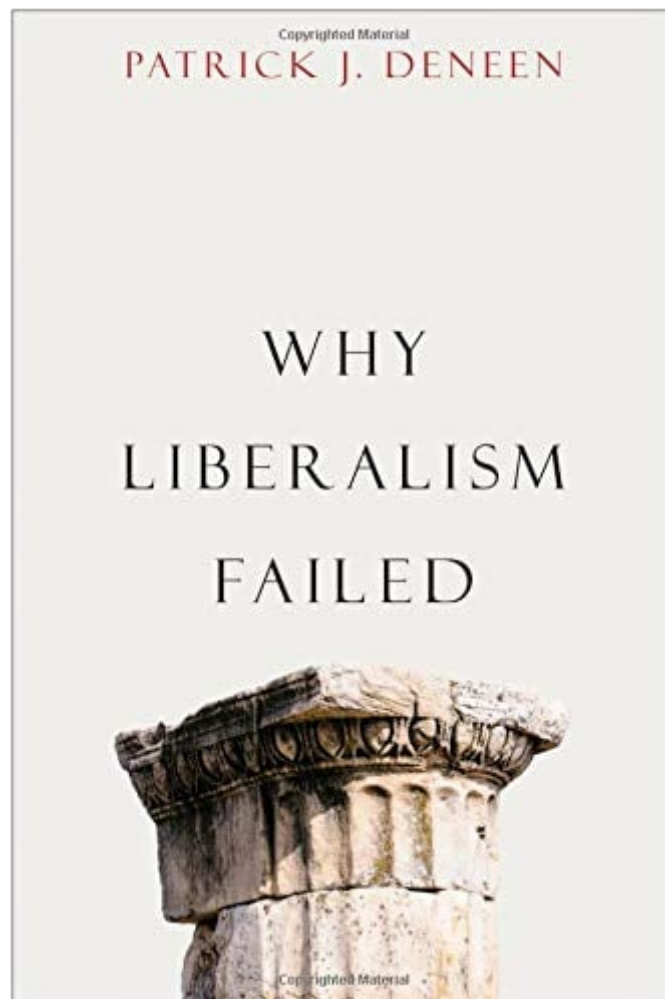


Review: Why Liberalism Failed

by Samuel Chamberlain



Few books experience such luck in the timing of their publication as that of Patrick J. Deneen's 'Why Liberalism Failed'. Deneen, claiming that his thoughts had taken over a decade to formulate, began writing after Brexit, finished his manuscript three weeks before Trump was elected, and was published at a time when the phrase 'the rise of populism' was fast becoming trite. The times gave his work, of which his major theme was the decay of liberalism, a currency that few political writers could hope of attaining. Currency or not, his claim of liberalism's inevitable failure is just another line in the litany of declinist literature – a belief which is a betrayal to some of conservatism's most fundamental tenants.

Unlike typical criticisms of liberalism which align themselves with the various ideological offshoots of Marxist teachings, Deneen's criticisms come from someone with a more conservative background – Deneen's Catholicism guiding much of his world view. Criticisms from the Marxist or culturally radical perspective force one to choose between accepting or denying liberalism and this ultimately leads to the liberal project either being abandoned or maintained without being improved upon. Whereas the criticisms in Deneen's book do not require a complete abandonment of liberalism. Rather they require that any sickness be identified and then rectified. Deneen says in his preface that "readers in today's well-established political camps will be tempted to place the book in one or another familiar category"[\[i\]](#) and that his critique doesn't really come from any of the well-established political ideologies. However, Deneen's repeated use and emphasis of the terms *customs*, *conventions*, *norms*, *institutions*, *structures*, *traditions* and *practices* gives his work a Burkean flavour. This flavour is welcome and refreshing, and it is the reason that you should engage with this text.

"Liberalism has failed, because liberalism has succeeded."[\[ii\]](#) This is the key thesis in Deneen's work. Liberalism wants to free the individual from the state, but builds greater state structures to do so. Liberalism wants to free the individual from him or herself, but instead removes structures which help achieve this goal. Liberalism was meant to endow individuals with worthwhile citizenship, but instead has made this citizenship worthless. These arguments seem counterintuitive, but then so is the overall thesis. Nonetheless, he presents well laid-out and cohesive arguments for it, particularly in chapter two of the book where he discusses statism, markets and the liberal individual.

Deneen crudely divides classical and progressive liberals along economic lines by saying the former promotes markets and the latter promotes the state. Most would see this as a

simplistic but apt description of the economic political divide that is seen in most contemporary western nations. But Deneen says this argument between these two branches of liberalism is a façade –“Is it mere coincidence that both parties, despite their claims to be locked in an political death grip mutually advance the cause of liberal autonomy and inequality?”[\[iii\]](#) He says of classical liberals that “The expansion of markets and the infrastructure necessary for that expansion do not result from “spontaneous order”; rather, they require an extensive and growing state structure.”[\[iv\]](#) Greater markets require a bigger state.

Progressive liberals on the other hand with their overt statist economic policies, support a removal of individuals from the grip of “constitutive relationships, from unchosen traditions, from restraining custom.”[\[v\]](#) Think of the sexual revolution and the outcome of other socially progressive policies. Again, here we see progressive liberals calling for a smaller government – getting government out of the bedroom so that the individual can be whomever it wants to be. But a larger state is required in order to fight against all naturally occurring social customs to maintain this unique individual. A freer individual requires a greater state.

