FREEDOM ISN'T ACADEMIC

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Conrad Russell. *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*. London: Duckworth, 1999. Pp. 128. £14.99 (hb). *Academic Freedom*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993. Pp. xi, 119. £17.99 (pb).

Who is the intelligent person of the first title? Is it the brainy reader who knows about liberalism, and merely wants to update her knowledge? Is it the clever author who offers a guide out of the goodness of his heart? Or more likely, is it the sharp publisher, who knows a good selling point when he or she sees one? One guesses it is the publisher. But as to the present volume, few will complain of the title's ambiguity, for it entices readers into an compact, well written, and timely argument on political matters of the first importance.

Conrad Russell was the author of *Academic Freedom*, a well regarded and similarly compressed discussion of academic freedom.[1] *Academic Freedom* preceded the *Guide to Liberalism* by six years. It was as though Russell had first to taste and see the awful effects of neo-conservatism in his beloved University of

[1] Conrad Russell has a world reputation as an historian of the English Civil War, of the whole seventeenth century, and of the social history of politics before 1800. His several books and hundreds of articles and reviews show that he had an apparently effortless mastery of most world history since the Reformation. I have been unable to deal with Conrad's historical output in this review, but have discussed it in a forthcoming biographical essay about Conrad Russell in the *Bertrand Russell Society Quarterly*, "Conrad Russell as Political Intellectual", forthcoming in 2006.

London and then, six years later—after due reflection upon the whole horrid mess—to provide a compelling political remedy to the evil apparatus of Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Major. *Academic Freedom*, a sister volume to the *Guide*, dealt with the intellectual and administrative liberty that university teachers must have if their work is to be academically viable and socially valuable. Already in 1993, *Academic Freedom* offered a sharp attack on the Thatcherite use of league tables and performance indicators, and on high civil servants, vice-chancellors, and government ministers who rely on the numbers. In effect, accountants and managers and long lists of numbers had overtaken much that universities did.

Academic Freedom ended with a straightforward prescription: university teachers and (on occasion) responsible administrators should make the hard academic decisions to which they are called—not civil servants, not number-crunchers, not politicians. This view did not mean elected politicians were released from the burden of honest choice and decision, particularly in regions of governance and public life for which they had direct responsibility and care. But Russell's point remained: it would be madness if statistical tables replaced responsible and able human beings, or if those human beings accepted that they must become automatic "decision machines".

Conrad Russell died on 14 October 2004, but must have had a form of pre-science. For in 2005, more than thirty academic units and fields were eliminated in United Kingdom universities on grounds of efficiency, ranking in league tables, and performance indication. Each time the administrator concerned threw up her hands, claiming she had no choice, as the league table or the last Research Assessment Exercise "made me do it". Up the line, politicians have gone further, even rejoicing in the New Management of British higher education and the pleasant prospect of even greater "efficiencies" in the next decade.

Conrad Russell well understood that freedom is not just academic.

An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism relies, then, on recent political history to provide its main narrative thrust. By the mid-point of the book, one has the impression that current events have shaped his liberalism, and that his understanding of the history of liberalism is "presentist". But Conrad Russell starts by saying that he doesn't pretend to be writing history (or philosophy) in his *Guide*. To call Conrad Russell "presentist" is to underplay and certainly to underestimate his *Guide*'s treatment of great figures in the theory and practice of political liberalism. Russell pays attention *throughout* to political theory and the philosophy of politics. It is a matter of real regret that in the brief compass of 128 pages, he could but hint at the strengths and weakness of Benthamite liberalism, or explain why Mill's classic defence of liberty is "but a hair's breadth" from his own.

By book's end, the tone is resolutely practical. Were I a young Liberal Democrat in the UK running for election to the House of Commons in 2007 and

wondering about a possible alliance with the Greens, I would have to consider carefully this book's chapter on "Green Liberalism". Were I a middle-aged New Labour MP, I'd mine Conrad Russell's book for insights on the evils of "marketization" in education and health, and the risk of allowing the executive branch of Parliament (Tony Blair and Gordon Brown) to acquire too much power. And were I a political party leader of any stripe, I would be well advised to consider his chapter on "Liberty to Do What, May I Ask?"—that is, what the broad purpose of government may be in the new century.

Conrad Russell's *Guide* has several ancestral lineages. One of them is the popularizing and commercially viable "Intelligent Person's Guide" to most anything. Duckworth has published in the past fifteen years guides to modern Ireland, to Catholicism, to Dickens, to Ethics, to Fascism, to Modern Art, and (intriguingly) to Guilt. This I call the "commercial" lineage, and books published in a commercial lineage must accept stylistic discipline, for such books are supposed to sell 10,000 copies in Britain alone.

The *Guide to Liberalism* is a honourable member of that lineage. It shows signs of being written to order. It is too short, and thus (to take but one example) too willing to imagine a consensus among liberals and liberal-democrats in Britain and in Europe. The problem of space is at times not just frustrating to the reader, but disabling to the argument of the book. There are not enough pages to consider such matters as the role of armed forces in a liberal-democratic state, the exact funding for social services, or the degree to which decentralized government would be acceptable in a modern state.

A second lineage goes back to George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* of 1928, among many others of its kind, about liberalism, conservatism, communism, and social planning in the inter-war period. These were aimed at influential readers on both sides of the Atlantic, yet were meant to attract members to the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Reader's Union. Whether it was H. G. Wells selling his brand of social engineering or Sidney and Beatrice Webb selling theirs, the lineage was full of high-minded and capably researched argument. In those distant days, publishers accepted books twice or three times as long as Conrad's *Guide to Liberalism,* and in many if not most cases, the books were on the discursive side.

