

Donley T. Studler, *Great Britain: Decline or Renewal?* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1996) pp 256. \$19.95 ISBN 0813315093 (paperback)

For most Americans, the British political system is a paradox. On the one hand it is the best known foreign country. The similarity of language makes Britain the most visited by American tourists and the most prominent country in American newspapers. On the other hand, the organization and style of politics is vastly different. Nowhere do the basic institutions of parliamentary democracy differ so sharply from the American presidential system as in Great Britain. Class distinctions permeate British politics in dramatic contrast to American populism.

Given the American fascination with British society, there is a compelling case for a textbook that would introduce university students to the fundamental aspects of politics in that country and clarify some of these contrasts. Donley Studlar has written such a text, and its insights and perspective will be useful for instructors as well as undergraduates. Britain is typically one of the countries included in survey courses of comparative politics or specialized courses in European democracies. Those who teach these courses will find a wealth of insights that breathe life into British politics and address issues such as why the British monarchy seems so peculiar in its behavior, how England lost the world's largest colonial empire, and why Britain continues to play a prominent role in world affairs with a relatively weak economy.

Studlar views these questions as paradoxes that defy explanation based on the typical understanding of British politics and he searches deeper to unravel the puzzles. The typical account of the British system holds that tradition and deference to an educated elite comprise the mortar in the wall of British society. British politics, therefore, is supposed to be

relatively conservative in character, operating according to unwritten rules that are obeyed because everyone knows them without speaking them aloud. Studlar counters that within this general understanding there is actually much room in which political leaders have freedom to operate. Freedom allows them to pursue quick changes in policy direction when necessary and adapt rapidly to new circumstances. They do not always choose wisely, however, and a system that allows for dramatic reversals of policy can allow decisions to get fairly far along before they are corrected. Thus the major contribution of Studlar's book is to describe and explain key aspects of British public policy.

The discussion is organized in a conventional way, with chapters devoted to foreign affairs, economic policy, social welfare, and the vehement debate over the breakdown in civic morality. The chapter titles alone are provocative and indicate the important paradoxes the author seeks to explain. The chapter on foreign policy is titled "From Great Power to European Periphery," and explains how an establishment ill-equipped to recognize the importance of global change adhered to a nineteenth century notion of British imperialism while their empire crumbled around them. Studlar suggests that conflict between traditional notions of national interest and a new cadre of global thinkers splits the establishment on issues such as European integration.

The chapter on economic policy is titled "From Industrial Giant to Britaly." It is an examination of the decline of British industry (ship building, coal and textiles) in the postwar period. The chapter title is an unflattering reference to the parallels between Britain and Italy, another European country noted for its inability to adapt to a post-industrial service economy because of rent-seeking and complacency among those who should be entrepreneurs.

"From Leader to Laggard" is the title of a chapter that traces the tumultuous adjustment in the British welfare state. After World War II Britain was hailed as the world's most progressive innovator in social policy, adopting a universal system of health care and providing basic pension assistance for the elderly. Over the last twenty years the system has been much maligned and has undergone dramatic privatization. Opinion is divided on whether the rising levels of poverty and decline in health standards justify the reforms.

British society's awkward adjustment to these changes provides the theme for a chapter subtitled "From Public Morality to Social

Permissiveness." New immigrants from the former colonies challenge the historic tradition of assuming that all social truths are self-evident to everyone. Brits themselves are less inclined to be deferential to political leaders.

The result has been a rise in uncivil behavior, ranging from crime to direct action campaigns. The official response to these developments has reflected changes taking place across Europe. States take on a greater regulatory role as society demonstrates it is unable to regulate itself.

Studlar concludes that all these changes have made it more difficult for the political elite to set the policy agenda beset by pressures imposed by global changes. Also, a more discerning and demanding public scrutinizes its decisions more carefully and has less patience for elite arrogance.

Britain is nowhere near a political crisis, but the challenges it faces are perhaps the most numerous and acute it has faced in the last century. Institutional responses to the pressures have led to the devolution of political power to regions, particularly Scotland and Wales, as well as a greater acceptance of directives from the European Union. For a country steeped in tradition, however, the adjustment is not easy.

This book does a marvelous job of placing all these pressures and responses in their proper historic and global context. Thus Donley Studlar has managed to write a book that is a probing examination of an important country, and he has placed that country in a broader comparative perspective.

Robert Henry Cox
University of Oklahoma

