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HISTORY

Leader Ashdown

Andrew Rawnsley, Duncan Brack and Harriet Smith

Ashdown as Leader Interviews

Tony Little

'His Friends Sat on the Benches Opposite' The Peelites and the Liberal Party

Dr Michael Brock

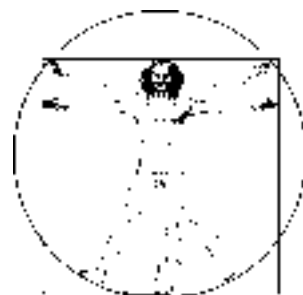
The Unofficial Side Asquith archives

R. Ian Elder

J. M. Hogge: Backbench Maverick Biography

Reviews

The Ashdown Diaries Tony Greaves **Thirty years of Liberator** John Smithson



Liberal Democrat History Group

Issue 30: Spring 2001

3 Ashdown as Leader

Andrew Rawnsley, Duncan Brack and **Harriet Smith** interview Paddy Ashdown on the contents of Volume 1 of his *Diaries*

15 'His Friends Sat on the Benches Opposite'

Tony Little examines the part played by the renegade Conservatives – the Peelites – in the creation of the Liberal Party

19 The Unofficial Side

Dr Michael Brock describes the Bodleian Library's acquisition of H. H. Asquith's personal papers

20 Biography: J. M. Hogge

The life and career of Liberal MP James Myles Hogge (1873–1928), by **R. Ian Elder**

23 Report: The Limehouse Declaration and the Birth of the SDP

with Sir Ian Wrigglesworth and Matthew Oakeshott; report by **Neil Stockley**

25 Letters to the Editor

Michael Meadowcroft; Robert Ingham; Dr Peter Hatton

27 Reviews

Paddy Ashdown MP: *Diaries, Volume 1*, reviewed by **Tony Greaves**

Thirty years of *Liberator*, reviewed by **John Smithson**

Robert Skidelsky: *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937–46*, reviewed by **David Gowland**

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In November 2000 Paddy Ashdown published the first volume of his *Diaries*. Andrew Rawnsley, Duncan Brack and Harriet Smith interviewed him on his period as leader.

Ashdown as Leader

In August 1999, Paddy Ashdown MP handed over the leadership of the Liberal Democrats, drawing to an end a dramatic and sometimes controversial eleven-year span as party leader. Just over a year later he published the first volume of his *Diaries* (reviewed in this issue of the *Journal* by Tony Greaves), covering the period 1988–97. The Liberal Democrat History Group organised two interviews with him on the topics covered in the *Diaries*: the first, at an evening meeting in Politico's bookstore, where the questions were put by *Observer* journalist Andrew Rawnsley and members of the audience; and the second, with Duncan Brack and Harriet Smith. This article reproduces edited extracts from both.

The *Diaries*

Q: I thought we'd begin by asking Paddy why you wrote these diaries and what you hope to achieve from publishing them?

PA: Tam Dalyell suggested I should. It was the morning of 28 July 1988 – the day of the Liberal Democrat leadership election count – and I was walking through the House of Commons Members' Lobby and I met Tam there, and he said: 'Paddy you are going to win today – congratulations. And here's a word of advice – keep a diary.' And I did, starting that night. I must say I wish I had kept a diary before, because it is a fascinating thing to do. Looking back on the eleven years, it's an odd thing to sum up at the end of the day what you have done that day, not in a militaristic fashion – Andrew would like to pretend that I'm only capable of thinking like a roaring commando captain with a dagger in his teeth and blackened face – but it sums up what you've been doing and helps to point you where you will be going the next day.

The next thing I decided was that if you are going to do a diary, you have to do it *for* somebody; you can't just do a diary in a vacuum. I had no intention of publishing them until about a year or eighteen months ago, when I showed Richard Holme a copy of a meeting with our present Prime Minister and he said: 'you really ought to be publishing these'.

However, I didn't dictate them for you and they would have been worse diaries if I had done, because I think I would have been a bit more self-conscious than I otherwise was. I dictated them, in fact, for my grandchildren, as then unborn; what I tried to do was to try and express for them what politics in our time was like at my level. I think that has made them more frank and, I hope, a little more unvarnished, than they would otherwise have been.

I want to add two warnings for you. One, diaries are the most seductive form of historical inaccuracy – they appear to be historically accurate because they are contemporaneous. I dictated these every night – well all right, I'll admit it, sometimes the next day, and just really very occasionally the day after – and I would note if there was a conversation; I would note it down immediately I left, if it had been a meeting with Major or Thatcher or the Secretary-General of the UN or, of course, Mr Blair. So they appear to be a historical record, but of course they are not, because they are one person's view, how I saw things. On one particular occasion, you will see that my mind played tricks with me – in the Tricia Howard affair, when I thought we had taken a set of decisions and everybody else who was there said we had *not* taken them for the same reasons I thought we had taken them. I put a footnote in there saying everyone else didn't see it that way. So, underlined several heavy times – this is *my* view, *my* recollection of events, no more and no less.

The next point about diaries is that you then have to decide why you are going to publish them. It's very difficult to answer this question without sounding pompous, so let's start off by saying: because of the money, which isn't nearly as much as you all think. But also I genuinely think they are a record of eleven years of politics which people may find interesting.

My second reason was because, as you will see, I conceived the idea of what has come to be known as the 'project'. Actually I didn't conceive it, but I decided that this was what I was going to do, that I wanted the Liberal Democrats to play their role in the reshaping of the left in politics as early as 1989, long



before Tony Blair was even a gleam in Peter Mandelson's eye. It wasn't even my project; it was the project of my predecessor David Steel and before him Jeremy Thorpe but, most profoundly of all perhaps, Jo Grimond. This is a project about the realignment of the left which we in the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats – or at least some of us – have wanted to achieve for a very long time. I am passionate about it. I genuinely believe that this is something that had to be done, and is a big event waiting to be done in politics – and our failure to do it has given the Tories too many chances to have a go at government, and progressive politics too few chances to govern and bring the kind of things we believe in.

That's not to say we are the same as Labour; but I think working together to 'heal the schisms' is a useful and good thing to do. I hope that these diaries will give that a boost, for two reasons. I hope that at the end of reading them and thinking about that aspect of the diaries, people will say: 'goodness, didn't they get close?' and the next thing they'll say is: 'wouldn't it have been a better thing if they had succeeded?' Because I have no doubt that this would have been a better government if we had been involved in it. It would not have been a government that made the mistake of not investing in health and education for the first two years – which Tony Blair now admits to be one of the cardinal mistakes of his government; it would have tackled the issue of Europe earlier; and it would have been a much greener government.

It wouldn't necessarily have been a much more liberal government, but I think I am right in saying, without being too breast-beating and pro-Lib Dem, that it would have been a more in-touch government. I hope it will give that project a boost. I think it probably will, particularly in the light of the new climate for partnership between the two parties that's working well in Scotland and Wales.

The early days

Q: Why did you want to stand for the leadership of the party?

PA: Because I didn't know what position the party was in! – though I don't think it would have changed my mind if I had. David Penhaligon once said that one of the reasons he was elected Member of Parliament for Truro was because he was too naïve to know it was impossible – and I think the same is true of my election in Yeovil, incidentally. But I had no idea of the financial state of the party. And it wasn't just the finances. What we didn't realise was the extent to which party support and everything else fell apart behind us in the three months of the leadership election campaign, because it was leaderless.

Q: Given the state of the party in those early days, when we were all so naïve, what did you think you could achieve?

PA: Very early on, I formulated a three-stage strategy, in my normal military fashion. In many ways, my early leadership was like my early leadership of the Yeovil constituency. I took over something in about the same state of disrepair and I was quite goal-oriented, plan- and strategy-oriented. I laid out a three-stage strategy. Stage 1 was to put the thing back together again. We had to concentrate in the first two or three years just on ourselves, rebuilding, recreating the structures, getting the thing working together, getting a decent headquarters and so on.

