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Woodbridge, Steven [Reviewer] (2016) Book Review of: 'Mosley and British Politics, 1918-32: Oswald's Odyssey', by David Howell. *Parliamentary History*, 35(2), pp. 215-217., which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1750-0206.12232>.

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Review of: David Howell: *Mosley and British Politics, 1918-32: Oswald's Odyssey* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). In: *Parliamentary History* 35 (2), 215-217 (June, 2016).

This new study of the early political career of Sir Oswald Mosley, written by one of Britain's leading scholars of interwar Labour party and trade union history, is both a perceptive biography of the ambitious baronet and a painstaking reconstruction of the wider political ideas and context of the 1920s. Howell explores this particular period because it is a decade in Sir Oswald's tumultuous political life-story that has been relatively neglected by the main biographers. The latter, unsurprisingly, have tended to focus on the 1920s only as a general prelude to the infamous fascist version of Mosley in the 1930s. The historiography has thus concentrated primarily on the short-lived New Party of 1931-32 and, in particular, on the post-1932 years and Mosley's formation and leadership of the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Indeed, there is now a considerable published literature on Mosley and the activities of the BUF in the 1930s.

In contrast, Howell's book directs the analytical lens back on to the 1920s and, in the process, manages to furnish the reader with a good range of fresh and interesting insights into Mosley's entry into, and early engagement with, democratic politics, both at the local constituency level and in the incestuous social circles of 'high' politics at Westminster. There are cogent reasons to do so. As Howell puts it, historians must be careful not to collapse the complexities of the Mosley of the 1920s into the marginal figure of 1932 and beyond (p.193). Howell also seeks to make broader points about the changing nature of party organisation and competition in Britain during this period, a decade which saw the rapid emergence of Labour, the dramatic decline of the Liberals, and a growing realisation on the part of the Conservatives that, out of sheer necessity, they would have to adapt urgently to the

requirements of post-1918 mass democracy, or face possible decline and oblivion themselves.

By concentrating in detail on the complex world of parliamentary politics in the 1920s, and on Mosley's 'odyssey' through the main parties (from his disillusionment with the Conservatives, through a brief flirtation with the Liberals, and his membership of Labour and rise to Ministerial office), Howell has succeeded admirably in shining new light on Mosley's ideological motivations and personal behaviour during the formative years of his career, especially his shifting political allegiances and his increasingly impatient and ambivalent attitudes to traditional party structures and processes.

Placing himself firmly on the intellectual Left of the political spectrum from the mid-1920s onwards, and drawing on a small network of like-minded thinkers from the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and other groups, Mosley's vision of the future, and his diagnosis of the nation's ills, was both deeply pessimistic but also markedly optimistic, calling for radical solutions rooted in Keynesian-style economic planning and the creation of 'emergency' political machinery (chapters 4-6). Moreover, when Labour returned to office in 1929, Mosley was adamant that Ramsay MacDonald's cabinet should rapidly implement these policy measures. The Labour 'Establishment', however, remained sceptical, wedded to orthodox economics. This led to Mosley's eventual resignation as a Minister in 1930, and his attempts to further pursue his case from the Labour backbenches (chapter 7). When this failed, Mosley launched a new vehicle, the 'New Party', to try to break the dominance of the two main parties and rally others to his programme for 'action' (chapters 7-8). It was a prognosis Mosley had developed in the context of a decade that witnessed growing political uncertainty and the seemingly insurmountable challenges of

economic instability and looming capitalist crisis. Mosley was undoubtedly motivated by gloom about the immediate future and his acute fear of national decline, together with a notably strong self-confidence that he could personally intervene and play a leading role in saving the country.

In the preface to his book, Howell explains that, early in 1968, he heard Robert Skidelsky deliver a paper entitled 'Oswald Mosley, Last of the Radicals', a presentation that developed ideas already broached in Skidelsky's recently published study of the second Labour Government of 1929-31; these would be further developed in Skidelsky's controversial biography of 1975, which was viewed by critics at the time as 'revisionist' because it displayed too much empathy for aspects of Mosley's career. For Howell, the heated debate over Mosley raised 'significant and contested issues' about the character of interwar British politics which extended 'far beyond the complexities of an individual personality' (p.viii). This was reinforced some years later when Howell read Matthew Worley's 2010 study of Mosley and the New Party. Worley's meticulous work stimulated Howell into attempting his own understanding of Mosley's pre-fascist career that might, at the same time, 'illuminate the topography of party politics in a critical period' (p.viii).

Howell's excellent book successfully realises these objectives. Based on an impressive range of primary and secondary sources (including numerous unpublished personal papers, internal party archives, and published contemporary material), Howell offers a fascinating investigation of both Mosley the politician and the general operation of the democratic party 'game' during the 1920s, a game that Mosley was, ultimately, unable to play effectively (p.191). As some of the revisionist assessments of Mosley argued, this failure could possibly be explained in terms of Mosley's character: his impatience, his arrogance, and an unwillingness or inability

to accept the disciplines and frustrations of political bargaining (pp.190-91). Howell certainly finds evidence to support such interpretations. On the other hand, Howell also detects other factors at work: he points, for example, to interesting evidence which suggests that Mosley's attachment to any particular party was always loose, and this attitude may have been more common than scholars have assumed. As Howell argues, it is important to realise that party politics between 1918 and 1931 was characterised by instability. In this context, several politicians, not just Mosley, shifted allegiances: a number of Liberals moved over to Labour and, by 1924, even Winston Churchill had 'ratted' twice. In the later part of the decade, some of the younger Conservative intellectuals, such as Harold Macmillan (see chapter 7), also seriously contemplated deserting their party for some kind of 'national' political alliance in order to place country before party and arrest decline.

Howell also persuasively points out that Mosley shared with other political big beasts, such as Joseph Chamberlain and Lloyd George, a very 'instrumental' view of party: 'It offered a tool for the pursuit of objectives and should be discarded if deemed to have failed the test. Mosley's induction into any party culture had been minimal; the jettisoning of any party attachment was relatively easy' (p.193).

All in all, Howell's study is an important contribution to the historiography, which combines thoughtful analysis of Mosley's early years in politics with a comprehensive understanding of the internal politics of the Labour movement of the 1920s. At the same time, it also sets out very clearly the more general landscape of parliamentary politics in this period, and how various politicians from across the parties grappled desperately with the dilemmas posed by the onset of the Great Depression and economic slump.

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