

Abstract

The virtue of political moderation holds an important place in the history of political philosophy and in political history in general. But as moderation forces expectations to be lowered and compromises reached, it is not the most popular virtue. Moderation means self-restraint and as such is very difficult to put into practice. Nevertheless, moderation was a key concept in many phases of history, in particular in turbulent times, in times of political upheavals or in the years following a revolution. The age of the French Revolution was such a tempestuous time – not only for France but for the whole of Europe. The need for political moderation was felt in many places, but particularly in Britain where politicians and political thinkers saw moderation as part of the national character.

The main advocate of political moderation in Britain was the Anglo-Irish philosopher and politician Edmund Burke. It was not only during the revolution in France, but throughout his entire political career that he made a strong case for moderation, prudence and the British mixed constitution, which he confounded with a certain interpretation of John Locke's philosophy as the basis of Whiggism. This was the ideology of the "Old Whigs" which he positioned against what he saw as a "new, republican, frenchified Whiggism" represented by Charles James Fox and his friends. Burke was thus not the "Father of Conservatism" into which he was transformed by some 20th-century authors, but an 18th-century Whig guided by the quest for moderation and a political middle course. He combined Whig principles with a conservative disposition and in this way prepared British Liberal Toryism, or Liberal Conservatism, as a kind of "middle course between extremes" as George Canning called it. Apart from Canning this "middle course", which was actually nothing other than a conservative variant of liberalism, was primarily represented by Sir Robert Peel.

This book closes a research gap by showing the rise of British Liberal Conservatism from 1750 to 1850. It initially examines Burke's political philosophy and then shows how Liberal Tories and Liberal Conservatives took up his thought, and how they understood the virtues of moderation and prudence. It discusses the political ideas of the Liberal Tories and Liberal Conservatives by examining their policy in all possible fields. Furthermore, the book aims at demonstrating that 19th-century Britain was not simply dominated by the opposition of two closed parties, but that there was a fluid party system in which Liberal Conservatism played an important role by establishing a dominant political culture of moderation which eventually marked both parties, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party. In the end the rise of Liberal Conservatism meant no less than the triumph of the centre in Britain.