The second stage was, having done all that, to make the party matter to the electorate again. The 1992 election was about making the party relevant. And the third stage was, having made it relevant, how do you play on the scene? So to give it a sporting analogy, the first

stage was building a team, the second stage was putting the team on the field and making sure people knew we could play, and the third stage was trying to score some goals.

Q: What did your victory signify in terms of party thinking? Was it a rejection of 'old Liberalism', a fresh start after Steel, the triumph of the ex-SDP element of the new party, or something else?

PA: I don't think it was a triumph of the ex-SDP. One always writes things after the event to suit oneself, but I think there was a determination, a deep recognition in the party that if we could retain the strengths of the old Liberal Party – campaigning ability and strength on the ground – and match that with the new strengths brought in by the SDP – intellectual rigour, a few quite high-profile people and a more efficient approach to things (not all things, but some things) – then we could create something. There was a desire to build something new; I think the strategic mistake that Alan [Beith] made in the leadership election was that he wanted to recreate the old Liberal Party, whereas most of the members wanted to create something fresh, something different.

Q: You refer early on in your diary to SDP/Liberal tensions. Which of the two groups did you find it easier to work with?

PA: My natural bent was to find it easier to fit in with Liberals, because I had come from a grassroots campaigning background, because ALDC had helped me win Yeovil, etc. I can't tell you what the answer is, but I don't think either of them was easier to work with. The people I got on with were those who believed that past differences didn't matter and that we had to get to a position where everyone believed they didn't matter. In the construction of my first leader's office I quite deliberately chose 50% of the people who had voted against merger, from both sides, because I knew that unless I brought them in, I couldn't rebuild the party.

Q: When did SDP/Liberal differences cease to matter?

PA: There is a date – some time before the 1992 general election. I have a suspicion that Des [Wilson] may have

been responsible for that more than anyone else, because although Des could be very bitter about some things – I think the thing that keeps him together sometimes is his hates – he was in fact very inclusive during the election campaign. If there's one thing that got us over the differences, it was the election campaign; it proved we could do it, we were together, we were a force, we did matter. Des's remarkable team-building style, with some exceptions, was part of that.

Party policy and organisation

Q: The Diaries hardly talk about policy – why is that?

PA: The reason is the editor, who naturally wanted to pick out the bits that were of interest to a wider circle; there isn't much about the constituency either.

What I am clear about is that, especially in the first phase, the creation of a body of policy which was Liberal and which gave the party heart was absolutely crucial. Frankly, chairing the Policy Committee was a crucifixion, but it's a crucifixion I had to bear because if I hadn't had a hands-on approach, we would not have created that body of policy that it gave us. Michael Meadowcroft used to say that in order to win the votes you must first win the

vote-winners. I am not sure how much policy does apply to people out there, ordinary voters, but it certainly applies to the vote-winners.

Q: What were the key elements in that? What were the key components of the new liberal party?

PA: Somebody said to me that one of the seminal moments was Hong Kong passports. I think that's right. It was because we were alone, we were opposed by everybody else, and it was Liberalism.

An important strain was economic policy, where Alan Beith, as Treasury spokesperson, and I quite deliberately went about seeking to change the policy of the party away from – and I don't mean to be insulting to others – a soggy corporatism towards a more liberal policy, more interested in competition, small businesses and enterprise. We shifted the economic policy deliberately quite strongly to the right.

The second was based on the citizen and citizens' rights. I think the party still has a problem here, which is that because

of our local government base we tend to articulate far too much the view of the producer and not the consumer.

The third element, internationalism, was a passion of mine. I think that the three proudest moments of the party in terms of events were the Hong Kong

passports issue, which I think was mine, actually; the second was the Maastricht debate, which I still believe was our proudest moment in the House of Commons – Maastricht would have fallen if we hadn't voted with the Conservatives; and the third was

I found it very difficult to get the party to think afresh. For a radical party, we can be extremely resistant to new ideas and new concepts that swim against what was the accepted wisdom.

Bosnia, for which I have taken a huge amount of credit, but actually the architect of our policy was Russell [Johnston]. It was Russell who said we must take this position and it was Russell who persuaded me to do so, and I have benefited greatly from what was Russell's moral leadership.

The environment is also very important. Charles [Kennedy] chose the environment as the thing he wanted to make a splash on early in his leadership campaign, and so did I. I wanted us to be the greenest party and I think we probably were, by a long way, and that was a considerable revolution in the early days.

The Balkan wars were a constant theme of Ashdown's leadership (cartoon courtesy *Liberal Democrat News*)



Q: All your proudest moments were on international issues?

PA: Those were the big policy events, it seems to me, and I think it was and is true to say that in terms of personalities the party enjoyed an ascendancy over Labour on the foreign affairs and defence fields. Menzies [Campbell], Steel, Johnston and myself were able to present a much more cogent and consistent argument in the Gulf War, over Maastricht, and in the Balkans than anybody else. They are all foreign affairs but I suppose that's because that was the niche we could occupy – the niche that others, particularly Labour, didn't pay much attention to, and which played to our personal strengths.



Ashdown and Sir David Frost

Q: Where did you get your ideas from? What were the sources that influenced your thinking?

PA: Ken Baker once accused me of being a picker-upper of unconsidered trifles. I'm fascinated and driven by ideas. That's why I enjoy speaking to Gordon Brown so much, because he's the same. I sort of go around hoovering up ideas and testing them and then being attached to them. Is there a single source? You'd have to go to people like T. H. Green, Gladstone, Keynes on the economic side, Ralf Dahrendorf – the pretty standard Liberal Democrat thinkers. I didn't take my creed lock stock and barrel from any one individual.

Q: What were the problems you experienced with the process of putting together that body of policy?

PA: I found it very difficult to get the party to think afresh. For a radical party, we can be extremely resistant to new ideas and new concepts that swim against what was the accepted wisdom. For example, I still think that mutuality is one of the key tasks for our age and we missed a real opportunity there.¹ Look at the party's response to neighbourhood school trusts,² which, incidentally, true to Don [Foster]'s prediction, have now been adopted by both the other two parties. We could have been ahead on that. We are hopelessly resistant to really interesting new thought in the party and we ought not to be. We used not to be and that may well be a failure of my leadership.

The second thing is the constant battle with the local government-driven producers. That sounds much more insulting than I mean it to be, because in many ways I tried to model the party on our local government record; I saw what had been done there as a beacon for the rest of us to follow. These guys had taken power, grappled with it, dealt with coalitions, and come out of it on top and that's what I wanted us to have the self-confidence to do nationally. So if I'm being slightly insulting to local government in the party, I don't mean to be across the board. It's just the nature of people – you have a power base and you try to preserve it, of course you do. I do exactly the same, but it was this great burden we had to get through to persuade people that what we were doing nationally also made sense in their councils.

Q: The structure of policy-making in the party rests on a balance between the Federal Policy Committee, the conference and the parliamentary party. Did you have any problems with any one of those consistently? Were you able to play them off against each other?

PA: I loved the FPC – it was a crucifixion to chair it because it went on and on and on, but it was a bloody good committee to work with. We had some high-quality people and some superbly high-quality debates. It was the pace at which it moved that I found frustrating.

I don't think the parliamentary party has accepted or yet accepts the primacy of the FPC. The difficulty we had was that

very frequently we had the spokesperson in parliament going off and doing their own thing and frequently saying 'I'm not responsible to the party – I am responsible to my electorate, parliament is different.' There were considerable tensions and difficulties, still unresolved, between the freedom of action the parliamentarian has – and this applies equally, and perhaps more, to the Lords – and the FPC. In my view the FPC was on most occasions braver and intellectually more rigorous and in many cases more Liberal than was the parliamentary party. Again there is a reason for that, it's a human reason – it's not because the parliamentary party aren't Liberals, it's because they are dealing with the compromises of power.

