

# Reviews

## Nobody believed he believed

David Dutton: *Simon: A political biography of Sir John Simon* (Aurum Press Ltd, 1992)

Reviewed by Duncan Brack

What are we to make of John Simon? In common, probably, with most Liberal Democrats, before reading this book I knew little more about him than the fact that he led the Liberal National break-away from the official Liberals in 1931 – a group of MPs who opposed the Labour Government of the time, joined the National Government in 1931 and in due course merged into the Conservative Party – and a couple of quotes about him by Lloyd George ('Simon has sat on the fence for so long that the iron has entered into his soul'; 'I do object to this intolerable self-righteousness ... Greater men ... have done it in the past [changed their views on a major issue], but ... they, at any rate, did not leave behind them the slime of hypocrisy in passing from one side to another'.)

I had not appreciated that Simon was perhaps one of the most puzzling Liberal politicians of the mid-twentieth century. He occupied a unique collection of offices – the Home Office (twice), the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Woolsack – and, along with Winston Churchill, shared the distinction of being the only man to have sat in the cabinet at the outbreak of both world wars. But despite these obvious indicators of ability, intelligence and hard work, one cannot really call him a political success. He achieved relatively little in his periods in the Home Office (1915–16 and 1935–37), and was almost a disaster at the Foreign Office (1931–35) and little better at the Treasury (1937–40). He was listed second after Neville Chamberlain in the famous polemical tract, *Guilty Men*, as one of the politicians whose personal shortcomings and attachment to the policy of appeasement led directly to the crisis of 1940. Only as Lord Chancellor (1940–45) did Simon serve with any real distinction, finding at the end of his career the niche which his legal training and ability suited him for.

David Dutton's biography provides a very thorough chronicle of Simon's career, though its coverage is perhaps a little uneven. While his period as Foreign Secretary, including the Manchurian crisis of 1931–33 and the World Disarmament Conference of 1932–34, are analysed virtually memorandum by memorandum and speech by speech, other aspects of his career, including his time in Asquith's govern-

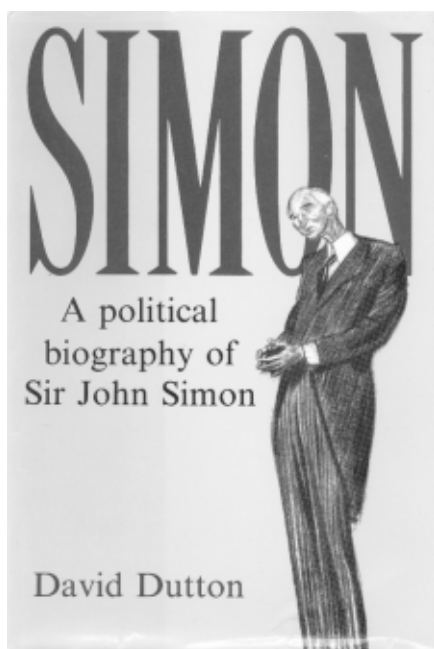
ments (as Solicitor-General, Attorney-General and Home Secretary), and his dealings with his new party, the Liberal Nationals, are more sketchily treated, presumably because of the relative shortage of records.

Dutton also does probably the best job anyone could of persuading his readers that Simon's failures were not all his own fault. No British government of any make-up, for example, would *not* have adopted the policy of appeasement in the 1920s and '30s — there were simply too many reasons, including military and economic weakness, and a genuine desire to right the wrongs of Versailles, for any other course to have been credibly pursued.

But it is not always easy to understand *why* Simon did what he did, though this partly becomes clearer when one reaches the last chapter of the book, 'The Man'. Why, for example, did he resign from the cabinet in 1916 over conscription, a position almost wholly at odds with his later career? Why did he become so antagonistic to Labour, and to Lloyd George, throughout the 1920s that he was prepared to break with his party in June 1931? Dutton chronicles the events meticulously but I did not always feel that I really understood why Simon did what he did.

Perhaps this is because Simon himself was a difficult man to understand. As Dutton notes, Simon's autobiography was largely unrevealing, and his surviving private papers contain none of the private and family correspondence which could have revealed his real character. Even his diary was written, apparently, with an eye to the political record. There are, of course, many clues: his upbringing as an only child; the devastating effect of the death of his first wife in 1902; his formidable intellect, which led him to see perhaps too clearly the benefits, and the drawbacks, of all potential courses of action; his legal training, which gave him the ability to argue anyone's case but seems possibly to have removed any tendency to *believe* in one.

