

Reviews

A Liberal life

Daniel Waley: A Liberal Life: Sydney, Earl Buxton, 1853–1934 (Newtimber, 1999)

Reviewed by **Malcolm Baines**

Daniel Waley has written a solid overview of the political career of this middle-ranking pre-First World War Liberal statesman, with several interesting insights into more general political issues of the time. He has added to its value to anyone interested in looking at the period in more detail by providing copious footnotes and a list of the Buxton papers. As a result, this book is well worth reading for those particularly interested in late Victorian or Edwardian politics, or in the history of South Africa, where Buxton was Governor-General from 1914 to 1920.

Buxton was born into one of those industrial dynasties of the late eighteenth century, including, for example, the Cadburys, which were to provide the financial basis of a number of Victorian and Edwardian political careers. In Buxton's case, the industry was brewing, and the income generated sufficient that Buxton could devote his life to political service despite suffering from a serious bone disease.

Waley sketches well the beginnings of Buxton's political career: his election to the London School Board in 1876, at the age of twenty-three, where he gradually established a reputation as a radical on social issues. As a rising Liberal politician with private means, Buxton had a typical start in parliamentary life. He had some impact as a political thinker, publishing several mediocre political works including a *Handbook to Political Questions of the*

Day. Buxton stood unsuccessfully in Boston, Lincolnshire, in 1880, and had a short period as MP for Peterborough from 1883 to 1885, before becoming member for Poplar in the East End in 1886 until his resignation in 1914.

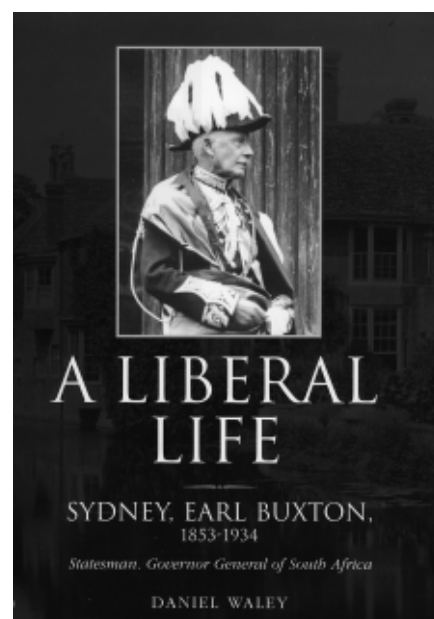
In parliament, Buxton spoke frequently on a number of issues and cemented his radical reputation by taking a leading and sympathetic role in the 1889 dock strike. He also argued in favour of free education and against judging schools purely on their examination results. Buxton was, however, opposed to allowing widespread Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe into London, arguing that charity begins at home.

Waley portrays Buxton as a rising Liberal politician who never quite reached the top of the greasy pole. He joined with Asquith, Haldane and Grey in forming a group to press for a wider programme of social reform in the 1890s. However, unlike the others, who substantially advanced their careers in Gladstone's 1892–94 government, Buxton was disappointed only to be offered the Colonial Under-Secretaryship. This post did, however, begin his interest in Southern African affairs. Waley, in one of the most interesting chapters of the biography, gives a fascinating insight into the Poplar Liberal Association in this period and how fundamental Buxton and his wife were to its organisation, providing a focus for constituency activity during the year.

After the defeat of Rosebery's Government in June 1895, Buxton returned to opposition. Waley has little to say about Buxton's contribution to Liberal thinking in this period. Given his former ministerial post, it is perhaps natural that he should have been preoccupied with the Boer War, but it was also the time of his second marriage. Nonetheless, he still hoped for high office following Campbell-Bannerman's formation of a government in December 1905, even thinking it possible he might become Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Campbell-Bannerman, however, had a low opinion of Buxton, confiding to his secretary that he felt a place had to be found for him even though it was not deserved through merit. In the event, he served until 1910 as Postmaster-General and then under Asquith as President of the Board of Trade.

Buxton was no match for the political skills of Lloyd George, who, for example, unscrupulously persuaded Asquith that he should be the one to introduce the Government's measures to bring in unemployment insurance. As a result, Buxton was very much on the margins of the 1906–14 Liberal administrations, although it is not clear from Waley's account that he ever had the ability to play a more prominent role. Increasingly fed up with dealing with industrial unrest, Buxton took the opportunity to replace Herbert Gladstone as Governor-General of



South Africa, a post in which he seems to have been a much greater success.

