

Richard Seddon King of God's Own

By Tom Brooking

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Reviewed by Tony Simpson

It's always been something of a curiosity that Richard Seddon, our longest serving and in many ways most significant prime minister/ premier has not attracted a biographer since R M Burdon published his popular account of Seddon's life in 1955. Tom Brooking has now repaired that deficiency with what will be the standard work of reference for many years to come. This is because it is a book which sets out in exhaustive detail the initiatives and legislative sequences in which Seddon was involved over his political career. But it goes far beyond that into three very significant aspects of what that career signifies.

The first of these is to give a name to what Seddon's agenda added up to as a consistent political position, something which people have been struggling with almost from the outset. Brooking calls it 'populist Liberalism' but it has enjoyed a number of names over the decades and in a number of locations. In Britain it was usually referred to as 'the new Liberalism' to distinguish its social emphasis from the *laissez faire* economic liberalism of the Gladstonians but that designation didn't quite fit in its New Zealand context and has never caught on here. The French political scientist Andre Siegfried called it *socialisme sans doctrine* in the astonished book he wrote after a visit here in 1904, unable to get his head around how such an apparently inchoate set of precepts and policies could produce such a coherent and largely consistent egalitarian and democratic outcome. (1) What he did not understand was that it had its own philosophical underpinning in the works of English radicals such as Thomas Paine and William Cobbett, and later by way of Chartism and the development of the British tradition of trade unionism to now largely forgotten thinkers such as Henry George or movements such as that for 'free silver' in the United States which Seddon and his political supporters in parliament were translating into practical political programs almost as they went along on behalf of voters to whom they were common political currency. In other words, along with the Australians and Canadians of the same era the European incomers, having got their hands on more or less complete adult (or at least male) suffrage were doing what they would have done in Britain if they had been able to capture the legislature there. This was to implement what we would now call social democracy

The second broader aspect of the book is the explosion of the myth that Seddon swept all before him once he had got into his political stride in 1893. On the contrary, far from dominating the political scene, he was under continuous attack from his political foes in and out of parliament during the thirteen years he held the premiership. No electoral or legislative outcome during the entire 'Seddonian' period was ever a foregone conclusion. His enemies included not only those who were on the left and putatively belonged, broadly speaking in the days before tight party discipline, within his own party, such as Tommy Taylor, but also (and this is much less commonly observed), the pre-existing political elite of landowners and investors who were scandalised by the emergence of a political leadership which had not enjoyed the benefits of a higher education and who therefore had no business ruling the country. Now that democracy has become the default setting for much of the OECD and beyond we sometimes forget that in this period the notion that adult males should be given the vote on that basis alone was considered to be fraught with hazards. New Zealand, once women

had been enfranchised in 1893 after a long struggle, became the world's first fully fledged adult democracy, a development with social consequences which struck many people as not only dangerous but an outrage. Nor were these people all beyond our borders. Although Brooking does not mention it specifically, one of its loudest detractors was Alexander Turnbull who never lost a chance to sneer at and refer contemptuously to governments of butchers and bricklayers; he was typical of many among the educated professional class in New Zealand in his day who thought similarly. By the time of Seddon's death in 1906 these opponents had come together in the newly formed Reform Party which less than a decade later would re-capture power and whose subsequent actions would show that they had forgotten none of their own agendas, but who had learned from their experience in Opposition to cloak these in the populist vocabularies embedded in our political culture by Seddon and the Liberals.

Which leads thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, to what this book makes clear. The Seddonian Liberals established a political agenda which became the bedrock upon which most governments erected their policies for the next nine decades. One of the most interesting commentators on the book so far, ex-Cabinet Minister in National governments Simon Upton, has remarked upon the importance of the Seddon era in establishing this fundamental agenda (of what he calls "the providential State") that it became so central to our political concerns and beliefs that when it was successfully challenged in the eighties "we couldn't articulate the roots of what had been swept away [which] said as much about the success of that experiment as it did about our ignorance of them." (2) It was an agenda so deeply embedded that it survived two world wars and an international economic depression of considerable magnitude more or less intact, and only apparently disappeared when international economic developments rendered many of its key shibboleths obsolete and impractical. I say 'apparently' because although Upton clearly approves of this development, many New Zealanders do not, and still look back on that era with considerable nostalgic hankering even if they are not quite clear where the things they are hankering after came from and how they might reassert them. How many of them will repair that ignorance through Brooking's book is however a moot point, given that its language suggests that it is directed to an academic rather than a general readership.

The book is particularly good on Seddon's later political career. If people recall the Seddon government at all it is most likely to be because of its earlier radical reforms such as votes for women (which ironically Seddon opposed, first overtly and then behind the scenes), the breaking up of the large landed estates, and the regulation of the labour market in ways which encouraged the formation of trade unions. But the book also makes a case for such later reforms as the opening of secondary education to all—at least if they could pass the examinations—being of equal if not greater significance in the establishment of a thorough-going egalitarianism as one of the major features of our society than what we generally think of as the Liberal's achievement.

One other dimension of the book which will surprise some readers is the significance of the relations between Maori and non-Maori in that era, and the central role played by Seddon in attempts to reconcile Maori to an acceptance of their cultural defeat and the loss of the ownership of their land which underpinned it. That it was couched in its time in the unfamiliar language of the central debate in the decade up to the First World War over freehold as opposed to leasehold land tenure is probably a main reason why it is little regarded and less understood than it ought to be. But to take just one example, those over the past decade who have been startled or bewildered by events in the Ureweras which seem to have come out of nowhere, will find much of the background to them here in a sorry

catalogue of misunderstandings and outright broken commitments which Brooking outlines and in the creation of which Seddon played a major role.

If I have a caveat it is that Seddon the man does not really emerge as a rounded and fully flesh and blood figure from this book. Despite its name it is a 'times' rather than a 'life'. But that does not detract significantly from its value. The jurist Stephen Sedley in reviewing a new biography of Lord Mansfield in the *London Review of Books* (3) earlier this year remarks of the writer, Norman Poser, that "his achievement as a biographer is to equip others to form a fuller judgment" and this also, it seems to me is Brooking's main achievement.

Notes

- (1) Siegfried's book *Democracy in New Zealand* (1904 and translated into English in 1914) went a considerable way to making his international reputation as an intellectual and academic in his time
- (2) 'Larger than life' *New Zealand Books* Summer 2014
- (3) 'I Have No Books to Consult' in *London Review of Books* 22 January 2015