Q: You say at one point you worry about the ability of the parliamentary party to hold together in a hung parliament. One does get the impression from the Diaries that they are a terribly undisciplined bunch of people. Do you think the party is well served by its parliamentarians?

PA: I think it's changing. One of the changes that occurred during my leadership, for which I can take no credit at all, is that the parliamentarians have become steadily more professional and steadily more influenced by practice in local government – in many cases because, like me, they have come up through the local government route and helped to build their local government bases and know what it's about. The Liberal Party as it was before I joined, pre-1983, was a collection of extremely powerful, sometimes vaguely eccentric, very well-loved local figures. I don't say they weren't Liberal – some of them were and some of them weren't – but that's what they were and that's how they got elected.

1983 changed that, with Archy Kirkwood, Michael Meadowcroft, Malcolm Bruce, Jim Wallace and myself all coming from a similar background. 1987 and then 1992 changed it again and 1997, I think, has made a phenomenal difference. If there's one MP who is an outstanding example of it, it's Jackie [Ballard]. Now Jackie and I have had our differences, and sometimes they have been quite personally hurtful differences, given that we were brought up together in politics; but what is true

about Jackie is that once a decision has been taken, however much she disagrees, she is unbelievably loyal to that decision and holds to it absolutely firmly – and there are others in the new lot who are like that too. So, the parliamentary party has got steadily better and better on this front.

Whatever worries I may have had about the parliamentary party's potential cohesion in a coalition were probably unsubstantiated. Just look at the Scottish parliamentary party – if you had looked at it before it was assembled, you would have thought: 'Jesus, how will this lot not break apart under the smallest

pressure?' Or the Welsh Assembly party. This did not look like a cohesive band of brothers, but they've been brilliant, and I think I underestimated the extent to which people rise to the political challenge. One of the things you discover as a Liberal is that you give people responsibility and they rise to it.

The Labour project – marriage, affair or casual sex?

Q: One of the aims of your leadership campaign was to replace Labour as the main opposition to the Tories. In 1997 you talked about replacing the Tories as the main opposition to Labour. Was either of these realistic?

PA: The first was realistic, it was deeply realistic. I was not to know then that the Labour Party would elect a new leader. What I was very conscious of, and where I think my analysis was right and has proved to be so, was that socialism as the basis of a political party was not going to work, and that there was a space in politics – which I would call Liberalism or New Liberalism or whatever you like – which the party could go for.

The deepest and most desperate point of depression in my whole leadership of the party was the election of Blair. In many ways it was the thing I wanted to happen, but in many ways I knew – and I

say this without a doubt – that he was going to occupy the space that I was designing for us. So the question then was: how the hell do we survive, how the hell do we ride that wave rather than have it swamp us? So I think our analysis that the Labour Party would be replaced and that we would have a go at replacing it was correct, but we were not to know they would elect a leader that would replace

the Labour Party himself.

I was puzzled by this 1997 thing, about can we replace the Tories as the opposition to Labour. You will see in Volume 2 of the *Diaries* [due out after the next general election] that I agonised

about what the role of the party should be in the face of the New Labourism of Blair. Should we be part of it, in the hope of reforming it and turning it, or should we be opposing it? But you will see that I have always rejected the possibility that we could replace the Tories. The reason is because there is a centre-right constituency in this country and the Tories don't represent it at the moment; as long as they don't represent it we can borrow votes and some people from it, but as soon as they come back to the centre ground we can't be a centre-right party, because we are a left party, we are a party of progress.

Ashdown in typical pose – with a computer



There has always been a choice in my mind. The two logical positions for the party are the John Tilley/Tony Greaves view that our job is to be Liberals and to argue the Liberal opposition to a non-Liberal government, whether socialist or Tory. That is a perfectly logical position for the party, and I have always accepted that as one option. I may have wondered whether we should pursue this line, but in my own mind I was absolutely clear – and in some key moments after 1997, even more clear – that this was an historic opportunity for us to shape the government and to be the government. And I think I can say that if we had been in government as a result of coalition post-1997 this would have been a far better government.

Now what led me to that belief? The answer is this rather powerful thought, that you may think in the end a chimera. I looked at our own party, and the seminal moment for me was Bob Maclennan's response to Blair's accusation in one of our meetings. Blair said 'we're all social democrats now', and Bob said: 'no we're not, I'm a Liberal'. And I said to Bob afterwards, 'hang on, you're SDP', and he said, 'I've become a Liberal'. And the same is true of Charles Kennedy. And here's the thought that occurred to me: if Liberalism is the only creed that continues to matter and the others have become irrelevant, then it is extraordinary that Emma [Nicholson] from one wing and Bob from the other, through contact with us, have become liberals. And I entertained the thought, which I still think is not unreasonable,

that Blair – who nearly joined the SDP anyway, I am told – was on exactly the same journey. Blair once said to me that he watched the Hillhead by-election, ‘and I listened to our candidate there and I saw Roy [Jenkins] there and I said “I’m in the wrong party, I should be in a party with him”’. That was the thing that led me to believe that the right thing to do for us was not to follow the Tilley/Greaves view, but to take a risk, be inside this process and turn it towards Liberalism. People will say I’ve failed, and ultimately, I suppose, I have.

Q: Do you think you judged Blair wrongly in that estimation?

PA: No I don’t. I will have to leave this to Volume 2, which has a degree of poignancy and tragedy about it. One of the real problems with Blair, that we can see very clearly now, is that he doesn’t have an ideological backbone. He’s about management, he’s trying to get there but he can’t quite make it. One of his problems is that he’s never been through hard times.

I think the potential was there with Blair. I think that I would have been derelict as leader of the party if I did not take what I perceived to be the best opportunity we have had in half a century, or probably more, to achieve PR and to achieve the realignment which Grimond and Steel were after, let alone me. I calculated that I would take any reasonable risk to try and bring that about. There will be more about that in Volume 2.

Q: We should at this point bring out the issue of sex, as you said there were three options: you could have a marriage, you could have an affair or you could have casual sex. Now there are some people who think what happened here is Tony Blair was the classic married man, and you were the mistress who he kept promising to make an honest leader of, but never quite did. I was struck with the number of passages there are with you wanting to bring this thing to fruition, and Tony appearing to be enthusing – but so many conversations end up with Tony saying: ‘yes, but I’ve got to square off Gordon, I’ve got to

deal with Jack Straw, oh dear, what do I say to John Prescott?’ And I wondered whether the alarm bell didn’t ring every time he said: ‘Yes Paddy, but ...’?

PA: Let’s deal with the sex. I’ve got two Garland cartoons – one is in this book and one is in the next book – in which we change sex. If you look at the first one, there’s a picture of Tony Blair as a very seductive woman dancing with a rose between her teeth, trying to draw my attention as I’m reading a newspaper and looking the other way. In the second one, I’ve become the disgruntled woman going off. Sex seems to have a

great deal to do with this discussion, in more ways than one.

I suppose the enemies of the project can easily write up one of two stories – Blair was a charlatan, or Ashdown was a dupe. But I think the story is different. Here are two people, leaders of their

parties, who are outside the tribal normality of their parties; Tony Blair isn’t a Labour member in the same way as John Smith was, and I’m probably not a Lib Dem in the same way as David Steel was. Both of us have had other experiences, I suppose. We looked at politics and said:

Was it Thomas Aquinas who, when he saw the devil, took a rusty nail and pressed it into the palm of his hand in order to make him feel real? – well, metaphorically I used to take a rusty nail whenever I went in to see Tony Blair.

‘Here’s a big thing to be done – let’s see if we can do it’. To believe otherwise you have to presume deceit on his part, and I have to tell you straight that I can’t presume that, given the amount of time he spent and the risks he took.

