

REVIEWS

Edwardian Liberalism: ideology and political practice

Ian Packer, *Liberal Government and Politics, 1905–15*

(Palgrave, 2006)

Reviewed by Paul Readman

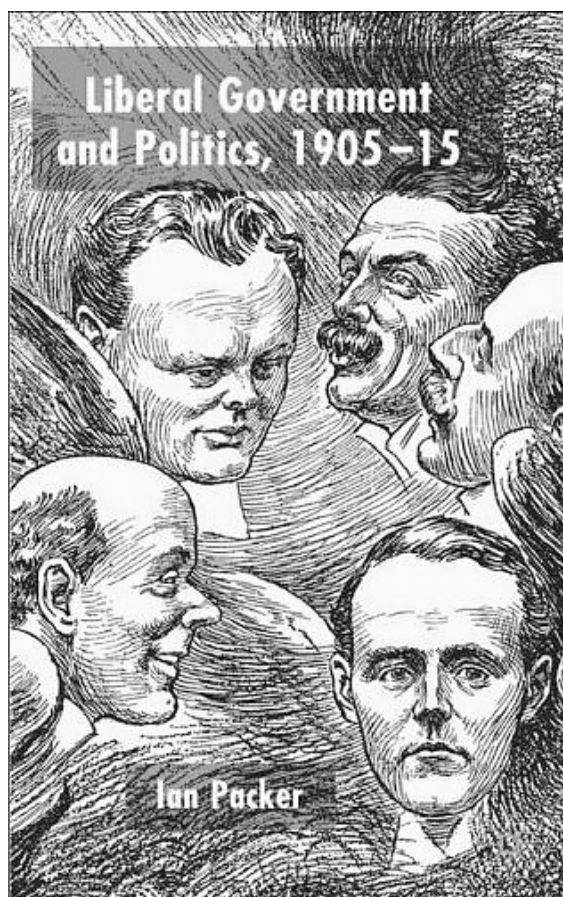
THERE IS no shortage of scholarly literature on Liberal politics between 1905 and 1915. However, this slim yet thoroughly-researched book breaks significant new ground. As Ian Packer points out in his introduction, previous treatments of the Liberalism of this period have tended to focus on the adaptation of the party's policy and creed to accommodate a new collectivist agenda of social reform. This concentration on the politics and ideology of 'New Liberalism', Packer argues, has had the effect of giving us an unbalanced – or at least incomplete – understanding of the character of the last Liberal governments. *Liberal Government and Politics*, a book which devotes just thirteen and a half pages to social reform, is conceived as a corrective to this historiographical trend. Through a re-examination of the nature of Liberal ideology, and its relationship to the policy-making of Campbell-Bannerman's and Asquith's cabinets, Packer aims to present a more accurate picture of Edwardian Liberalism, one consonant with contemporary perceptions.

In this Packer largely succeeds, but what is especially satisfying about his account is his attention to the interplay between ideology and political practice. Although predominantly concerned with 'high' rather than popular politics, this is not a book which explains politicians' motivations simply

in terms of personal ambition, tactical considerations or partisan calculations (though none of these are ignored). Neither, however, is it a book which simply describes the ideas of intellectuals or the rhetoric of stump orations without relating these to the nitty-gritty of parliamentary politics. Here, what Liberals said is not detached from what Liberals did; ideology is connected to political action, to bills introduced and laws passed. The treatment of Liberal Imperialism provides a case in point. Not only does Packer provide a good summary of Liberal Imperialist ideology, which, he convincingly argues, (*pace* Colin Matthew) occupied an important presence in political discourse after 1905, but he also illustrates how it impacted on the practical business of politics. In the account offered here, the commitment to 'continuity' in foreign policy and the hesitancy over Irish Home Rule provide two key examples of Liberal Imperialism's influence on government policy before 1914.

