

Radical Failure

Book Review: *The Decline of British Radicalism 1847–1860* by Miles Taylor (Clarendon Press, Oxford; £45)

Reviewed by Mark Pack

Miles Taylor's book is an examination of the failure of British radicalism in the 1850s. For many the mere appearance of a book that concentrates on the 1850s in their own right, rather than later or earlier periods, will be welcome. However, this book has an added interest for those wondering about the future of the Liberal Democrats, as there are many parallels between the picture the author draws of radicals and the recent history and possible future of the Liberal Democrats.

Although Taylor's focus is on the 1850s, he first traces the rise of radicalism in the 1830s and 1840s, before examining its failure to make a sustained and successful impact on national government. For him it is the growth of public support for control of the executive that underpinned the growth of radicalism. Parliamentary control of the executive was seen as a means to curbing corruption, waste and abuse of public position for private gain. This emphasis on the centrality of Parliament is somewhat at odds with other historians' preference for using language and culture to examine radicalism, but there is some common ground. In particular, like many others, he sees a continuity in radical beliefs running through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was based on the tradition of Foxite Whig constitutionalism with a belief in the primacy of the Commons. Moreover, this continuity helps explain what 'happened' to Chartism after 1848; this tradition of agitation based on eighteenth century ideas of freeborn Englishmen meant many ex-Chartists moved easily on to other radical agitation.

The number of radical MPs was small, but their level of activity was high and the presence of even a few gave an important lever on the exercise of power. With a widespread belief that Parliament mattered, they were also able to act as a focus for a variety of other pressures, such as local reform organisations. Added to a sometimes astute manipulation of the press, this meant some reform successes were achieved.

Usually this meant pressuring and persuading other non-Conservative MPs into supporting them. Although the radicals were nominally independent, when it came to key votes they always voted to oppose the possibility of Conservative government. Radical MPs also came under pressure from the increasingly two-party nature of constituencies to make clear where their loyalties lay – and 'to radicalism' was not a sufficient answer for voters. Thus, although being efficient representatives for local concerns, often revelling in committee work and petitioning, was in the 1830s and 1840s a source of electoral success, by the 1850s it was not sufficient. There was a particular problem for many radical MPs as they were often elected due to local discontent with others rather than any positive enthusiasm for radical cures. This was not a problem in all areas of the country with, for example, the questions of local taxation and government in London providing plenty of scope for radicals to garner positive support. However, this did not apply in other areas, especially the north-west (though quite why this should be the case Taylor does little to explore).

Over time their independence decreased, with the bulk of radical MPs becoming first an appendage to the forming Liberal Party and then being fully subsumed into it, although a few – like Bright and Cobden – long retained a suspicion of taking office. This merger into the Liberals was eased by some common ground with another group who helped form this new party: ex-supporters of Peel. Both groups shared a dislike of high taxes and wasteful government, calling for a cheap and efficient state. Little role is given by Taylor to dissent in local Liberal politics in the 1850s. Rather, importance is attached to financial issues and anti-centralisation beliefs, with the defence of local government against centralising national Whig government with its Westminster-based patronage networks.

Radicals were also squeezed out of their independence by issues involving nationalism and patriotism. Taylor draws emphasis on the importance for radicalism of a different type of patriotism, rooted in pride in public service, a healthy electoral system and control of the executive. At times this seems somewhat detached from the concerns of the bulk of the population, with the emphasis on constitutions rather than class, and civic responsibility rather than social reform. And when foreign wars and disputes arose it was of little help. Many radicals tempered support for cheap government and constitutional reform, seeing foreign involvement as requiring higher taxes and a lack of distracting domestic reform wrangles.

Much of Taylor's story contains parallels with the recent history of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats, especially in his picture of radical MPs being marginalised as the polarisation of a two-party system removed their power in Parliament and reduced their popularity outside. Despite these adverse trends though, radical pressure could still be effective, as in the bringing down of Palmerston in 1858 in the face of his lack of domestic reform, cavalier foreign policy and dismissive attitude towards Parliamentary accountability. This power, though, was only possible as radicals were willing to stomach a Conservative government, rather than – as they saw it – a Liberal government with no liberal policies. Unity with Palmerston was possible again in 1859, catalysed by opposition to the limited nature of Conservative reform proposals. This allowed unity despite the absence of agreement on many domestic issues; having a Liberal government became more important than ideological purity.

Previous generations of radicals were often left behind by this moderation, but also by the increasing emphasis on economic and social issues, rather than institutional reform. As Taylor concludes, 'whether such a system of organised parliamentary liberalism was actually a better safeguard of civil liberties than the strategies favoured by independent radicals is a matter of some doubt.'

Mark Pack completed a thesis last year on the English electoral system in the first half of the nineteenth-century. He now works at Exeter University, helping to support computing in the Arts faculty.