Through either process the individual is further atomised and the state further enlarged. This suggests that “individualism is not the alternative to statism but its very cause.”[\[vi\]](#) The point Deneen makes here is that when markets have been established and purported and social customs done away with, then “the only thing we all belong to is the liberal state.”[\[vii\]](#)

I have heard someone quip recently that the UK has become a National Health Service with a people attached to it. It is amazing that the NHS as an artificial structure created by the state is the most trusted and revered institution in the United Kingdom. One would think that this mantle would fall to historical institutions which have lasted centuries such as

the monarchy, the Anglican Church, parliament or the aristocracy. No, it's a transactional government service that people turn to for guidance and faith in their institutions when the going gets tough – "the only thing we all belong to". If the liberal individual's connections are purely transactional, of course the tangible transaction the NHS provides will earn it more trust than an institution with obtuse benefits such as the monarchy.

How could we achieve such perverse outcomes from such noble intentions? Well if liberalism failed because it succeeded, the principles underpinning liberalism must have been faulty. Like a calculator, the mechanism can be perfect but if the inputs are inputted incorrectly then the outputs are surely to be wrong. The faulty input of liberal thinking, says Deneen, was a flawed perception of the state of nature – "it [liberalism] is based on falsehood about human nature, and hence can't help but fail." [\[viii\]](#) Liberal thinkers such as Locke, Milles and Hobbes saw persons as "liberal agents" who would act constructively with one another only if there was an umpire to oversee this process so that "The liberal state serves ... the reactive function of umpire and protector of individual liberty." [\[ix\]](#) The individual seen in this world was imagined however, Deneen says. Liberalism "Claim[s] that the radical individual imagined, by liberal theory was a "given"". He goes on to explain that those communities which resist the pull of liberalism are more nuclear and strong in their structure, as the destructive forces of liberalism are yet to tear away at the long-established conventions, institutions and traditions needed for a "community that is more than a collection of self-interested individuals brought together to seek personal advancement." [\[x\]](#)

I agree with Mr Deneen on this point. The fact is that the "liberal individual" was a made up figment of political texts in the 16th and 17th centuries and has taken the following centuries to become fully formed. People naturally exist in

well-rooted communities, established by long-standing conventions and practices, which in turn establish their own well-suited institutions over time. The inertia is found in removing these traditions not establishing them.

To think though that this is the only input into the figurative calculator would be a great mistake though. It is one input among many. Deneen looks very closely at the philosophical and introverted claims of liberalism, but ignores or at least diminishes the role of external forces which currently pray upon it. The historian, Neill Ferguson, puts liberalism's first flourish down to institutional reform which simply worked where other foreign institutions failed. Now that other nations have seen what has gone before them, they can pick and choose from among tested institutions to fit their own existing political structures, such as China taking incentive based market structures and implementing them without any property rights. This has led to the original liberal nation's pre-eminence to recede in comparison to their quasi-liberal competitors. Just as Deneen criticises the vacuum in which the liberal individual is constructed, you as the reader will come to recognise the seemingly empty vacuum of issues in which liberalism is discussed in the book.

Continuing on with this analogy of the calculator, many different types of liberalism would have to be separated into many different inputs. This hasn't occurred. Deneen sits comfortably from the side-lines of conservatism and claims all liberals to be the same. This is despite liberals themselves wishing to make great distinctions among one another with their different policies. But to Deneen the failures of one sought of liberalism can be lumped in with them all. A political philosophy only works, however, if outcomes can be linked directly to the purposeful policies of that philosophy. The Liberal party in Australia would not wish to be judged by the outcomes of a Labor party policy, but this is the intellectual equivalent that Deneen is performing by mashing

together progressive and classical liberalism. Is this genuine but flawed criticism or a political smear point? Australian journalist and historian Paul Kelly says it's the latter – "Patrick J. Deneen, a social conservative, economic primitive and misguided political analyst,... mistake[s] his misallocation of blame. He blames liberalism for the failure of the conservative and religious movement when its failures are its own." [\[xi\]](#)

Why Liberalism Failed is yet another book among many which tout the end and decline of the established order. He raises many valid points – problems which currently face us – but they are manipulated so that liberalism is their sole cause and that the successes of liberalism are downplayed. "This is partly a feature of declinist literature, which tends to emphasis the problems of the present while downplaying those of the past." [\[xii\]](#)

So will liberalism fail as Deneen predicts inevitably so? The answer is no. Or not necessarily. Despite Deneen sharing Edmund Burke's love of customs, institutions, traditions and so on, he forgot another of Burke's key philosophical tenants. That history is merely cause and effect. Any sense of inevitability is merely the "the gross and complicated mass for human passions and concerns... which undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections." [\[xiii\]](#) Thinking history will go one way or another is wishful thinking. Saying that if Liberalism was to come to fruition that it would be its downfall is also the wishful thinking of a conservative. *Why Liberalism Failed* was lucky with the timing of its publication but "there is a long history of books that trumpet the fall of liberalism. All of them have thus far been wrong – or at least premature – in their conclusions." [\[xiv\]](#) Liberalism may fail, or it won't, but that hinges on events yet to happen. There is no inevitability about it.

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[\[i\]](#) Patrick J. Deneen 'Why Liberalism Failed' pxxi

[\[ii\]](#) Deneen p179

[\[iii\]](#) Deneen p63

[\[iv\]](#) Deneen p50

[\[v\]](#) Deneen p65

[\[vi\]](#) Deneen p61

[\[vii\]](#) Deneen p65

[\[viii\]](#) Deneen p6

[\[ix\]](#) Deneen p50

[\[x\]](#) Deneen p78

[\[xi\]](#) Paul Kelly 'The Uncivil War Killing Liberalism' June 6-7 2020 The Australian

[\[xii\]](#) Connor Harvey 'Why Liberalism Failed by Patrick Deneen' UQ Statecraft October 2019

[\[xiii\]](#) Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France and the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event' p154

[\[xiv\]](#) Harvey UQ Statecraft