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'The Stupid Party': Historicising the development of anti 'anti-intellectualism' by opponents of Conservatism

JS Mill's famous affixing of the label 'the stupidest party' to the Conservatives in 1861 swiftly embedded irrationalism and anti-intellectualism as key tenets in the characterisation of Conservatives by their opponents. Throughout the later 19th century, Liberals became preoccupied by the supposed Conservative championing of voter intoxication via the beer barrel, their conditioning into unthinking obedience in Anglican Church pews, or their hypnosis by gaudy displays of khaki patriotism and jingoism. While the destruction of the Liberal Party arguably dampened this 'anti anti-intellectualism' in the post-1918 period, the theme of the 'stupid party' - perhaps provoked in part by anti-ideological Conservative appeals to 'pragmatism' and 'common sense' - have persisted, along with the 'stupid' label itself.

This paper, focussing especially on the late Victorian and Edwardian political arena, is an attempt to historicise the origin and evolution of the 'stupid party' label.