Above all, as Dutton brings out clearly, he had three major failings as a politician. He lacked warmth and an ability to inspire affection, but too often



tried too hard to pretend he had them — one of the most commonly told of all anecdotes about him was his habit of slapping someone convivially on the back and then calling them by the wrong name. He was fatally indecisive, time after time presenting beautifully argued options to cabinet without indicating his own preference. What he liked, said Lloyd George, was that someone else should present him with a decision and then he could put up a brilliant case for it. And finally, he lacked belief. ‘Too penetrating a discernment and too frail a conviction’, as Eden said. ‘We see him pitifully seeking with his

intellect’, noted a *New Statesman* writer, ‘for the answer which his heart should supply’. Bevan put it more simply: ‘nobody believed he believed’.

These, at the end, were his fatal drawbacks, the reasons why he has gone down in history as a failure despite his glittering array of offices, achieved without any obvious advantages of birth. ‘There is a sense,’ concludes Dutton, ‘in which the great barrister who won so many cases for others lost his own’. As a political history, this book is interesting. As political psychology it is fascinating.

*Duncan Brack*

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## Cold War politics

**Christopher Mayhew: *A War of Words: A Cold War witness* (I. B. Tauris, 1998)**

**Reviewed by Robert Ingham**

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Christopher Mayhew was one of the rare breed of politicians about whom it can be claimed that his political principles were his sole guide throughout his career. A talented administrator who combined a passion for action with the capacity for original thought, his insistence on defending unfashionable causes probably cost him the higher office his talents deserved. He was a vigorous opponent of Communism at a time when Communists and fellow travellers were influential within the Labour movement. He defended the Arabs at a time when many leading politicians and commentators were Zionists. He was one of the few ministers to have resigned his post because of a political disagreement with his colleagues, concerning Britain’s role east of Suez. And he forewarned of the growing Trotskyist infiltration of the Labour Party and joined the Liberal Party when his warnings went unheeded, in 1974.

It was his anti-Communism, which, unusually for Labour politicians at that time, dated back to his university days, that made Mayhew most unpopular

with left-wing elements of the labour movement. Mayhew had no time for apologists for Marxism or the Soviet Union. Not only had he seen for himself the restrictions on personal freedom and the harsh economic conditions of the Soviet Union. He had also experienced the tactics used by Communists to gain influence within the Labour Party and was convinced that the leadership of the Soviet Union was doing everything in its power to subvert and, ultimately, destroy, the economically and politically free countries of the West. He detected signs of Soviet ideological warfare in even ostensibly friendly organisations such as the British-Soviet Friendship Society and pioneered the West’s counter-attack, the ‘War of Words’ referred to in the title of Mayhew’s posthumous volume of memoirs.

‘War of Words’ is an account of three different aspects of Mayhew’s crusade against Communism. The first aspect was the establishment, on Mayhew’s suggestion, of the Information Research Department (IRD) within the Foreign Office in 1948. The IRD arose from Mayhew’s frustration

at attending international gatherings, particularly the United Nations, where pro-Soviet propaganda was heard loud and clear and went unchallenged by Western diplomats. He wanted a ‘sustained world-wide anti-Communist propaganda offensive’ which would ‘stress the weakness of Communism, not its strength’ and reveal Russia as ‘a poor, backward, devastated country with ridiculous pretensions of being a ‘liberator’ and ‘the wave of the future’. This offensive was particularly aimed at developing countries, which Mayhew feared would fall under the Communist spell all too easily if Soviet propaganda was not countered.

The IRD provided factual background briefings on matters such as justice, the collectivisation of agriculture, and the Sovietisation of eastern Europe for journalists, academics, diplomats, politicians, broadcasters and others sympathetic to the department’s aims and also published a number of books and pamphlets. Mayhew had hoped that the IRD could also sell the achievements of British social democracy and effectively counter Soviet propaganda about the British Empire, but practical difficulties were encountered, not least in persuading Whitehall’s mandarins that these efforts would be worthwhile. Mayhew recounts the problems encountered in trying to get the scrupulously independent BBC to accept and use IRD material, as well as the interest shown in foreign embassies in the IRD’s work. The IRD preceded work by the US to counter Soviet propaganda and Mayhew is surely justified in claiming that ‘the IRD can probably claim a modest share of the credit for stemming and turning back the Soviet ideological offensive’.