There are problems with our blessed Prime Minister. One of them is that he has such excessive charm. Was it Thomas Aquinas who, when he saw the devil, took a rusty nail and pressed it into the palm of his hand in order to make him feel real? – well, metaphorically I used to take a rusty nail whenever I went in to see Tony Blair. But I think he underestimates his difficulties. I don’t think he properly appreciates the barriers to achieving what he wants to achieve, and I think he overestimates the power of his charm, and I think he delays in making decisions. But I genuinely do not believe that he set out to do this with malice, or with the intention of seduction, or with the intention of doing anything else other than what he appeared to be doing, which was seeking to heal the schism on the left.

If you reject the evidence of the book, then listen to the evidence of his own mouth, in which he has said, perfectly clearly, that he has two big things that he wants to achieve in order to go down in history as a great Prime Minister. One is to lead this country into Europe, and the

Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors’ conference, November 1998



other is to heal the schism of the left in politics. He can reflect on the fact that he has achieved neither, and that he is further away from both than he was when he was elected on 1 May 1997.

Q: The other possible interpretation, which doesn't make you a dupe or him a charlatan, is that the PM was naïve in the forces of resistance he would encounter amongst his most senior colleagues, and weak.

PA: You could make that case, precisely because it required two leaders who were from outside the tribal boundaries of their parties. You could make the case that both of us underestimated the barriers. As it happens, he had to face up to his cabinet on 2 May – or, as I think I said, on the night of 1 May – before I had to face up to my party. I could easily have lost that too. He had to pull back. It may well be that the charge of naïveté, or lack of appreciation of the forces of tribalism, is one you have to lay against him, and I suspect is one you have to lay against me.

Q: Let's look at the conversation you had with him just before he's about to go to Buckingham Palace on 2 May 1997. He had actually said to you earlier on: 'If I get a big majority it's going to be easier to do that'. But he didn't pop the question – and at that moment you and, I think, others, such as Roy Jenkins, whose counsel you were sharing, express yourselves as relieved. But had he said to you 'despite this massive majority, Paddy, I still want to do it – you come into the government, we are going to do a proper programme, it won't be just a few Lib Dems administering a Labour programme', would you have said yes to him if he had asked you outright?

PA: Yes, and I say it in the book: I would have said yes.

There are several things that led to this outcome. Both of us remained in the psychology of the election campaign; what we hadn't done is to make the change to the psychology of the new administration. I was very clear in advance that that what was going to happen, so before we started the campaign I lodged with Blair a document,

which you will see in the *Diaries*, which shows how we would have dealt with a coalition. So he knew what would happen, we wouldn't misread each other's signals. Nevertheless, I think on polling day we did misjudge it. One of the things that weighed heavily in his mind, and on mine, was that with this massive majority, was it not undemocratic for us to diminish the power of an opposition and to increase his own majority? Now that, I think, was an error.

The second thing is that I was exhausted. I had made a plan to put Tom McNally in charge for forty-eight hours afterwards, and use Richard Holme precisely to try and change my

psychology, but I was absolutely knackered at the end of the campaign – and I was relieved. If you look at the book I'm not saying who was at fault on this –

Blair took the decision, but I was relieved about it. But I would have said yes, as the book makes very clear. And then take it to the party and see what happened; I think I would have got it through, others may disagree.

My final point is this. I think between 1 May, when I spoke to him from a school in Jackie Ballard's constituency, by arrangement, and he told me he knew by then that he was going to get a big majority; and 2 May, when he rang me just before he went to see the Queen, something happened. I don't know what it was. I think – and you may be able to find out – that that night he hit the blocks we were talking about – he hit Prescott, Brown and Straw.

Q: Would you have accepted a position in the government, and how could the Liberal Democrats support a government with Jack Straw?

PA: I genuinely have no desire to be a cabinet minister. I have a terrific desire to be Prime Minister, but that job appears to be taken at the moment. There is a point in the book where I say to Cherie [Blair] that I have no desire to be a cabinet minister but I wanted my other colleagues to be – a leader of the party doesn't have to be

in the cabinet, if you think of how they run it in Europe. So leaving me aside for a moment, we had three conditions to go into a coalition.

Firstly, it had to be a coalition about policy. You'll see at the end of the book that I said: don't ask me simply to add Liberal Democrats to a Labour administration running a Labour manifesto; it has to be a genuine coalition based on both our policies put together. We weren't in a position to ask for very much, but one of the things we were going to ask for, incidentally, was independence for the Bank of England.

Condition number two was PR – not that it should be delivered but that in a referendum Blair and the government would argue in favour. And condition number three – we did say it and I think we were probably right – was that we couldn't be in a government – after all, we are Liberals – in which Jack Straw was Home Secretary. I'm not saying he couldn't be in the government, but he couldn't be Home Secretary. That was with the experience of the Criminal Justice Bill in the House of Lords very fresh in our memories. I still think that judgement was not an inaccurate one.

Q: Can you tell us what you feel Tony Blair thinks about electoral reform, because he's been very coy in public – can the Liberal Democrats really rely on Labour? There's a footnote in your Diaries where he gives an interview to the New Statesman in which they portray him as ruling out PR, and he says to you that he was completely misquoted. But in fact that interview was a transcript. He had said in certain terms: 'I'm not going for PR – and he then comes to you and says: oh no, I'm being traduced.'

PA: I was aware of that. I'm going to expand the question from PR to constitutional reform but I think it applies to PR too. Constitutional reform is not the iron in Blair's soul in the way it is in Robin Cook's, for instance. Blair regards constitutional reform not as the absolutely essential thing you must do to get government right, but as a part of the process of modernisation. We will modernise the civil service, we'll modernise the arts, oh we'll modernise the constitution as well – it's just one thing you would do along with everything else, not the fundamental change you

We couldn't be in a government – after all, we are Liberals – in which Jack Straw was Home Secretary.



Paddy and Jane Ashdown (Dick (now Lord) Newby in background)

have to make to enable others. That is why he has tripped so much, for instance, on devolution.

There is a very interesting bit in the book where he says, 'frankly I'm not very keen on PR. I can be persuaded either way. I only want PR because it gets you guys in', which is why I believe that this rapprochement will come. It won't come now, in my view, from a position of strength, which was what we were trying to do as part of a grand vision; it will come when it has become necessary to do it. Maybe that's what politics is – maybe these things only happen when it's necessary, maybe it was naïve of us to try and imagine we could create circumstances that wouldn't otherwise have been created. So in one of two circumstances – when Labour realise they are going to lose the next election, or if they don't realise that in time and when they suffer another defeat – its chance will come round again.

Q: A lot of your negotiations with Tony Blair took place in secret circumstances, which presumably meant keeping it from your close colleagues, both in the parliamentary party and in the party in the country. Did you feel guilty at all, or was that a necessary deception because there were some in the party who just would not have accepted it?

PA: Well, three points – did I conspire with Blair to maximise our vote and maximise the defeat of the worst, most rotten and corrupt government we have had this century? Yes, I did and I make no apologies for doing that. I

think we were doing a service. Rallings and Thrasher calculate that we may have increased the numbers of seats we won together by about fifty. We exaggerated the Tories' defeat and won more seats for ourselves, and I make no apologies for that.

Secondly, was I operating outside the ambit the party had given me? I don't think I was. I took to them the abandonment of equidistance quite deliberately. Blair was already there then. I took that to the party and said I wanted to make it quite clear that we should now be working with those forces that are about the removal of this government – we should be co-operating with them, particularly on constitutional change. I lived and worked within that public ambit that was publicly taken and democratically supported at a conference.

Did we, nevertheless, do things in private? Well, yes we did. I think you can't conduct these negotiations any other way. But that's why the small group who were always in touch, who read the minutes, who read the diary bits that you are reading now, included the Chief Whip, who of course was responsible to the parliamentary party, and the President of the Party, who is elected by them and responsible to the party at large. They were involved in those closest circles.