Packer's discussion of the relationship between ideology and policy-making is set out in a clear and admirably user-friendly way. The book is divided into seven main chapters, each dealing with a different theme. The first, on 'Government and Party' provides a survey of the structure and workings of Liberal Party politics, and while the account offered here will be familiar to

specialists, it will be of considerable utility to students, for whom information such as the fact that the early twentieth-century National Liberal Federation was a 'talking shop' exerting no real influence on the leadership may come as something of a revelation. The next chapter is arguably the best in the book, developing a compelling argument that there was little that was distinctively 'Liberal' about foreign and defence policy before 1914. Packer claims that on the question of armaments, patriotism trumped retrenchment, even for many radicals, as shown by the ultimately weak opposition to *Dreadnought* building plans and in foreign policy, Grey essentially got his way. One quibble here, however, would be that Packer has perhaps exaggerated the extent of Liberal unanimity. Keith Wilson's work, especially his *Politics of the Entente* (Cambridge, 1985), has argued strongly that Grey was constrained by divisions of opinion within the Liberal Party – from



the Cabinet downwards – over the conduct of foreign affairs, and while Packer does cite some of Wilson’s research, the latter’s important *Primat der Innenpolitik* argument is left unexamined.

Two further chapters deal with the constitutional issues of Home Rule, the House of Lords, and female suffrage. Although not much of substance is added here to existing accounts, specialists will be interested in the able discussion of the so-called ‘Ripon plan’ for the reform of the House of Lords, while students will find the treatment of Liberal policy on Home Rule – for Scotland and Wales as well as Ireland – informative and concise. Packer emphasises the lack of appeal of Irish Home Rule for Liberals, going so far as to say that the electoral debacle of 1886 ‘convinced most Liberals that the issue had no appeal for the British electorate’. Yet while parliamentary support for Home Rule certainly declined over time, as Packer shows, ‘no appeal’ does seem rather strong: Home Rule remained a platform cause that could raise cheers among the Liberal rank and file well into the Edwardian period, and the reasons for this still remain under-explored by historians.

The next three chapters, before the epilogue dealing with World War One, concern Nonconformity, the economy and finance, and social reform. Packer has already published work on all three of these themes, as is demonstrated by his confident treatment of them. Fiscal and economic policy is discussed with great clarity, with appropriately strong stress being laid on the still-continuing importance of free trade to the Liberal creed. Free trade, of course, had been central to the political identity of the Gladstonian Liberal Party, as indeed had been the defence of religious freedom and the association with Nonconformity, and Packer underlines the

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persistence of these ‘older’ strands of Liberal ideology in the years before 1914. In his insistence on the continuing centrality of Nonconformity to Liberalism, Packer’s line appears consistent with revisionist critiques of the Peter Clarke-inspired position that by the Edwardian period, social class had replaced religion as the primary determinant of political identity. But he adds a distinctive twist to his revisionism by arguing (as in a previous *Journal of British Studies* article) that new evangelical strands within Nonconformist theology, emphasising the value of ‘good works’, helped fuel the social reform agenda of the New Liberalism (the Rowntree family is the classic example here). Such a perspective helps us understand why the social reforms enacted by Liberal governments were, as Packer argues, unproblematically compatible with mainstream Liberalism.

It is perhaps to be regretted that the book lacks a conclusion as such; we get, instead, an ‘epilogue’ on Liberal wartime policy in 1914–15. But readers will find it easy enough to draw together the main themes

of Packer’s study. Overall, the book does much to confirm the now-dominant argument that the Liberals were an effective, modern party of government in the Edwardian period; they were not in terminal or even in serious decline in 1914, and perhaps not even in 1915. (For Packer, the upshot of this is that the finger of blame is pointed squarely at Lloyd George.) Yet if the Liberals were in good shape before the First World War, the reason for this was in large part electoral, and it is a shame that this otherwise excellent book pays little attention to elections or popular politics: ideology mattered at the polls, as well as in Parliament. Notwithstanding this criticism (which some may think unfairly levelled at a study of government policy), this is a book that should appeal to anybody interested in the history of the Liberal Party, and one which will be of considerable utility in a teaching context. One must hope that the publisher sees fit to bring out a paperback edition, as the £45.00 price tag will surely deter.

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War memoirs

Andrew Suttie, *Rewriting the First World War: Lloyd George, Politics and Strategy 1914–18* (Palgrave, 2005)

Reviewed by Richard Toye

AMIDST THE many dramatic changes in twentieth-century British politics, it is easy to overlook the significant shifts that occurred in the way that politicians wrote their memoirs. Typically, autobiographies of Victorian statesmen were discreet, worthy, and, consequently, dull. Since 1918 – perhaps in part as a consequence of new, less

deferential habits of biographers and journalists – politicians have been inclined, if not always exactly to greater frankness, then at least to more active self-justification and score-settling. This has frequently necessitated putting previously confidential material into the public domain, albeit often in a misleadingly selective way. The typical politician’s memoir has therefore