
Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain is a study of the longevity and durability of the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) from its foundation in 1934, through its rebranding as ‘Liberty’ in 1989, to the present day. It examines how the organisation has been at the forefront of debates about the protection and extension of rights and liberties. The opening of the book powerfully encapsulates the trajectory of the NCCL since the 1930s. It contrasts Shami Chakrabarti’s role, in her capacity as Director of Liberty, as a flag-bearer during opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics, with Special Branch reports from 1934 identifying the NCCL’s founder, Ronald Kidd as a ‘communist sympathiser’. This contrast not only reveals the changing politics of the NCCL/Liberty, but also the changing role of NGOs and the place of human rights in British politics.

The book is structured into three sections, each of two chapters. Part 1 examines the origins of the NCCL in the age of the popular front; Part 2 considers the ‘rights revolution’ and the reformulation of the NCCL’s work during the rise of new social movements in the 1960s and ‘70s; while Part 3 examines the professionalization of the organisation within the NGO sector in the context of the consolidation of a politics of human rights in the 1990s. Moores argues that the changing role of NGOs is particularly useful for historians to study, given they are a key location for the contestation of dominant political paradigms and the creation of new ways of framing political issues. He suggests (p. 10) that the NCCL “sought to translate the more and utopian language of human rights, as best they could, into the everyday”.

The first two chapters cover the period between the organisation’s foundation in 1934 and 1948. In these chapters, the politics of civil liberties are interpreted within the context of ‘popular front’ politics which sought to occupy an ideological middle ground between communism and liberalism,
as a bulwark against the spread of fascism. Moores concurs with earlier assessments that, in the 1930s, while the NCCL was never subject to the control of the Communist Party, it did have an ‘ambiguous relationship’ with it. The NCCL attempted to stress its non-party credentials by modelling itself on other forms of associational life that were central to the culture of the British middle classes at the time. Nevertheless, the defence of ‘freedom of speech’ and other civil liberties was the product of a period in which there was widespread political concern about totalitarianism internationally and growing domestic authoritarianism.

The second chapter focuses on the shifts in this popular front approach towards civil liberties activism between the end of World War Two and the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948). Moores argues that, in this period, the British left were beginning to articulate a coherent approach to political, social and economic rights, but were unable to win broader support for these rights, under the pressure of early Cold War paranoia and the consolidation of more liberal rights frameworks internationally. In this context, throughout the 1950s, NCCL drifted into a quieter politics, developing test cases around issues such as mental health.

The second part of the book focuses on the transformation of civil liberties activism into rights-based activism over the course of the ‘long 1960s’. Moores demonstrates how this political shift occurred as the organisation shifted from relying on the opinion of legal and academic experts to a more direct engagement in (and alongside) the social movement activism of the New Left. With many of these new social movements operating confrontationally at the boundaries of the law, the long 1960s afforded a new generation of progressive lawyers the ability to reaffirm the practicality of older civil liberties claims. This was also the period when the NCCL began to take rights claims based on ‘identity politics’ seriously. Chapter 4 examines how, as the 1970s progressed, the NCCL’s defence of civil liberties became increasingly radical and contentious in response to internment in the north of Ireland and the 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act; as well as the defence of black and Asian communities against the rise of the National Front. Chapter 4 examines in depth the (ongoing) controversies surrounding debates within the NCCL about how they should respond to the
prosecution of members of the Paedophile Information Exchange (a group which actively tried to insinuate itself within the NCCL for added legitimacy).

The final two chapters reflect on the emergence of the contemporary politics of human rights and the ways in which these marked a new stage in the evolution of NCCL/Liberty from its origins as an organisation concerned with civil liberties. Moores argues that, faced with a British government that was unconcerned by lobbying based on civil liberties, a critique based on human rights claims enabled the NCCL to challenge the actions of the government and the security services at a time when electoral challenges to the Conservative Party were largely ineffective. The use of a human rights framework added universal moral authority to their critique of government policy. However, Moores acknowledges that, by focusing on human rights claims within the framework of the European Convention on Human Rights, while having an effect on policy and making human rights a meaningful category within British law, the NCCL tied itself into an increasingly conservative set of rights and legal structures. Even so, for the first time, human rights entered the political mainstream in Britain, becoming increasingly incorporated into the political programmes of the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties during the 1990s. For Moores this indicates that NGOs such as the NCCL have been better able to influence political and professional elites, offering them technocratic and legalistic approaches to protecting rights, than they were in winning a “whole-hearted cultural embrace of human rights” (p. 20) within the wider British population. Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the historical study of civil liberties and human rights in Britain since the 1930s, but also the changing role of political pressure groups and NGOs over the Twentieth century.

University of Leicester

Gavin Brown
gpb10@le.ac.uk