The second strand of Mayhew’s book concerns his efforts in the mid-1950s to replace Communist-led British/Soviet cultural organisations with bodies run by the British Council and the Foreign Office. The Communist-led organisations, such as the British-Soviet Friendship Society, organised most of the cultural exchanges between the two countries in the early and mid 1950s, particularly as ‘peaceful coexistence’ was promoted as a strategy for dealing with

the West by the Soviet regime after Stalin's death. Mayhew found that the Communist-led friendship bodies grossly exaggerated the strength of Communism in the UK and he doubted whether Marxism could genuinely live in 'peaceful coexistence' with its capitalist foe. The story of how Mayhew tackled Khrushchev, Bulganin and their British supporters head-on and succeeded is one of the most entertaining parts of this book.

Finally, Mayhew gives an account of his opposition to unilateralism, both within Gaitskell's Labour Party and within the Liberal Party. He sheds new light on the defence debate within the Liberal/SDP Alliance, saving one or two mildly sarcastic remarks for David Steel and Paddy Ashdown: one of this book's few disappointments is that Mayhew does not say more on this subject.

Mayhew set out to counter criticism of the work of the IRD written by pro-Communist journalists when the

department's archives began to be opened up in the mid-1990s. He also aimed to tackle those scholars of the Cold War who have explained the conflict in terms of policy mistakes and misunderstandings by two mutually suspicious but not necessarily antagonistic powers, an approach Mayhew firmly rejected. *War of Words* is a novel, interesting and convincing addition to the bibliography of the Cold War, as well as a valuable account of the influence of Communism over both the Labour and Liberal Parties, and a stimulating autobiographical account which supplements Mayhew's 1987 volume *Time to Explain*. The book was published posthumously – Mayhew died in January 1997 – and owes much to Lyn Smith's unobtrusive editing. Perhaps its greatest fault is its price – £25 for less than 150 pages – but that certainly represents better value for money than the dull, self-serving memoirs of many politicians.

Robert Ingham

of England, where they had to concentrate votes. And, it had reminded the electorate that to get rid of sitting Tory MPs they would have to vote tactically. That is what happened in 1997. The Liberal Democrats targeted winnable seats, especially in the south and west, and campaigned hard for the tactical vote in seats all over the country, where Labour was already in third place. As a result, the largest number of seats was obtained for the Liberal Democrats since 1929 — on a lower percentage of the poll than had been achieved in the previous general election.

Emma Nicholson was born into a Conservative background. Her father was a Tory MP. But there were other political traditions in her family. Her great-grandfather William Nicholson had been Liberal MP for Petersfield in the late 19th century. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Emma Nicholson is able to record that on joining the Liberal Democrats she felt as if she had 'come home'. Nicholson Toryism was of the traditional, gradualist, non-dogmatic variety. Like his daughter, Emma Nicholson's father also fell out with his party, abstaining in the vote condemning President Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, and thus running the risk of de-selection. The book mentions another Tory MP who did lose the support of his constituency association over the same issue, Emma's near namesake but no relation, Nigel Nicolson. Oddly, although she describes him as a friend, he is referred to as MP for Sevenoaks when he actually sat for Bournemouth East. Nevertheless, identifying with Tory dissenters like her father and Nigel Nicolson, clearly helped Emma Nicholson loosen the tribal ties of political party. Getting punched in the stomach by a 'fellow' Tory MP for daring to vote against the government for the first time in what was supposed to be free vote also probably helped Emma Nicholson towards the conclusion that she was not in a party which naturally tolerated dissent and free-thinking.

But *Secret Society* is much more than an account of Emma Nicholson's gradual disillusion with and defection from the Conservative Party. It is something of a personal manifesto ranging over the

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## Coming home

### Emma Nicholson: *Secret Society, Inside – and Outside – the Conservative Party* (Indigo, 1996) Reviewed by Graham Lippiatt

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In his recently published autobiography, John Major – our last Prime Minister, if you are having trouble placing the name – predicts that, against the background of her defection to the Liberal Democrats in December 1995, 'Emma [Nicholson] will be forgotten'. Given her election to the European Parliament in 1999, Emma Nicholson seems set to stay in the public eye for a good while longer yet. Mr Major also comments rather sniffily that the Liberal Democrats had nominated her as a life peer, as if he wants to imply this brings something into disrepute, but he cannot quite make his mind up whether it is the Liberal Democrats, the House of Lords or both. This (to borrow one Mr Major's pet phrases) is a bit rich coming from the man who insisted on ennobling Jeffrey Archer — especially after

the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee had recommended otherwise.