My final point is this. In here you will see that we recommended to Blair what became known as the 'Big Thing', which was that we should go into the last

election on a joint heads of agreement. The document that I presented to him – which we almost agreed on – is in one of the annexes of the *Diaries*. Now that would have been a perfectly public and open thing. We would have said, 'here are the heads of agreement on which we are working, and this is how we present ourselves to you, the British people'. We never came to a conclusion about that. People say: why didn't you announce this; well, how do you announce a negotiation that you haven't succeeded in? You couldn't do that. So I don't say I'm free of criticism, but you asked the question: did I think and worry about it? Yes, I did and I tried to incorporate it into what we did. Whether or not perfectly is up for others to decide.

Q: When did it occur to you that your project was possible? One of the seminal moments for the realignment of the left was the John Smith lecture – how much have we forgotten of what John Smith did to make Labour more acceptable to Liberals, because of his commitment to devolution and other constitutional reforms?

PA: I formulated the idea of the project in 1988, just weeks after the leadership election. I remember us fighting on the slogan that the party was there to get rid of Labour – I didn't realise that a Labour leader would do it better than we could ourselves! But I was absolutely clear that in order to achieve 'the project', we had to make sure that Labour were defeated in 1992. Although in the long run I wanted to get us into a position where we could work with Labour, my first task was to defeat them.

John Smith then came in, and there's a record of a meeting with Smith in the *Diaries*. I was aware that because of that defeat, Labour had begun to take up the constitutional issue; Smith was leading that and that was very helpful. So I saw him and I said, look, this is what I think we can do. By the way, Kinnock's view had been: 'I'm not touching it with a bargepole, go away'. I went to see Smith and he said: 'I'm not touching it with a bargepole, I'm sorry, I'm tribalist' – well, he didn't quite say that, but he said: 'we can do our own constitutional changes in parliament, we don't need you, I have plenty of time to do this, so not interested'.

Then of course Blair came in, and Blair was the opportunity that we could not turn down. I had met Blair before he became leader; we had started having dinners together beforehand – the first one was at Anthony Lester’s house. As soon as he came in, he became the opportunity which, if David Steel had been there, if Jo Grimond had been there, and if I was there, we just had to take. But you are right that Smith made the constitutional agenda a salient that both parties could stand on, and this became an absolutely vital part of it. It is not insignificant that Scotland plays a huge part in this, what Menzies Campbell used to call the ‘fraternity of the Edinburgh shuttle’; the Scottish convention became the model that Blair and I tried to replicate.

Q: Is the publication of the Diaries an admission that the project has failed, because you wouldn’t have published them if you felt there was a real chance of it coming off?

PA: The reason I published them is because I think it *increases* the chance of the project coming off. Now you may make a different judgement, but I didn’t publish them because I think it is over.

There have been many attempts at doing this, from Jeremy Thorpe going in 1974 to Downing Street completely unbriefed, not knowing what to do, to David Steel and the Lib-Lab Pact. What we now have is a blueprint. It’s laid out in the book, the documents are all there – how it could be handled, what should be done. What we have done is assemble the means by which it will happen. Never again will the opportunity arise and people not know what to do with it. And what’s more, that blueprint has now been tried out, in Scotland and in Wales. These are policy agreements, shared responsibility in government – all the things we have laid down have been put into practice in two scale models already flying and already delivering, I think, rather good governments.

The interesting thing about Blair is that he is a man on a journey. I’m not sure where he’ll end up but I have a suspicion that he might end up somewhere close to liberalism.

The last point I would make – and my Lib Dem colleagues are not necessarily going to agree with this – is that I think the growing complementarity of the votes of the two parties across the country now makes the project an electoral necessity in due course. So, my judgement is that the project is not dead, the purpose of the book is to give it an extra boost and I think all the ingredients are there for it to happen when it ceases to be a vision in two leaders’ heads and becomes a necessity for the grassroots of politics.

Q: If you had been entering politics in 1994, would you have considered joining New Labour?

PA: No. I am a Liberal. I used to be Labour, incidentally; I was Labour when I was a Royal Marines officer, which was a very unpopular thing to be at the time, and I was Labour when I was in the Special Forces, and I left Labour in 1967 when Callaghan, cynically in my view, killed off what *In Place of Strife* meant in terms of reform of the trade unions. I knew that Labour, as far ahead as I could look, was going to be a child of the trade unions and I left them.

Then I was in the political wilderness until, quite literally, a funny little man in a furry hat turned up at my door in Somerset and said: ‘excuse me, are you going to vote Liberal in the local elections?’ I said: ‘certainly not!’ But he sat down for half an hour and I discovered I had been a Liberal all my life and I just hadn’t known. And that’s true of many others too – it’s true of Jackie Ballard if you speak to her. You are a liberal but you haven’t yet discovered liberalism is an actual creed, you think of yourself as a socialist. So I am a Liberal and I couldn’t be anything else, and I couldn’t belong to Labour.

The interesting thing about Blair is that he is a man on a journey. You look at Blair from the Beaconsfield by-election to where he is now: he is a man

on a journey, and I’m not sure where he’ll end up but I have a suspicion that he might end up somewhere close to liberalism.

Q: You obviously had a unique friendship with Tony Blair and still do. Do you see yourself, even though you are no longer leader of the party, carrying on that dialogue with Tony Blair?

PA: No, I really can’t. He’s a friend, and we meet and we get on well together but this is Charles [Kennedy’s] stuff now. I know what I did was right at my time, but Charles and you guys in the party have got to do what you think is right now. The notice up in the wheelhouses of the Mississippi steamboats used to say, ‘Don’t speak to the helmsman, don’t spit on the floor.’ I think that’s a pretty good motto for ex-party leaders. It’s certainly one that David [Steel] followed with me, and I’d like to think that though I can sometimes be exasperated and even provoked, I have the self-discipline to follow it with Charles too.

The strains of leadership

Q: One thing that comes over again and again in the Diaries is the sheer awfulness of the modern politician’s life. It’s full of getting up horrendously early – I know that suits you – but those sleepless nights for one reason or another, a press that is never generous however great your achievements, and at the end of it all, if you are an opposition politician like yourself, whatever achievements you undoubtedly can claim, that life has been unrequited without having actual power, giving orders to a permanent secretary, having that red box – and you wonder, was it really worth it?

PA: I’m accused sometimes of being a romantic, and the book is very unvarnished about some of those bumps and some of those difficulties. But there is nothing that I have done in my life that has even approached it. It’s the only thing I know that’s like active service; except active service is boring 99% of the time and shit-scaring about 1% of the time, whereas this is all the time.

It is the great game. You read in the *Diaries* about the Geoffrey Howe speech, and the paragraph at the end of that that says everything has changed. You see the election of Tony Blair – we

had the whole party set up; we had created a whole policy prospectus which I knew would sell to the British electorate, and Blair came along and took the whole thing over almost overnight. This is the great game to be played, and whatever the knocks and blows, there isn't anything else like it that I know of in the world. And it is a great thrill to be the leader of the party you belong to.

Q: What was the best decision that you made in your time as leader?

PA: I think the best decision, and possibly the most difficult, was the abandonment of equidistance. By the time I had finished the 1992 election, I knew we were trying to present to the electorate a fraud. So we had to move the party away from the safe position that was equidistance into a position to say we are going to be one of the forces that gets rid of this government. That was the best, and I think an absolutely essential, decision. If we hadn't taken that decision and had stayed in equidistance, by the time Blair came along we would not have been about the wave for change and I think we would have been obliterated.

Q: Do you think we ever were equidistant in reality?

