

Postwar Liberalism

*Book Review: Arthur Cyr, Liberal Politics in Britain
(Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1988). Reviewed by Duncan Brack.*

We still lack a good comprehensive history of the Liberal Party after 1945. Roy Douglas' *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* ends too soon, and the later parts are too anti-Common Market. John Stevenson's *Third Party Politics since 1945* suffers from too many inaccuracies. Chris Cook's *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900–92* is probably the best, but concentrates too heavily on psephology at the expense of policy. All of these three, however, are considerably better than Arthur Cyr's *Liberal Politics in Britain*.

This 1988 version claims to be a substantial revision of the author's 1977 publication, *Liberal Party Politics in Britain*, though it reads as though the chapter on the SDP, plus a few other references to it and the Alliance, have simply been tagged on to a substantially unchanged earlier text.

Cyr's main problem is that he is, as his Introduction explains, a fan of Samuel Beer (of Harvard University) and his 'broad conceptual categorization and analysis of British party politics' – to the extent that more than half of all the references in chapter one are to a single work of Beer's. Beer's explanation for Liberal decline in the twentieth century is simple: the party was individualist and anti-class, and failed to adapt as British politics became increasingly collectivist and class-based after 1900. Along the way, Cyr entirely ignores the New Liberalism, with its agenda of progressive social reform, states that the Gladstonian Liberals opposed the extension of the franchise, writes as though Radicals, Whigs and Liberals were entirely separate organisations and implies that the Liberal Party did not change its policy or structure in any significant respect from the mid-1850s to the mid-1950s.

The Liberal Party survived, according to this thesis, only because there were enough pockets of anti-collectivist sentiment and anti-class activism from which to draw residual support. Any deviation from this analysis is ignored; Cyr makes no attempt, for example, to explain the byelection victory in Orpington, which was clearly not a 'peripheral and neglected' area, even while correctly identifying its importance in restoring Liberal morale and organisation. Similarly, the Liberal Party, as the embodiment of anti-collectivism, must always be ill-disciplined and hostile to holding power, despite the acknowledged growth in local government strength. The SNP and Plaid Cymru, because they are not the Conservatives or Labour, must also be anti-collectivist liberals, so Cyr devotes part of two chapters to examining their electoral successes, while completely failing to mention anything they actually stood for. Thatcherism,

because in some respects it was anti-collectivist, must have had something in common with Liberalism – privatisation and hostility to bureaucracy, we learn.

The book is rather better at discussing the importance of Jo Grimond and his policy innovations to the Liberal revival, though even here the policies chosen for analysis are those that fit the Beer straitjacket – welfare, education, industrial democracy, local government and devolution, but hardly anything on foreign policy, the wider agenda of constitutional reform or civil liberties. And this is the only point at which Liberal policies are analysed; the same is done for the SDP, but Liberal policy-making might as well have stopped dead when Grimond retired for all we read. The book is better on the salience of community politics, linking it to the rise of single-issue pressure groups in the 1960s, and identifying both as anti-collectivist movements.

There is also some interesting survey material on the beliefs of Liberal activists in the early 1970s, though it deals mainly with their attitude to class, Liberal failure to draw support and activists from the working classes being one of Cyr's themes (if the Party had only taken the Association of Liberal Trade Unionists seriously, all would have been well, apparently). But there are very few other reasons to read this book. It is badly structured and highly repetitive, and its arguments are unclear and littered with inaccuracies (Dick Taverne, for example, may be surprised to find out that he won the Dundee byelection, but probably even more taken aback to discover that the SDP, apart from David Owen, was 'generally anti-nuclear'). Buy one of the other ones.

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