallels between the Cornish and South Australian experiences', with the apparent paralysis of Cornish politics being echoed by the eventual '“fossilization” of the Cornish-Methodist-mining influence in the Labor Party in the inter-war period'.²⁴

Finally, we must consider the need for studies of individuals associated with Cornish politics. Both Elvins and Jaggard have provided useful biographies of personalities from the nineteenth century, in particular the historical significance, as was mentioned earlier, of Sir John Colman Rashleigh's contribution to early Liberal politics and the recent edited collection of the 1868 election papers of Arthur Pendarves Vivian.²⁵ Yet there is a clear case for more scholarly

research into the lives of other influential politicians who have been able to shape the history of Cornish politics. Payton's brief sketch of Isaac Foot in *The Making of Modern Cornwall* nicely captures the appeal of an individual who so clearly personified the distinctive nature of Cornish politics.²⁶ Foot was also more than just a product of his times. His ability to articulate the moral politics of the Old Left might well have been the critical factor in ensuring the continuance of the Cornish Radical Tradition. Detailed studies of such charismatic individuals should be encouraged in order to build a more complete picture. Moreover, a consideration of personalities, rather than just the conventional focus on statistical evidence, would surely assist Cornish political studies in appealing to a wider audience.

Personality studies should not be restricted to the leading figures in society. The ongoing research associated with the Cornish Audio Visual Archive (CAVA) project offers the potential of investigating this subject at a variety of levels. Although the remit of CAVA now covers all aspects of the historical and contemporary life of Cornwall and the Cornish, this multimedia research programme actually grew out of an idea that simply envisaged the use of oral history as a method of studying the region's political culture in the twentieth century. Researchers associated with CAVA are now beginning to offer fresh perspectives on a range of issues, notably Crago in his ongoing reappraisal of the political dimension to the Celto-Cornish Revival and Kayleigh Mildren with regard to the historic relationship between Methodism and politics.²⁷ Oral history can be applied in different ways. In the first place, it offers the potential of providing extra data on the local level, thereby supplementing more conventional sources of information and enabling scholars to investigate such topics as family voting patterns and wider cultural influences through reference to individual life histories. Yet talking about the past with those who participated in it, even created it, is also a means of exploring the everyday dynamics of Cornish political life. Electoral behaviour is not necessarily a rational process. By exploring the subjective dimension of micro-politics we can further enhance our understanding of the party identity and spatial diversity issues outlined earlier.

EXPLORING THE POLITICS OF ANTI-METROPOLITANISM

So far the principal concern of this paper has been a consideration of Cornwall's political culture as a whole. Yet the ethno-regionalist dimension to local electoral behaviour deserves special consideration. On a superficial level this statement might seem surprising. Whilst a nationalist movement, Mebyon Kernow (Sons of Cornwall), was created in 1951, its electoral record over the past few decades has

hardly been impressive in comparison with its more successful counterparts in Scotland and Wales. Deacon's 1983 study of the electoral impact of Cornish nationalism noted that its best vote in a parliamentary election was a mere 4.02 per cent, which was achieved by Colin Murley at St Ives in 1979. The author concluded that once Mebyon Kernow was seen as an insignificant force in Westminster elections its potential was further undermined by a voting system that 'positively encourages tactical voting'.²⁸ Recent challenges to the London-based parties have shown no sign of a breakthrough for Mebyon Kernow at the parliamentary level. Setbacks in 1983 meant that the party did not contest any further elections until 1997 when its four candidates polled an average vote of 0.83 per cent followed in 2001 by a modest increase to just 2.14 per cent for its three nominees.

Some observers, however, have pointed to other ways of analysing the politics of Cornish nationalism. Payton and Lee have pointed out that the mere existence of Mebyon Kernow 'was in itself enough to mark the political experience of Cornwall off from that of English counties and to suggest the existence of an autonomous political culture in which the articulation of separate identity and a sense of anti-metropolitanism was of underlying significance'.²⁹ This was clearly evident in the 1960s when leading members of the London-based parties joined Mebyon Kernow, which at that stage was more a pressure group than a party, to demonstrate their support for its political aspirations, notably David Mudd for the Conservatives and Cornwall's two Liberal MPs, Peter Bessell and John Pardoe.³⁰ An anti-metropolitan agenda continues to be advocated by groups and individuals across the political spectrum. In December 2001 the Cornish Constitutional Convention was able to present a petition of 50,000 signatures in favour of a regional assembly for Cornwall, a move that was also publicly supported by the Duchy's four Liberal Democrat MPs and a variety of councillors and public figures. Mebyon Kernow itself has occasionally been able to win a respectable level of support outside of Westminster elections, notably 10,205 votes (5.9 per cent or nearly 10 per cent of the total Cornish vote) in the European parliamentary constituency of Cornwall and Plymouth and in recent years an even higher mean vote of 12.1 per cent per candidate in the 2001 county council elections.³¹ With nominal representation on four out of the six district councils, one might add that the failure to adopt a specific election strategy based on the immediate objective of building a strong base in local government has been a critical factor in preventing the nationalists from making a breakthrough. A forthcoming study of Mebyon Kernow and the wider politics of Cornish nationalism

MEBYON KERNOW

VOTE



TRURAN X

LIB·LAB·TORY HAVE HAD THEIR DAY
VOTE MEBYON KERNOW THE CORNISHWAY
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION 1979
THURSDAY MAY 3rd

PLEASE DISPLAY THIS IN YOUR WINDOW

Published by Neil Plummer, Blythe, New Road, Stythens.
Printed by Penzance Printers, 48 Causewayhead, Penzance.