John Major must have wished he could have dismissed the Emma Nicholson phenomenon so easily as he does in his book back in 1995–96. As it was, according to *The Times*, her defection provided the Liberal Democrats 'a dazzling firework display' and lent credibility to the party when successes in by-elections or local elections always seemed to be overshadowed by New Labour and Tony Blair. *The Times* leader for 2 January 1996 presciently looked forward to the general election. The previous Tory defector Alan Howarth had joined Labour. By choosing the Liberal Democrats, Emma Nicholson had boosted the party's claim for chief opposition status in the south and west



issues and policies that Emma Nicholson has campaigned for. These include the fight to end all forms of unfair discrimination. Emma Nicholson herself was born with a hearing deficiency which was not identified until she was seventeen years old. Other causes Emma Nicholson has espoused are the campaign to combat adult illiteracy, the need to persuade and encourage more women (particularly members of the ethnic minorities) to enter public and political life, closer co-operation with our European partners, penal reform,

opposing the introduction of identity cards, protecting the privacy of patients' medical records and supporting moves to impose proper standards on those in public life — all classic liberal themes.

More importantly in personal terms, the story is told of Emma Nicholson's work with children's charities. In 1973, she joined the Save the Children Fund because of her background working in IT, eventually rising to become Director. As an MP in 1990 she visited Romania and later founded an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Romanian Children and launched a financial appeal. Against this background and together with an interest in fair treatment for international refugees and the legacy of the Iran–Iraq and Gulf Wars, Emma Nicholson set up the AMAR appeal in 1991 to assist the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. That appeal raised £4 million over the next five years. A year later she arranged to bring Amar himself to Guy's Hospital for treatment to his 45% third degree burns and then took him into her own family. This in turn led to greater awareness of the effects of government policies on those in the community and a growing realisation that the Conservative Party was an integral part of the problem, not a means to its solution.

A criticism of the book is that while

its structure is essentially chronological, the subject matter seems at times to jump around and the story of a particular campaign or political episode is sometimes difficult to follow through. But in a sense this is a reflection of real life. Busy politicians do not campaign neatly on one issue at a time. Crusades overlap and political themes interact. The organisation of the book brings home the hectic nature of current political life for an active and campaigning MP.

There is an epilogue to the book which consists of quotations from well-wishers, mostly traditional Conservative supporters who, like Emma Nicholson, and for their own reasons, could stand no more of the last government and had decided to change electoral allegiance. It would be instructive to know if any of those quoted have reverted to the Conservative fold or whether the deep disillusion expressed in their words has remained as strong as time passes and the memory of Conservative government fades. Emma Nicholson's political future is, however, firmly entrenched in the Liberal Democrats, as a peer and a Member of the European Parliament. Reading this book, her whole political life seems to have revolved around liberal causes and the only wonder is — what took her so long?

Graham Lippiatt



## Breaking the mould?

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enthusiasm for these policies as if they are concessions given by a Labour Party anxious to win the golden opinions of 'bien-pensant' society. But I do not have a sense of their innate enthusiasm for the sort of principles which underlie the constitutional programme. That aspect of SDP thinking has not actually been absorbed by the Labour Party.

TL: How much do you think the SDP has been the dominant influence on the Liberal Democrats?

RM: I do not think it is possible to say. One of the most interesting and in a way unpredicted developments was the speed with which it was impossible to tell from which party the members of

the new Liberal Democrats had originated. The differences now are almost impossible to detect. This happened very quickly. Liberals and Social Democrats found they had so little dividing them that it was artificial to talk about it. This was probably because the members of the SDP who joined the merged party were the people who were most moved by liberal democratic philosophy.

TL: Reviewing politics from 1979 onwards, what would you identify as the greatest achievement you participated in?

RM: Helping to promote into the centre of political debate in Britain, liberal, democratic ideas — to end class as the test of British politics, to end the dominance of class in political debate. And to foster pluralism in the political arena. That is what has led to the greater ac-

ceptance of the role of our party in local government, at Westminster and in the European Parliament. These [electoral successes] are the easy measures of our advance but the real change is in the nature of the debate and that, I think, has been our achievement.

TL: And what has been your greatest regret?

RM: My greatest regret is that it took so long. We are a conservative people. The aspirations of people in politics has not matched the needs of the country. We should have been more radical in challenging the nostrums of the other parties.

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★ *SDP – The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King (Oxford, 1995)