Waley gives an interesting resumé of Buxton's career as Governor-General and in many ways this is the best part of the book. In particular, he focuses on Buxton's relations with the defeated Boer leaders Smuts and Botha, now running the South African government, the pressures on him to support South African annexation of Swaziland and Rhodesia, and how he travelled the region to support the war effort.

Buxton returned to the family home in Sussex in 1920, where he spent his remaining years, until his death in 1934, in writing a biography of Botha and continuing his interest in African affairs. Although in the Asquithian camp, Buxton played no real role in the Liberal squabbles of that period.

This is the first biography of Buxton, a man who struggled against illness and family tragedy in the premature deaths of his first wife and four of his six children, but never seemed from Waley's account to have had the necessary political skills to make a success of his periods in government. Waley certainly concludes that his conciliatory role as Governor-General was Buxton's main achievement and probably that part of his public career he enjoyed most. Overall, an interesting insight into a lesser known figure but not one that changes fundamentally our understanding of the pre-First World War Liberal Party.

Copies of A Liberal Life can be obtained from Newtimber Publications, Newtimber Place, Newtimber, Hassocks, West Sussex BN6 9BU; tel: 01273 833298; web: www.newtimber.co.uk.

responsibility on internal feuds within the Liberal Party and the failure of the Lloyd George government to deliver a land 'fit for heroes'. He is relatively kind on Asquith's stance during the period of Labour government in 1924, and looks in some detail at the Popular Front initiatives of the 1930s. Interestingly, he finds an early example of the Liberal Party deciding to target its efforts on a handful of promising parliamentary constituencies, in 1938.

Joyce devotes 200 pages to the post-war era, compared to only half that number on the years prior to 1945. The main criticism of the book is that he allows too much space to a discussion of the Grimond era, including a section of doubtful relevance on Grimond's views after he retired as Liberal leader, at the expense of other aspects of the Liberal/Labour relationship. Joyce makes no mention of the talks which took place during the 1950 Parliament between Liberal MPs and a representative of the Labour Party on the possibility of the Liberals backing a Labour programme during a period when Labour's parliamentary majority was small. The relationship between the two parties at local government level is not considered, although there were examples of local pacts and arrangements, for example at Southport. His treatment of the Lib-Lab Pact is surprisingly short and Christopher Mayhew, the only sitting

Liberals and Labour

Peter Joyce: *Realignment of the Left? A history of the relationship between the Liberal Democrat and Labour Parties* (Macmillan, 1999)

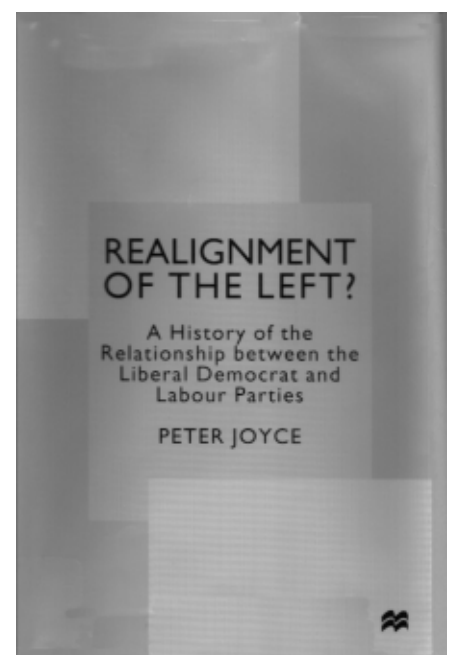
Reviewed by Robert Ingham

The relationship between the Liberal Democrats and its predecessors and the Labour Party has been a source of political interest for much of the last century. Historians have long considered the question of how the Labour Party came to replace the Liberal Party as one of the two major parties in the British electoral system, as well as why the Liberal Party survived once it slipped to the political periphery. The creation of 'New' Labour and the election of the Blair Government in 1997 has encouraged fresh consideration of the relationship between the parties, particularly with the advent of joint policy negotiations on a range of key issues.

Peter Joyce has made an early attempt to assess the relationship

between the parties during the twentieth century, but plenty of opportunities remain for other historians in this fertile area. Joyce's study is a patchy mix of new research – particularly on the period during which Jo Grimond was Liberal leader – and a review of existing literature. Students arriving at this area of political history fresh will find Joyce's work useful, but more expert readers are likely to find the book a little disappointing.

