Runing the world from clubs

Seth Alexander Thévoz, *Club Government: How the Early Victorian World was Ruled from London Clubs* (IB Taurus, 2018)

Review by **Tony Little**

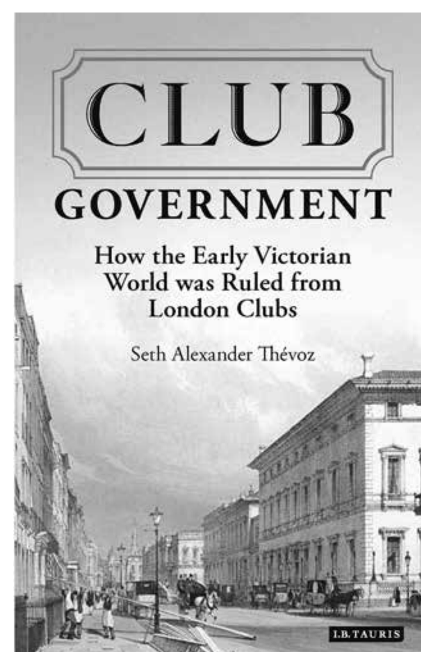
Any reader of Victorian political novels, particularly those of Trollope or Disraeli, will be familiar with the importance of the London political club culture to Victorian members of parliament and of the gentlemanly ethos which, ideally, guided their actions and judgements. There have been plenty of books giving the history of individual clubs and even more anecdotal reminiscences of conversations and behaviour within their precincts. What there has not been, until now, is a serious analysis of the role played by these clubs, who played it, and the differences between the various institutions.

Seth Thévoz takes us from the origins of these establishments in the eighteenth century through to the Second Reform Act of 1867, though with references to both earlier and later periods. His focus is on the overtly political clubs though, inevitably, some consideration is given to the non-political clubs such as Boodles or the Athenaeum because many politicians were members of such clubs. What he does not do is consider the provincial political clubs whose importance developed during the period and particularly after the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, which required more organisation in the constituencies to win over the enlarged electorate – scope for Thévoz or another intrepid author, willing to venture into even more uncharted territory.

The early London clubs were founded by plucky entrepreneurs and, behind a respectable façade of chocolate or coffee drinking, the main activities were gambling and drinking alcohol, both hobbies widely embraced in fashionable aristocratic circles. Inevitably, given the upper-class membership and the location in St James', with its proximity to Westminster, some of these clubs took on a political hue. Though not exclusively so, Whites had Pittite associations and Brooks's Whig. Following the Great Reform Act more overtly political clubs were established, by politically motivated groups rather than private entrepreneurs, of which the Carlton and Reform were the most significant and successful but not the only examples covered by Thévoz.

The book had its origins in a doctoral thesis, and while this comes with a few disadvantages to the general reader, who may want to skip lightly over the introductory historiography, the compensation is that the author's academic credentials allowed him unprecedented access to the archives of surviving clubs and in particular to the membership records. This has facilitated a quantitative analysis showing the very high proportion of MPs who joined one or several clubs, demonstrates the linkages implied by common club membership and deflates the myth of blackballing. It confirms the political status of some clubs but tends to undermine it for at least one. It corroborates the central importance of the Carlton to the Tories while suggesting a division of Liberals between the Reform and Brooks's. The analysis is complicated by the author's utilisation of MPs' slightly slippery self-categorisation when filling in questionnaires for Dod's *Parliamentary Companion*, calling themselves Whig, Tory, Radicals, Repealers, Reformers or Liberal-Conservatives (free trade Conservatives/Peelites), as well as the more straightforward Conservative and Liberal, compounded by labelling changes over the period as parties and factions split or refashioned themselves. Parties at this period were not fully organised and nobody was a card-carrying member, but even so readers would have benefitted from some introductory definitions.

Why did MPs and the parties need the clubs and why in particular after the Great Reform Act? Reform did not immediately end the aristocratic dominance of politics, but there was a gradual tendency for MPs to be drawn from a wider social background. This increased the number of MPs without a London home and without the entrée to those grand aristocratic houses which had formed factional salons in previous periods. A further factor suggested by Thévoz was the destruction of parliament in the fire of 1834.[1] For most of the period, parliament was a building site. MPs needed somewhere to stay in London, somewhere to dine, somewhere to work and somewhere to socialise away from the public gaze at a time when they did not get expense allowances and there were few respectable hotels or



pubs and taverns. Clubs also provided vital resources through their libraries and subscriptions to newspapers and journals. They kept pace with the latest technological developments such as the telegraph, producing the equivalent of a curated twitter feed. The parties needed varied spaces, small enough for committees or lobbying and large enough to bring together the whole party for critical meetings. While the clubs were tied to party, by and large they were a neutral space between internal factions, unlike the aristocratic salons, and while access was controlled it did not depend on the whims of the hostess issuing the invitation. The clubs were designed and adapted for these purposes and the book has some useful floor plans and drawings which illustrate the importance of the varying room sizes.

