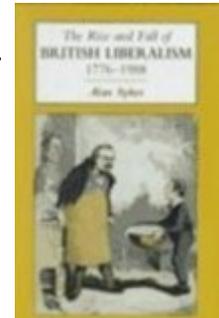


Alan Sykes. *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776-1988*. London: Longman, 1997. vii + 316 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-06041-8.



Reviewed by Todd Lee

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Ever since George Dangerfield wrote of the Edwardian crisis that had brought on the "strange death of Liberal England", historians have seen the turn of the century as a key point in British political development. Alan Sykes' new contribution to the long historiography of British Liberalism brings a new spin to the familiar story of liberalism's successful nineteenth-century crusade and its twentieth-century demise. Firstly, he endeavors to write the history of liberalism as an ideology rather than a history of the Liberal Party as others have done. Secondly, Sykes argues that far from being the dominant ideological force of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, liberalism was actually a weak ideology wracked by the conflicting ideals of libertarianism and a coercive elitism. These conflicts were revealed both in the divisive factionalism following the departure of Gladstone from the political stage, as well as the New Liberalism of the twentieth century embodied in David Lloyd George, the last great Liberal political figure. Sykes follows the progress of the "liberal impulse" in British politics from the American and French Revolutions through the experience of the First World War. He maintains

that the seeds for the conflict between libertarianism and elitism were present from the first, as Whigs attempting to co-opt the middle classes behind Britain's aristocratic constitution set distinct limits on the level of electoral inclusion. For Whigs and for the later Liberal Party, property remained the test of participation through the vote.

Sykes disagrees with other historians like Jonathan Parry and Norman Gash, who have dated the birth of the Liberal party in the 1830s, stressing that the so-called Liberal party looked and acted more like a non-Conservative alliance of disparate and discordant groups than a political party; the mid-nineteenth-century liberal hegemony appears primarily to have been that of a political mentality a political mentality is not a political party (20-1) Sykes maintains that in these early days, the liberals simply formed a centrist faction between Conservatives and Radicals in Parliament. Instead, he dates the melding of liberals into a cohesive party much later in the 1880's under the magnetic leadership of Gladstone (45), when free trade, religious freedom, a non-interventionist, minimalist state and the pro-

tection of private property became the main pillars of liberal ideology. Sykes further maintains that the Liberals, always divided, were only able to maintain their electoral dominance in the late nineteenth century during times of Conservative division or failure, such as in the Conservative defeat after the Boer War. In Sykes' view:

The late Victorian strength of the Liberal party can easily be overstated, particularly by regarding the "Conservative hegemony" of 1886-1906 as an aberration caused by Liberal abstentions, and the election of 1906 as restoring the normal pattern of Liberal power. The Liberals won an absolute majority only twice after 1868....

The 1906 success was not the continuation of Victorian supremacy, but the aberration from the emerging pattern of Liberal weakness, caused primarily by the renewal of Conservative divisions and the adoption of deeply unpopular policies which reignited old Liberal passions for one last time. (270)

Liberals fastened onto issues like Home Rule for Ireland as a means to mask their own failures to accept and incorporate the Irish and the working classes into the political system of Great Britain. Further, Liberals never proved able to reconcile their vision of free trade with the concrete fact of empire, and suffered from popular jingoism in response to war in the Sudan and South Africa. Despite such weaknesses, the shortcomings of the Liberal party were made up by the conversion of the ever-expanding British electorate to liberal principles. These principles succeeded where the Liberal party and its policies failed in incorporating workers and women successfully into the political system. Thus, the New Liberalism of Lloyd George and the Coalitionist governments of the First World War erred in the transformation of Liberal politics into an image of state control as embodied in National Insurance. New Liberalism replaced the mid-Victorian, Gladstonian idea of the individual as the proper guarantor of government with the state itself:

Nominally, New Liberalism built upon the Liberal tradition of liberation, but it ran too easily to expert committees that bore more relation to the ideas of Milner than those of Gladstone. It compounded social with intellectual condescension. The working classes were to be administered, inspected, policed and reformed, their incomes were to be compulsorily reduced for their own good, their choices restricted, but they were not to share power. The elevation of the state, as a positive force, the embodiment of the "common good" through which the individual achieved his own liberty, provided a rationale for top-down government by bureaucracy (271).

Even in the 1909 People's Budget, with its reinterpretation of the fiscal system which shifted the burden of taxation from the working classes to propertied citizens, Liberals failed to see that workers' priorities lay in independence and the traditionally liberal freedom of the market. It was this break with the party's libertarian past that ensured the slow rise of Labour after the First World War and doomed the Liberals to a long period of insignificance, from the departure of Lloyd George in 1929 through to its final dissolution in 1988. Given the large-scale conversion of British people to liberal values, the Liberal party failed in spite of itself. Sykes' sweeping survey provides a competent guide to the complexities of the great age of British politics. His attention to the empire, and especially Ireland, as well as the relationship between Liberals and Labour, makes for a well-rounded account in what is nominally a synthetic work. Designed as a textbook, the author includes a thirty-page glossary of political and legal terminology which will prove beneficial to students as well as foreign readers. Students will also appreciate his well-developed thesis, with key points laid out at the end of each chapter which make sense of the sometimes dense political narrative. Although the book substitutes a short guide to further reading for an extended bibliography, the notes provide a useful path through the academic debates on major aspects of interpretation. Sykes'

challenging thesis recasts traditional views of liberalism and the Liberal party as the leading lights of democratic development over a century and a half of British political history.

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