In the twenty-first century, one thinks of successor books like Dick Taverne's *The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy, and the New Fundamentalism*.[2] This is a plea for common-sensical, evidence-based argument on the question of genetically modified crops, climate change, and consequent social policy. It is of

[2] Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2005. Taverne had the luxury of 100 more pages than did Russell in the *Guide to Liberalism*. Oddly, there is no reference to Conrad in Taverne's book.

more than passing interest that Taverne, like Conrad Russell a long-time member of the Labour Party, sits as a Lib-Dem peer in the House of Lords. His political history, in short, is parallel with Russell's.

Finally, Conrad Russell's *Guide* has ancestors among the books of another Russell, Conrad's father, Bertrand, or Bertie. (Henceforth I give the two Russells their first names.) Bertie's *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), *Political Ideals* (1917), *Roads to Freedom* (1918), *On Education* (1926), *Freedom and Organization* (1934), and *Authority and the Individual* (1949) deal at one stage or other with every major political question raised in Conrad's *Guide*.

Conrad explicitly mentions Bertie at three main points, beginning with a recollection of his parents (Bertie and Patricia) "… sitting over the paper looking at the results of the 1945 election. They were mourning Liberal defeats, and especially that of Sir Archibald Sinclair, then leader of the party, whom they described as 'a good old man.' They said the party was finished" (p. 7). The rest of the opening chapter describes the difficult history of the Liberal Party in the 1918 general election and the "wilderness years" (p. 15) until 1974. Asquith said in 1921 that the Liberal Party "never will be the party of any class, rich or poor" (*ibid.*). Conrad recalls that the word "class" meant ANY sort of class, which accounts for the Liberals' having pressed so long and so hard for equal civil rights for Nonconformists:

> In resisting class politics, Liberals were standing, not only for a conception of the general interest, but also for the supremacy of mind over matter. Today, in the days of *Sun* conservatism and champagne Socialism, other parties do not have a class base either and, for the first time since 1918, Liberals can contest elections on a level playing field.

Indeed Conrad argues (pp. 16–17) that since the Reform Act of 1885, working class people *have* given consistent support to Liberal candidates. He writes that the Liberal Party *never was* (my emphasis, but it might have been Conrad's) the home of free-trade or free-market extremism that Labourite historians asserted. Rather, Conrad sees the Party as looking past the narrowly class-based progressivism of the Labour Party to a greater problem: "The basic Liberal philosophy of the control of power looks to me far more important, and the chances of relying on any other party to do it far weaker, that I had ever realised" (p. 19). Conrad insists the basic principles of liberalism in England go back to 1679; Bertie analogously mentions his seventeenth-century liberal ancestors many times, and wrote admiringly of the liberal tradition—often seeing it in the philosophical lines running from Locke to Bentham and the Mills, father and son. Bertie and Conrad (at p. 24) admiringly tell of the martyrdom of William Lord Russell, who died on the scaffold in 1683. Writes Conrad (still p. 24): "I can still remember, when I was five, looking at William Lord Russell's portrait on the wall, and asking my father what he did. My father replied: 'Oh, he was a

very good man. The King cut his head off.'"

The continuing attractiveness of Liberal principles, the viability of practices in line with those principles, tells Conrad there is a "real need" (p. 19) for Liberalism, that its hour has come. Power must not be "based on birth" (p. 27). Human rights must not be limited to the native born (Conrad's attack on anti-immigrant regulation under Mr. Blair, p. 32). Power must be dispersed (which is Conrad's way of dealing with the problem of overweening nationalism, Irish and Scottish included, pp. 38–41). The systematic oppression of groups and classes must be ended, partly out of commitment to equality and partly from fear of the arbitrary power that oppressed them in the first place (hence Conrad's vigorous argument for women's equality rights, pp. 52–3).

Bertie, of course, mentioned the same worries in his political writing—the necessity of controlling executive power (see *Social Reconstruction* almost *passim*), the essential wisdom of looking after the underdog (see *Political Ideals*), the dangers of nationalism and the attractions of internationalism (*Political Ideals, On Education*). Yet Bertie's reasoning and experience took him into the Labour Party until the 1960s, when he famously tore up his membership card.

Bertie and Conrad went in opposite directions. Or did they? In a fifteen-page discussion of Mill's *On Liberty*, complete with applications to gay rights and gay marriage, Conrad draws freely and candidly on the views of his father. Here, and in subsequent essays on the problem of the ecology, and on the anti-competitive character of "globalization" (Chap. 8, "The Next Skin"—the word skin referring to the skins of an onion, at the core of which is liberal principle), Conrad deploys reasoning that shows his abiding fear of the power of global capital. Father and son agreed.

The world has changed massively since 1915, when Bertie left the Liberal Party and joined Labour, partly out of disgust with Liberal involvement in the horror of World War 1 (this is Conrad's third mention of Bertie, at p. 89). Were Bertie and Conrad alive today, surely their common agreement to the Liberal Decalogue (Bertie's ten-point answer to the Mosaic one) would be as striking as their occasional political differences may have been.

The *Guide* stands well enough on its own. Its weaknesses are partly the consequence of factors outside Conrad's control (the matter of its brevity), and partly the effect of his choosing to make so practical and political an argument in a field dominated (and correctly so) by the philosophers of the past 300 years, and by historians in the past century or so. The committed free marketer and the determined socialist will think Conrad's attacks on their positions to be superficial.

But it is well that an able historian who can write like anybody's business should give us a brief and lucid description of views that shaped not just his own life but characterized the life of his immediate ancestor, Bertrand Russell.