PA: No. We were not genuinely equidistant, but we pretended to be. Whenever a party pretends that something is logical that everyone else knows isn't, it's in an incredibly weak position. At the end of the 1992 election I simply said that I am not going to play this charade anymore, I am not going to pretend we could support a Conservative government. We couldn't have done it, you know we couldn't. If I had asked you lot to support the John Major government in a hung parliament in 1993, you would have absolutely crucified me. And, you know, I had to turn up to television studio after television studio and pretend we were equidistant and we were nothing of the sort. The lie was an extremely uncomfortable one for me to tell, and it also undermined our credibility. What

Did I bounce the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee? Yes, I did.



Ashdown on the street

are we known for? We are known for telling the truth. The truth was that we couldn't support the Tories but we couldn't say so. I think it fatally damaged our 1992 campaign.

Q: The complementary question, of course, is what was your worst mistake?

PA: I made so many mistakes! I say it in the book – the number of times I was saved from disastrous mistakes by friends and colleagues who helped me with advice is innumerable. The one that comes to mind is saying, no, I don't think we should fight Eastbourne,³ it's indecent to do so. Chris Rennard [Liberal Democrat Campaigns Director] wrote me a minute which said you must be joking. He didn't exactly say that but it's very pun-gent-ly worded for someone who's paid party staff to a party leader. He risked a lot by writing that, and of course he was right. Fortunately I was saved from that.

The biggest mistake I made, and there are probably lots more like it, was over the name – and this comes from coming from slightly outside the tribe, as it were. I became leader of the party and we formed the Social and Liberal Democrats, the SliDs, or whatever it was, and I said 'we don't want social, we don't want liberal – we'll call ourselves the Democrats'. And I took it to the

party conference and I won, because of course I was the party leader and I had this sort of chromium-plated vision in my head, and I completely failed to understand that hearts run parties as well as heads. You could not ask people to divorce themselves from a tradition in which their heart was absolutely steeped, this tradition of liberalism. You will see in the early days there is a lot about it – Alan Beith being grumpy in the background, and various others as well, quite legitimately. I nearly wrecked the party – in a moment of great weakness the party could have gone out of existence. Eventually we found a way out of that, but it was a terrible mistake.

One of my failings is that I'm very goal-oriented. If I pick a goal, that's where I'm going to and that can lead to a degree of insensitivity and treading on people's corns from time to time.

Q: One particular mistake many people thought you made was walking off the stage after the conference debate on drugs in 1994.⁴ Do you think that caused as much of a problem as you feared it would? You mention in the Diaries fearing this meant a return to the old anarchic chaos of the Liberal Assembly.

PA: No, I don't think it did. I think there are two things here and I want to put the record straight. I was not opposed to what the resolution on the drugs debate said. What I was very cross about was the fact that we had framed a bad motion, which was unclear what we were saying. You will remember me

saying if we're going to be radical, be radical, but for Christ's sake know what you are doing; be radical with open eyes. What we had done was frame a motion that was misunderstood by both sides of the debate – those who were against decriminalisation thought we were for it and those who were for decriminalisation knew we were somewhere in between. I wanted to have a clear-cut motion so that the party could have a clear debate, and I was annoyed about that.

Of all the mistakes I have made, stalking off the stage was one which was silly. It was a misjudgement of the sort you make in ten seconds when you think, how is this going to be read? – it'll be OK. But it wasn't OK and it was the kind of misjudgement that I suppose many of us make lots of times. But, at that stage, remember, I was involved in this terrifically delicate minuet with Blair. The dialogue with Blair, as discussed many times in the *Diaries*, is that we both take a risk; my risk with you is that you swallow us up, you tell me you won't; your risk with me is that we are feckless, irresponsible and can't be trusted with power, and at exactly the moment I was trying to do that, we had a debate which would have us broadcast in the press as returning to our old ways. Inevitably I took it to be more catastrophic than it was. It didn't make that much difference in the end but that's what you do when you are locked into the particular cocoon of a conference.

Q: My experience is that leaders tend to end up hating people in their own parties much more than others outside their party – and often for very understandable reasons, those feelings are reciprocated. I did see you quoted as saying leading the Lib Dems was like climbing a mountain with a rock on your back. Was it the party, the country or your parliamentary colleagues you were talking about?

PA: I'm not going to answer that one! All leaders feel like that once in a while. There are very many moments of black depression in the *Diaries*, which I hope none of the rest of you saw. I had a fascinating discussion about leaders with Roy Jenkins, and I concluded from it that I don't think it's necessary for parties to love their leaders, but it is necessary

for leaders to love their parties. The party can respect its leader but it doesn't necessarily have to love them. But if a leader doesn't love his or her party, you just won't put up with all that shit for very long!

I can say I love being leader, I love the party. I think one of the problems of Blair is that I'm not terribly sure he does love the Labour Party. And I don't want to be critical – he was a brilliant leader of our party, the very best that we had – but I'm not sure that David [Steel] loved the party at the end of his days. You do need to love your party or you wouldn't put up with it for very long.

Q: It is a characteristic of leaders to become increasingly isolated from their parties, to become convinced that they are right and anyone who disagrees with them is wrong. Did that happen to you?

PA: The problem of leaders is fighting the business of being pushed into the bunker, and the question is: how long can you keep yourself out of it? I think probably we kept ourselves out of it until the last third of my leadership.

The belief is that my style of leadership was: make a plan, tell people about it. I think this is inaccurate. Up until the advent of Blair, I don't think there had been a more consensus-building leader of the party than me. I used to go round the constituencies, I used to work with the FPC and so on, and I did it perfectly deliberately because I am a great believer in what I call the 'African chief' theory of leadership. African chiefs accumulate cattle in their corrals, and when they have lots and lots of them they sacrifice them in order to achieve something. I quite deliberately went round building up my popularity in the party, both by delivering results and also by being very consensual, conscious of the fact that when I started to play on the field in stage 3, I was really going to have to get rid of all those cattle. I say somewhere in Volume 2 that I've got to cash this lot in in order to be able to achieve what I want to achieve. So, insofar as I'd lost

touch with the party, a) it's what happens to leaders, I accept that it happened to me; but b) it was part of a conscious strategy to use this accumulated chunk of cattle to get to this point, to sell the project to the party. I say in Volume 1 that this is the point at which I have to make myself unpopular with the party.

Q: Looking back, do you think you should have concentrated less on goals and more on processes?

PA: I honestly don't believe that I neglected processes up until the last two years, and then deliberately so. Did I bounce the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee? Yes, I did. And I knew I was bouncing the party and I knew I was cashing in my chips. But I am absolutely convinced we would never have

got the party into the Joint Cabinet Committee – whether that was a good idea or a bad one – if I had gone through a consensual process. They'd never have done it. You cannot say I did

It was my driving passion, to get this party into a position where it handled power and handled power well and made a difference to people's lives.

not go through due process when it came to the abandonment of equidistance. I spent six bloody months trying to go round the party, but in the end, I readily conceived that on the Joint Cabinet Committee and the Joint Statement, I bounced them.

The legacy

Q: What would you like to be remembered for, looking back?

PA: Well there are easy things to say. We – and I mean those of us who ran the party during my leadership – ought to sit back and reflect for a bit. There are very few occasions when a new party is launched in Britain and survives and makes progress – I can't think of any. We were not an entirely new party, but nevertheless, new-ish. We gave it its name, we gave it its character, we gave it its body of policy, we gave it its physical symbols and we established its procedures, and that is not an insignificant

thing to have done. I don't pretend for one second that *I* did it, but the team of people who played the leadership role at all levels.

If somebody wanted to write one sentence, it was that over the period of my leadership the party converted itself from a party of protest to a party of power at every level. I mean local government level and potentially at national level too, certainly in Scotland and in Wales.

