

Leaders who made history under difficult circumstances

Paul Maylam, *Enlightened Rule: Portraits of Six Exceptional Twentieth Century Premiers*

Peter Lang, Oxford, 2011

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16. J. Lonsdale and B. Berman, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 1992), p 317.

The purpose of this book, according to the author, is to give recognition to six twentieth-century exceptional, transformative and progressive heads of government. They were gifted leaders in their respective states and in some cases, on the world stage. Moreover, in the majority of instances, these “premiers”¹⁷ assumed office under precarious political contexts. What Maylam presents in this book are six politicians “who can be greatly admired” (p vii). With his progressivist orientation, it is clear that conservative “premiers” such as Churchill, Thatcher and De Gaulle; and liberals like Lloyd George or Woodrow Wilson would not be considered. F.D. Roosevelt, J.F. Kennedy and Pierre Trudeau are not included, nor the great Labourite and state interventionist, Clem Attlee. But, the author confesses on p 23, the decision to include some and exclude others was ultimately an arbitrary one, and highly personal, I would guess. Be that as it may.

So who is included in this admirer’s list? All bar one were leaders in under-developed and poor states. What were the criteria for selection, excluding the author’s own subjective preferences? In Maylam’s view all six adhered firmly to key and fundamental values, such as the innate worth, dignity and equality of all humans, an unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights. Their view of the state was socialist or democratic socialist in the sense that the state should provide for services such as national education, health, social security and to boot, should intervene in the economy to assure a fair distribution of resources, *inter alia* by progressive taxation and redistribution of material resources. Not all of them could fully execute these ideals while in office, and had to make pragmatic compromises with the ruling classes. But all of them were admired by their followers for their moral authority and personal integrity.

Maylam’s list includes the following personalities: José Batlle y Ordóñez of Uruguay (1903–1907; 1911–1915); Lázaro Cárdenas of Mexico (1934–1940); Juan José Arévalo of Guatemala (1945–1951); Jawaharlal Nehru of India (1947–1964); Olof Palme of Sweden (1969–1976 and 1982–1986); and Nelson Mandela of South Africa (1994–1999). It is clear that Maylam chose a slate of admirable leaders that literally spans the whole of the twentieth century. This is a relatively short work for such a wide historical canvas, each premier is accorded between 35 to around 50 pages in the book – therefore of necessity it is a “portrait” of each, rather than a detailed biography. The style of the author is systematic. He provides the reader with a brief intellectual reading of leadership in an age of catastrophe (the twentieth century and its violence need no introduction here). In the introduction Maylam already provides the reader with a glimpse of the leaders he intends to “paint” in the book. His conclusion in the introduction is that he does not subscribe to the great man (sic) theory of history, nor does he accept the overly determinist structuralism of the late twentieth century: playing down the role of individual agency. He agrees (and so do I) with the Marxian aphorism: “it is men (sic) who make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing”. Of course, this goes a long way to

17. The author uses the term premier generically for head of state, which in four cases were actually presidents. Only two were prime ministers or premiers.

explain why all of the exceptional premiers had to make pragmatic concessions to the real world in their attempt to realise their progressivist dreams – and were quite often roundly criticised for it.

Each premier and his term of office, his major achievements, disappointments and an evaluation are presented in dedicated chapters. The author keeps his subjects reasonably at an emotional distance, in other words Maylam is not blind to the faults and shortcomings of each of the leaders he paints. Not quite warts and all, but certainly not only the accolades and veneration of an ingénue. Here are couple of interesting human frailties of the men. While Batlle was a philosopher by training, he also fought in duels, in one instance killing a rival. Cárdenas engaged in revolutionary wars in his early career. Mandela was at the forefront of the ANC's decision to wage an armed struggle against the National Party government in 1960–1961. Arévalle was suspected in the assassination of a rival. Nehru waged war against China and was thought of having cuckolded Lord Louis Mountbatten while he was the last viceroy of India. Palme was suspected of having been involved in a corrupt scheme to sell Bofors guns to India. But these human frailties do not detract from the leadership and contribution the men made to their respective states.

The book concludes with a chapter on legacies and lessons. The author identifies a number of lessons drawn from his study. These include that a political leader must exude some kind of moral authority. Second, those who seek power with a driving ambition may not be the best suited to hold office. In Maylam's view, none of the six men sought power for its own sake. Third, a head of government should be guided by a fundamental set of progressive goals and values: especially respect for human life, egalitarianism and a striving for international peace. Lastly, a disdain for narrow sectarianism, national interest at any cost, and the notion of the minimal state. Each of the men studied in the book displayed most if not all of these characteristics.

Having considered this work one is immediately struck by the thought: what about a book about exceptional women who acted as political leaders in the last 100 years? There aren't many, and not all of them were progressives. Women like Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Mary Robinson, Ms Banderanaika, Golda Meir and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands (constitutional monarch and all). How would their contributions measure up against Maylam's standards?

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