5. A Mebyon Kernow poster from the 1979 General Election campaign.

will offer another opportunity of reassessing this distinctive aspect of Cornish political studies.³²

In academic research the Revivalist background to Cornish nationalism has been given greater consideration in recent years. My own work in this area suggests that we need to go back before the Second World War in order to trace the historical development of anti-metropolitanism. Although accepting the essentially antiquarian nature of the early Celtic Revival, my article in *Cornish Studies: Five* indicated that during the Edwardian period some leading members

of the Liberal Party were already using Celtic imagery for political purposes and starting to echo their Welsh counterparts by developing a Cornish agenda that would embrace the local disestablishment of the Anglican Church and the creation of a regional assembly for Cornwall.³³ This was followed two years later by a consideration of the links between the Celtic Revival and the inter-war Cornish Labour movement. In the 1930s Labour politicians like A.L. Rowse, parliamentary candidate for Penryn and Falmouth, made a conscious effort to establish the concept of community socialism within Cornwall's political culture. The changing nature of the Celto-Cornish movement meant that younger Revivalists were willing to develop their ideas within the context of a specific form of 'Cornish socialism'.³⁴ Indeed, ongoing research by Crago is indicating a wider politicization of the Cornish cultural movement at this time than has been previously recognized.³⁵ One might add that we also need to go beyond the Cornish movement itself in order to fully understand the impact of the Celtic Revival in the twentieth century. The political career of Peter Bessell is a good example. It appears that Bessell was the first post-war political figure to give any serious thought to Cornish nationalism and his support for an ethno-regionalist agenda was evident several years before he joined Mebyon Kernow. What is also significant is that the interest shown by Bessell and his party colleagues in 'Cornish' issues suggests that the 'Tamar' factor was not preventing the Bodmin Liberal association from developing policies in a Cornwall-wide framework.³⁶ Once again, this is a reminder of the historical significance of anti-metropolitan politics in the region.

Yet we also require new research into the politics of contemporary Cornwall. The work of the Cornish Constitutional Convention is taking place against the background of wider constitutional change throughout the United Kingdom, with the Scottish Parliament and Assemblies for Wales, Northern Ireland and London likely to be followed by the creation of elected regional authorities in parts of England. Contemporary perspectives on Cornwall's place in this new regional order are now starting to emerge. Payton's latest study places the debate on the region's future in this devolutionary context, noting that the potential of institutional regeneration offered by the new Combined Universities in Cornwall campus at Tremough would be further enhanced through the creation of a Cornish Assembly. He added that this extension of institutional reform offers the prospect of 'a strong voice for Cornwall in the emerging Britain of the regions and within Europe'.³⁷ Bernard Deacon has recently addressed other issues relating to the current process of regionalization. Focusing on the alternative government model of a seven-county South-West region, he

identified the role of policy-makers at this level in articulating a new regional discourse that effectively excluded the imagery and political claims of other scales in community identification.³⁸ This new research is to be welcomed. The agenda of Cornish political studies embraces both historical and contemporary issues. Given the continuing interest in centre–periphery politics, which is evident through the present focus on such issues as the impact of European integration and globalization on peripheral identities, it is appropriate that Cornwall is used as a case study by those scholars wishing to enter wider British and European debates.³⁹

CONCLUSION

The research culture that has developed around the Institute of Cornish Studies over the past few years is currently creating new opportunities for researchers engaged in the broad area of Cornish political studies. Building on the core narrative outlined earlier, scholars have explored such areas as the rise and survival of the Liberal Party and the implications of spatial diversity. This work should now be extended to incorporate the history of other political parties and the role of individuals within the electoral process. The renewed interest in contemporary politics comes at a critical time in the constitutional development of the United Kingdom. In order to explore these issues we can use a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the statistical emphasis of political scientists now being complemented by the use of oral history by CAVA. Indeed, a useful model might be that of the Institute of Welsh Politics, which conducted life evidence interviews with politicians, pressure group officials and other leading personalities as part of its study of the devolution process in Wales.⁴⁰ The South-West of Britain, as the Rt Hon. Charles Kennedy MP remarked, ‘is not populated by homogenous country dwellers with identical aspirations and political beliefs, but by a rather more diverse people’.⁴¹ It is now the task of Cornish political studies to build on this recognition of diverse political cultures by encouraging further academic research on the subject in the years ahead.

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