The passion that drives me is that I think Liberalism is fantastic. It is the only creed that makes any sense, the only one with which I feel comfortable, and I am passionate to make sure that other people benefit from it in government. It was my driving passion, to get this party into a position where it handled power and handled power well and made a difference to people's lives. If anything, I succeeded in all sorts of other things, but ultimately I failed to get the party into a position of power nationally.

Q: And what do you think you will be remembered for?

PA: I don't know – bouncing the party, I suppose, from time to time? I think I said to people after 1997, my words to the parliamentary party were: fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be bloody bumpy ride. I hope people will think it was exciting, I hope they will think it was difficult, turbulent and annoying – but exciting.

- 1 Ashdown's enthusiasm for a Universal Share Option Programme, or Citizens' Unit Trust (set out in his first book, *Citizens' Britain: A radical agenda for the 1990s* (Fourth Estate, 1989) was not shared by the Federal Policy Committee, who declined to include it in the party's 1990 policy paper on industrial democracy.
- 2 This proposal for local community-based groups to establish trusts to run local schools, included in the 1998 policy review paper *Moving Ahead: Towards a Citizens' Britain*, was rejected by conference.
- 3 The Eastbourne by-election of October 1990, caused by the assassination by the IRA of the Conservative MP Ian Gow.
- 4 Conference debated a wide-ranging motion calling for a Royal Commission to draw up a national policy on illegal drug use, but most of the debate concentrated on the proposal to include consideration of the option of decriminalisation of cannabis in the Commission's remit. Ashdown voted against this and left the stage as soon as the debate ended. The press, almost without exception, reported the outcome as straightforward support for decriminalisation.



Leader's Office, House of Commons (newspaper cartoon originals on the walls)

In this month...

What was happening in the Liberal world in the first three months of years gone by?

9 January 1943

London Liberal Party Executive Committee – a resolution was passed urging the Liberal Party Organisation to initiate immediately a nationwide appeal to call on the Government to adopt an open-door policy to the Jews fleeing persecution.

11 January 1945

Southport Liberal Association Executive Committee – It was 'recommended that representations should be made to the Lancashire, Cheshire and North West Liberal Federation regarding the cost of municipal elections to individual candidates, and also, if possible, to move the elimination of canvassing'.

19 January 1956

London Liberal Party Executive Committee – the East London Liberal Council was criticised for its part in a demonstration organised by the Communist Party against the eviction of council tenants in Ilford. The executive committee described the demonstration as a 'deliberate attempt to capitalise on the discontents of people'.

13 February 1956

Hampstead Liberal Association Executive

Committee laid out its plans for the forthcoming elections to the borough council. Thirty-six candidates would be stood in the borough in all wards, bar Kilburn. There would be a focus on active candidates who canvassed and held outdoor meetings. There would be weekly conferences. The cost was estimated at £275, with £100 to come from the candidates themselves, £50 from the constituency association, and the balance from the wards. Mr Salomon donated £50 at the meeting, enabling Kilburn also to be contested. [No Liberals were successful in Hampstead in 1956.]

28 March 1960

Liberal Party Organisation Standing Committee – There was a slim chance of a Liberal winning the forthcoming Mid-Bedfordshire by-election, but the current prospective candidate, W. G. Matthews, was 'not the type to fight a dynamic by-election campaign'. It was resolved that 'every step must be taken to prevent his re-adoption'. [Mr Matthews resisted these moves, fought the election, and came third.]

31 March 1962

Liberal Party Organisation Executive Committee – record *Liberal News* circulation of 26,668 reported.

Tony Little examines the part played by the renegade Conservatives – the Peelites – in the creation of the Liberal Party.

'His Friends Sat on the Benches Opposite'

In the *Journal's* special issue on defectors (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 25, winter 1999–2000), one group significant to the development of the modern Liberal Party was omitted – the Peelites. Here, by way of a review of Professor Angus Hawkins' book, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (Macmillan, 1987), I aim to show the part played by these renegade Conservatives in the creation of the modern Liberal Party.

The formation of the Liberal Party is often dated to the meeting in Willis's Rooms on 6 June 1859. This meeting brought together Whigs, Liberals, Radicals and Peelites to defeat Lord Derby. It ushered in a Liberal government under Lord Palmerston which served until Palmerston's death in 1865 and paved the way for Gladstone's great reforming government of 1868–74. In retrospect the outcome was obvious but Professor Hawkins' book shows just how difficult the obvious was to achieve.

In 1846, the first modern Conservative government, under Sir Robert Peel, split asunder over agricultural protection. Peel and the bulk of the ministerial talent of the party reformed the Corn Laws but were then forced to resign. Peel and his associates kept a minority Whig government in power but Peel's death in a horse-riding accident did not lead to a reconciliation between his followers, the Peelites, and the bulk of the Tory party. Following the general election of 1852, Lord Derby headed a short-lived minority Tory administration until driven from office by the onslaught on Disraeli's budget led by Gladstone. The Queen had tried the Whigs, she had tried the Tories – what was left? Lord Aberdeen, leader of the Peelites, put together a coalition with the Whigs. In essence, this combination prefigured 1859, but could not withstand the strains of the 1854 Crimean War with an administrative system which had not been modernised since Waterloo.

Although Lord Palmerston had been a part of the Aberdeen coalition, his semi-detached position and pugnacious character made him the inevitable war leader and he was the prime beneficiary of the peetering out of the war shortly after he had acceded to the premiership. However, Palmerston had only been able to form his government by treading on the toes of oversensitive Peelites such as Gladstone, and without resolving a long-running quarrel with Lord John Russell.

It is at this point that Hawkins takes up the story. The problem he poses is that, while, in Kitson's words, it is not 'very easy to say what specific opinions were uniquely organised in the middle of the century by the Conservative Party', the forces that came together to oppose Derby suffered from a superfluity of leadership. For an idea of the complexity of the position it is important to recognise that there were four former or current prime ministers still in active politics in 1855, and among those of the next generation fighting for position were two who became the greatest Victorian premiers, Disraeli and Gladstone. Of these six significant politicians, only one, Lord John Russell, was clearly identified with a single party – the Whigs – and he was often thought to be more of a Radical. Palmerston had been a member of Lord Liverpool's Tory government and had switched sides at the end of the 1820s. Derby, now leader of the Conservatives, had started life as a Whig. Disraeli had originally thought of himself as a radical and was still treated with suspicion, and as too clever by half, by the more Tory members of the Conservative Party. Aberdeen and Gladstone had broken with the Conservatives over the Corn Laws and, while Gladstone was still searching for a way back, Aberdeen was probably more associated with Lord John than with the more conservative Palmerston. In December 1851, Russell had forced



Palmerston was Russell's foreign secretary until sacked in 1851. Shortly afterwards Palmerston was instrumental in bringing down Lord John's government – his Tit for Tat. The *Punch* caption read: 'I'm very sorry, Palmerston, that you can't agree with your fellow servants, but as I don't feel inclined to part with John – you must go of course.'

Palmerston from the Foreign Office and, in the following February, Palmerston's 'Tit for Tat' had brought down Russell's government. Aberdeen and Palmerston had opposed each other's foreign policies from 1841 onwards.

'The House of Commons is as unstable as water'²

Although the term 'Liberal' was being more widely applied to those opposed to the Conservatives, this grouping covered not just Whigs and a distinct group of Radicals, who tended to be as suspicious of the Whigs as they were of the Tories, but also the Irish brigade. Nominally Whigs or Liberals, the Irish brigade had their own distinctive agenda relating to Irish land problems and the religious disadvantages of Catholics. The remaining Peelites were little admired by any of the other groups: 'they are a sect – entre nous, *Prigs*. There is a snobbism that runs from their deceased head all down thro' his tail'³.

