

Must Governments Fail?

Book Review: Anthony Seldon (ed.), How Tory Governments Fall (Fontana Press, 1996). Reviewed by Tony Little.

Any book which details the many ways in which Tory governments ultimately fail must almost sell itself to Liberal Democrats. Seldon has put together a collection of essays by a wide range of academics, including Ivor Crewe, Norman Gash, John Vincent and Malcolm Pugh. He has asked them to judge the fall of each Tory Government since Pitt against a set of nine criteria:

- A negative image of the party leader
- Confusion over policy direction
- Manifest internal disunity
- Organisation in the country in disarray
- Depleted party finance
- Hostile intellectual and press climate
- Loss of confidence by the electorate in economic management
- Strength of feeling of 'time for a change'
- A revived and credible opposition

These criteria apply best to modern governments which are expected to manage the economy and where there is poll evidence to judge (no matter how fallibly) image and strength of feeling. They might almost have been devised from a description of John Major's predicament. For earlier periods where poll information is not available, and where the role of government was more restricted, they are less applicable. Fortunately the essayists on the earlier periods do not feel themselves too tightly constrained by the criteria but concentrate instead on setting out the main lessons which might be drawn from the decline of the government they cover.

Is Failure Inevitable?

Enoch Powell has written that 'all political lives, unless they are cut off in mid-stream at a happy juncture, end in failure,' and observation shows that the same applies to British governments.

Seldon does not pose the question of the inevitability of the failure of single-party rule, but Scandinavian and Japanese experience suggests that single parties can remain in power longer than even the most successful British party has achieved. Perhaps there are peculiarities of the British system which need further exploration. British politics operates in an environment of high stress, conflict and adrenalin. Tiredness in political leaders has been inadequately

explored as a cause of failure, but was undoubtedly a factor with Balfour, Churchill, Macmillan and Thatcher.

Seldon shows that there are commonalities in the failures of government, particularly in the deterioration of leadership or party splits, but the period covered is too long and the circumstances too individual for any simplistic conclusions to be drawn, and the book is best enjoyed for the quality of the individual essays rather than as a test of Seldon's thesis. Most of the essays contain useful statistics for its period and each ends with a chronology of the government concerned.

Looking only for the signs of failure ensures a different perspective to the usual concentration on the successes and progress made adopted by the conventional history. But ultimately this absence of the wider viewpoint is a handicap to those not already familiar with a particular period, a handicap which is magnified by the adoption of a single party standpoint. Politics is an interactive business. The Tory party may have some enduring prejudices and principles but it is also defined by the policies adopted by its rivals, and the environment in which it operates. The victories of Salisbury, Macmillan and Thatcher owe at least as much to the problems of their opponents as to the ideas that they propounded.

The Other Side of the Hill

Widening out the study to include the causes of failure in progressive governments might have deepened the perspective on Tory failure. The 1868–74 Liberal and 1945–51 Labour governments were each high achievers in their own terms but they exhausted their immediate ideas and their senior members. The 1880–85 Liberal and 1964–70 Labour governments lacked big ideas and became prey to the personal squabbles which seem endemic in politics and probably represent the closest approximation to the Tory experience. Party splits were critical to the failure of Gladstone in 1886, Lloyd George/Asquith after 1916, and Callaghan in 1979, but in each case there was an underlying policy/ideological shift which, like the Tory problems over protectionism (1846, 1906, 1997), made any split particularly damaging in the eyes of the electorate.

Seldon's team present enough interesting ideas to make the book well worth reading even without the draw of its title and I look forward to the promised follow-up.