Joyce's consideration of the relationship between the Liberal and Labour Parties before the Second World War is competent but does not add a great deal to existing work in this area. There is a good discussion of the reasons for the Liberal Party's eclipse by Labour, for which Joyce eventually pins



Labour MP ever to defect to the Liberal Party, does not rate a single reference.

Joyce's book is not the 'authoritative account of the history of the British left and centre' which it claims to be, and nor is it an entirely convincing analysis of the relationship between the Liberal and Labour Parties. Such an analysis would surely

have compared in detail the ideological underpinnings, and the background and views of the activists, of the two parties. Instead, Joyce has written a history of the Liberal Party from the point of view of its relationship with the Labour Party. Such an exercise is not without value, and the book makes for an interesting, if ultimately unsatisfying, read.

'equality of birthright'. Liberal achievements in curbing executive power and patronage stem from this basic approach: the steady widening of the franchise throughout the nineteenth century, the opening of the civil service to competitive entry, the abolition of purchase of army commissions, to cite but a few. The Gladstonian commitment to retrenchment, superficially so different to the following century's New Liberals' belief in public spending for social ends, in practice derived from the desire to limit expenditure on the armed forces, police and the diplomatic service, then the main areas of state spending, which primarily benefited the upper classes; it was another means of constraining executive power.

Along with the control of power goes its dispersal, which Russell links with the promotion of diversity, religious, social, geographical and cultural, to form pluralism, his second theme. Again there are strong historical roots: the Whig rejection of the Tory view of church and state as coterminous, Gladstone's acceptance of the United Kingdom as a country of several nations, the long-held belief in the autonomy of local government – a strong contrast with other, more centralised states such as France, where, as John Stuart Mill noted, 'everything was done *for* the people, and nothing *by* the people'.

Intelligent Liberalism

Conrad Russell: *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism* (Duckworth, 1999)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

This book, part of Duckworth's 'Intelligent Guide to ...' series, provides an excellent outline of modern Liberal philosophy. It deserves a review here because, as one would expect from an author who is a professional historian as well as a politician (and Honorary President of the Liberal Democrat History Group, no less), it is firmly rooted in the history of British Liberalism.

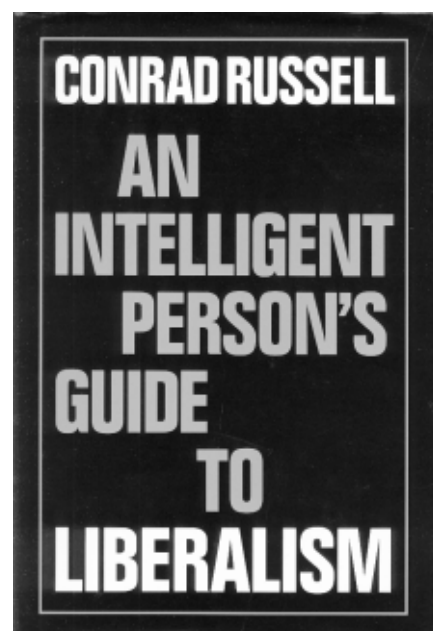
Russell writes clearly from the point of view of Liberalism as a distinct philosophy, deriving originally from events and thinking in the seventeenth century – while observing that an alternative vision, at times held by many Liberals, sees the party as one part of the progressive 'centre-left', closely related to Labour. As he does throughout the book, he provides plenty of quotations to support both views.

From the first position, modern Liberalism is the inheritor of a long and continuous tradition, though one that is, Russell argues, often misunderstood because of 'the distinctive twentieth-century failing of trying to analyse earlier centuries' politics in terms of economics', rather than, for example, religion. It was not disputes over religious *principles*, however, that motivated the early Liberals, but

conflicts over church *power* – and it is the concern over the use of power that lies at the heart of Liberalism:

That is why they provide a grounding in how to apply the Human Rights Act in the twenty-first century. Principles designed to protect Nonconformist aldermen in the reign of Queen Anne had been translated into principles of racial non-discrimination before the end of the American Civil War. Their application to gender and sexual orientation has taken us a little longer, but in those fields too, we find principles taken from the religious politics of the seventeenth century can be applied to the sexual politics of the twentieth. This approach has given Liberalism a philosophical continuity almost unique in British, and possibly in world, politics.