Twentieth-century cartoons of clubs create a misleading image of silent, crusty older gentlemen seated in over large armchairs and hidden behind broadsheet newspapers, forbidding any noise or disturbance. But my suspicion is that the most significant role of the club was as a gossip factory. Alcohol and gossip have been and remain pervasive factors in politics, forming building blocks for party cohesion and group morale. The corollary is that the clubs provided the space for groups of MPs to plot, lobby and campaign, though by their nature the existence of such activities needs to be deduced from the limited number of controversial cases which provoked complaints to the club's ruling committee. Club catering facilities could allow carefully orchestrated public

insight into the clubs when dinners with celebratory speakers were laid on as part of a campaign or to bolster support for some threatened party leader. On these occasions the press could be invited to publish the guest lists and the text of the speeches.

For the party hierarchy, the most important role for the clubs was the way in which they facilitated the operations of the whips and Thévoz devotes two chapters of the book to their operations. In the eighteenth century, a government majority could usually be ensured by a mixture of patronage, jobbery and electoral influence. The Treasury controlled enough constituencies to make the difference and enough funds earmarked for the management of the governing party. These weapons were denied to oppositions who were forced to rely on the ideological fire of their members and voluntary management methods. By the 1830s the government's advantages were waning and both sides were more reliant on their own efforts. The whips had to become more professional. The activities of the whips within parliament still await the attention of an enterprising author but Thévoz has uncovered much of what they did outside.

All the chief whips or their deputies, of both sides, were members of the appropriate clubs, and in some cases, particularly among Conservatives, acted as the gatekeepers facilitating MPs joining. The Reform and Carlton each provided a basement office from which the whips could operate and by the middle of the century division bells had been installed. The presence of significant numbers of MPs corralled inside the clubs of an evening, within reach of the House, undoubtedly made it easier for the whips to produce numbers for a division and, though Thévoz does not mention this, no doubt occasionally to plan an ambush. The clubs provided ideal spaces for intelligence-gathering by whips at a time when whipping was less strict and party cohesion weaker than in the twentieth century. On the Conservative side, which, in this period, was more usually in opposition, MPs paid subscriptions for the circulation of a printed whip and hence provided the surplus for an election fund. Liberal evidence is less secure but something similar probably prevailed.

The role of the whips and the clubs in elections were among the most controversial at the time, as each side played up the nefarious activities of the other with little concrete evidence. None of the clubs had the funds for widespread campaigning on the scale required for a general election, particularly when it is considered that fighting a constituency could cost more than it does today, without adjusting for inflation – treating and corruption were a regular feature. Thévoz provides examples of intervention in constituencies on a modest scale. He concludes that the provision of encouragement, coordination and basic expertise in registration and campaigning together with pairing willing candidates with vacant constituencies were the clubs' major contribution. Even so, the clubs provided what passed for national headquarters in a period when elections still retained a strong local component.

The final chapter attempts to justify the book's title and, while it does provide a very useful concluding analysis, to my mind it fails to prove that Victorian Britain, still less the early Victorian world was ruled from the London clubs. The phrase 'club government' originated with Edward Ellice, the Whig whip, but was seized on by Norman Gash for a chapter in his 1950s analysis of electoral politics between 1830 and 1850.[2] Gash outlines the development and functioning of the clubs but does not define what he meant by club government and neither does Thévoz. Some of the clubs had a clear ideological basis, such as the free trade and the ultra-protestant establishments, with clear agendas which they pushed forward, but the big clubs such as Brooks's, the Carlton and the Reform were broad based. Of course, they separated the Tory sheep from the Whig/Liberal goats, but their objectives were primarily utilitarian and social rather than the attainment of specific ideological utopias. The British Victorian world was governed from imposing, but modestly staffed, offices in Whitehall and accountable to the Palace of Westminster by men who happened to belong to clubs rather than because they joined. Neither Peel nor Palmerston chose ministers on the basis that they were good club men, though they probably were. Clubs may have provided the expertise that help elect MPs and provided comforting diversions on days when debates were less than enthralling but is that 'club government'?

This quibble with the title should not deter anyone from reading the book. Seth Thévoz has undertaken the most comprehensive and rational analysis of the part clubs played and how they were enabled to do so. He has demystified some of the aura that Trollope and Disraeli tried to create around clubland.

Tony Little is chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group. He was joint editor of British Liberal Leaders *and* Great Liberal Speeches. *He contributed to* Mothers of Liberty and Peace Reform and Liberation.

1 See Caroline Shenton, *The Day Parliament Burned Down* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
2 Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (Longmans Green & Co, 1953), ch. 15.

Chamberlain's machine

Andrew Reekes, *The Birmingham Political Machine: Winning Elections for Joseph Chamberlain* (West Midlands History Limited, 2018)
Review by **James Brennan**

The political career of Joseph Chamberlain continues to excite historians, and *The Birmingham Political Machine* is one of the latest to join the historiography. However, rather than offering a straightforward biography, Andrew Reekes charts the development of a highly efficient political organisation. This was a group of influential politicians whose electoral tactics dominated municipal politics in Birmingham, and were applied nationally through issues such as tariff reform. Reekes focuses on these instrumental figures, with Joseph Chamberlain as the key leader, who designed and operated this 'Machine' to great electoral success. Their methods have left an enduring legacy. In one of her first speeches as prime minister, Theresa May referred to Chamberlain as a key influence, and this was acknowledged in subsequent media coverage. The prime minister was referring to the political beliefs of