Russell traces the development and meaning of a series of Liberal themes. The most basic, and the oldest, deriving from Whig opposition to Stuart absolutism and to the exercise of hereditary power in the absence of consent, is the control of executive power. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 committed the Whigs to the 'ascending theory' of power, in which power came up from the people, who conferred it – or not, as the case may be – on government. Another way to express it, as Russell does in quoting one of his former pupils, is as a belief in



The Liberal commitment to equality, Russell argues, derives from this belief in a diverse and tolerant society. Such a society cannot exist where individuals are treated differently by the law and by government institutions because of their nature. 'Equality before the law' was one of the great rallying cries of Liberalism from the earliest days of the Whigs; 'equal justice', 'non-discrimination' and 'concern for the underdog' are just as valid ways of expressing it. Lloyd George launched his career in

the Llanfrothen burial case of 1888, where he successfully acted for a family of a nonconformist quarryman who had been denied burial in the local churchyard. This, of course, is a

very different commitment to equality than is Labour's, and perhaps helps explain many of the fundamental differences in approach between the two philosophies.

The remaining chapters of the book deal with economics, internationalism, civil liberties and the green agenda. Once again, Liberal principles are explained in terms of their historic development. Since Liberalism has such deep roots, going back before the state could exert any significant control over the levers of economic activity, the party, argues Russell, 'does not have an economic philosophy'. Economics is important principally in that it affects the distribution of power in society and can thereby enlarge, or diminish, the life-chances of individuals. In general, Liberals have tended to support the operation of the free market, mainly because this has appeared to be the system which has the greatest potential to deliver the greatest benefits to the greatest number with the smallest need for government interference. Many Victorian Liberals saw the free market, and in particular free trade, as desirable because it provided a means of protecting the poor against the

rich, who possessed the power (then, and to a certain extent now) to fix prices, rig the market and restrict choice. Liberals opposed concentrations of economic power as much as they did of political power, and for the same reasons.

The principle of the control of power applies just as well in the international arena. Historically, Liberals have supported the underdogs, nations struggling to be free of empires, minorities oppressed by majorities – though without auto-

matically assuming that independence, which often bears overtones of exclusivist nationalism, is necessarily the best option; various forms of federalism are

valid alternatives. Equally, Liberals have argued for the creation of a strong framework of international law, wherein every country, no matter how small and weak, may enjoy the same rights to equal treatment – say, in a border dispute, or an argument about trade discrimination – as its larger and more powerful neighbours. The creation of effective international and supranational institutions – the European Union, the United Nations and its agencies – is a natural development of this belief, and explains why Liberals have always argued the pro-European and pro-internationalist case throughout the twentieth century.

In the civil liberties chapter, Russell looks at how Locke's concern with restricting government interference was developed by Mill into the belief that the preservation of civil interests does not require a common system of morality. Moral principles are something individuals choose for themselves: 'human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, accord-

ing to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing'. As Russell observes, 'this is now somewhere near the heart of what Liberals believe', and he uses it to explain the problems the party has experienced with the more authoritarian, nanny-state tendencies of New Labour.

Green Liberalism, obviously, has less deep historic roots, but Russell does a better job than anyone else I have read of analysing how environmentalism fits in with the rest of Liberal philosophy, again tracing the Liberal approach back to the concern with the distribution of power, but this time with its distribution *between* generations. It relates to the idea of the exercise of power as a trust, passed to the government by the consent of the people, exercised in their name and for their benefit, and on behalf not just of the current population but of future generations too.

Probably the least successful chapter is the penultimate, which looks forward to the future development of Liberalism, seeing the phenomenon of globalisation, with its economic, environmental and security policy dimensions, as being the next major challenge the party and its philosophy will have to face. The text largely just states the problems, without attempting any prescriptions. An epilogue underlines the distinctiveness of the Liberal philosophy by comparing it with the other parties' – an easy task for Conservatism, but a more difficult one for Labour, the competition rather than the opposition.

There are some minor criticisms one can make of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*. Russell is occasionally too prone to write in soundbites, going for the nicely turned phrase rather than the compelling explanation. And on occasion he simply ducks out of difficult arguments. But these flaws are few and far between in a book that not only links philosophy with history, but does so in a concise and beautifully written way. What more could one want?

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