The cessation of international hostilities in the Crimea in 1855 brought about a return to normal political warfare in Britain. Hawkins' book is a work of *haut politique* focusing on the strategies of the various contestants for the premiership. Events and policies

are considered as to how they furthered the ambitions of the rivals rather than for their intrinsic interest. Consequently a degree of knowledge is required and the frame of reference is not much wider than the Palace of Westminster, the clubs of St James and the various great houses. Within this focus, this is a detailed work with wonderfully well-chosen quotations to substantiate its case.

Palmerston's strategy after 1855 was to keep foreign affairs to the forefront as a means of doing nothing about electoral reform. This may have reflected a deep-felt belief – Palmerston always acted to defer reform when in power – but it also had distinct political advantages. Foreign policy was his strength, not Lord John's, and it brought him at least tacit support from the Tories, his friends on the benches opposite. Reform, always associated with Lord John, divided his own supporters – as Lord John and Gladstone were to prove after Palmerston's death.

Lord John Russell had the harder task. He had lost support from his own party in his premiership (1846–52) and needed an issue on which to rebuild it. He offered the best link to the Radicals but each step towards them further alienated the type of Whig most likely to support Palmerston. Although 'Johnnie' knew that reform would buy him Radical support he also knew its cost.

The Peelites, who as much as anyone held the balance of power, were themselves divided. Some were willing to join Lord John; others, including Gladstone, were unwilling to relinquish their Conservative roots but were even more unwilling to make themselves subservient to Disraeli, not only the Tory's leading spokesman in the Commons but Peel's sarcastic tormentor in 1846. The Peelites, and Gladstone especially, had an antipathy to 'Pam' that derived from the old rivalry between Palmerston and Aberdeen but was intensified by Pam's acceptance of Roebuck's inquiry into the conduct of the Crimean War, with its implied criticism of the Peelite War Office minister the Duke of Newcastle. The Peelites were disliked for their unwillingness to fit the mould of two-party politics and because it was necessary to attract them

to support a government – a back-handed compliment to their ministerial talents. The Peelites had charged a high tariff in terms of ministerial posts for coalition in 1852 – posts that could only be awarded at the expense of loyal Whig supporters. Who would pay in any future ministry?

'We have slung the stone which brought him down'

Palmerston's bluff worked for two years, and ironically it was the foreign issue of British arrogance in China which brought him down, as the Radicals and Peelites united with the Conservatives to teach him a lesson. Ostensibly, the ensuing 1857 general election was a triumph for Palmerston – popular backing for his John Bull style of politics. The leading Radicals such as Bright and Cobden were defeated, the Peelites suffered and the Conservatives made only four gains. In reality the new Liberal members were more in favour of reform and other domestic activity than the old House had been. But again foreign affairs betrayed Palmerston.

Then as now, Britain was a haven for political asylum seekers, some of whom plotted assassination against the French government. Palmerston, weakened by the Indian Mutiny and misled by half-hearted Conservative support, gave way to French demands for legislative action, only to be met with defeat for his kow-towing to Napoleon III. Some eighty-nine of his nominal supporters, led by Lord John and Radicals such as Milner Gibson and Roebuck, joined the majority against the government. Palmerston resigned but was in no position to call a fresh election only months after his last 'victory'. As John Bright observed, 'Palmerston has been our greatest enemy and we have slung the stone which has brought him down'⁴.

Once more the Queen faced a dilemma. Palmerston would not advise Victoria but his explanation of the state of the parties – 'Derby at the head of [a] large party in both Houses', 'Russell with scarcely any'⁵ – was both accurate and self-serving. A spell under Derby might serve to reunite his followers.

Derby was well aware of the trap and was very cautious in accepting the Queen's commission.

If Hawkins' book has a hero amongst the plotters, it is the Conservative leader, Lord Derby. In contrast to his flashy, romantic lieutenant, Disraeli, Derby is almost forgotten, but Hawkins argues that it was Derby rather than Disraeli who made the survival and ultimate success of the Conservative Party possible. Derby provided aristocratic solidity and respectability after the debacle of 1846 in a manner to which the younger Disraeli could not hope to aspire. In 1852, Derby made it possible for the party to throw off the albatross of Protection. In 1855–59 he helped build the foundations for future recovery. In spite of Disraeli's activist tendencies, Derby's strategy during Palmerston's government was to lie low and encourage its conservatism. Comfortable with the thrust of Palmerstonian policy, Derby's quiescent opposition created the vacuum into which the fractious factions of Liberalism were to be sucked.

His policy, when asked to form a government in 1858, was an extension of his strategy in opposition. A moderate, even slightly progressive, approach offered the best hope of drawing peripheral Peelites back to their old allegiance and winning over the more worried Whigs. Indeed, Derby unsuccessfully offered posts to Newcastle and Gladstone and to the dissident Whig, Lord Grey. Gladstone's refusal was made only with hesitation on his side but was greeted with some relief among the less subtle Conservatives.

'On the sunny side of the House'⁶

To Russell's frustration, Derby succeeded in constructing a purely Conservative administration. When the House met in March 1858, the Tories were joined on the sunny side by Peelites Graham, Gladstone and Herbert and a rump of the Irish brigade, sitting below the gangway. Palmerston assumed the seat of the Leader of the Opposition while Russell, after some hesitation, took a seat on the opposition front bench, be-

low the gangway, with the Radicals and 'independent Liberals'⁷.

If Palmerston assumed that Derby's minority administration was doomed to a short life he was mistaken. At first it was thought that Conservative efforts to reform the government of India would provide an early opportunity to turn out the Tories. Whatever the underlying merits of the bill, opposition to it served only to illustrate the Liberal quandary. The Peelites would not put Derby out merely to bring back Palmerston, and Russell could not act while the late Liberal cabinet remained united behind Palmerston. Indian administration proved similarly barren ground, when facts did not support the motion of censure which the Whigs had tabled. Conscious of his vulnerability, Derby again reached out to the central ground. In reorganising his cabinet in May 1858 he once more approached Gladstone, who again failed to grasp the opportunity.

Over the autumn, Lord John sought to revive Reform as the means of Derby's overthrow and his own resurrection. Derby had promised to grasp this nettle but Lord John needed the result to rebuild his credit rather than Derby's. Bright's efforts to assist, calmly moderate by today's standards, were deemed so outré by the ruling elites that many moderate Whigs began to see the attraction of leaving the Tories in office. It is hard, in a short review, to convey the complexities of the mid-Victorian Reform debate to today's democrats. The problems were two-fold. Firstly, apart from a few Radicals, no-one was advocating universal manhood (let alone female) suffrage but there were almost as many views about the stopping point as there were MPs. A controlled change would give advantage to the party writing the Bill. The consequences of a large bill were beyond the statistical resources of the time, but MPs feared the temptations that could be placed in the way of a poor, uneducated electorate at a time when electoral bribery was commonplace (to say nothing of the implications for campaign expenses, largely met by the candidates themselves). Secondly, any significant reform implied a redistribution of seats, a matter in which MPs always took a keen



Palmerston sells some slightly used policies to Disraeli, following his defeat in 1857. Note that one of the garments is marked India.

self-interest. Derby was as alive to the opportunities of 'dishing the Whigs' in 1858 as he was in 1867, when he and Disraeli carried the Second Reform Act, but he was even more sharply aware of the potential for a Reform bill to split his own party. He avoided the problem largely by avoiding a cabinet discussion of the details of his proposed bill, presenting his colleagues with a fait accompli – a model imitated by Mrs Thatcher and Mr Blair.

Gossip reaching the Conservatives suggested that 'Pam and his friends... hope to support the government reform bill if it comes to a second reading; but Pam and his friends look to the F.O. as the means of an overthrow before the reform bill can be brought on'⁸. Palmerston's hope lay with the developing crisis in Italy, where the desire of Italians to throw off Austrian suzerainty was exploited by Napoleon in the hope of enlarging French territory. At this stage, the government's slightly pro-Austrian neutrality did not provide the leverage required.

Pam's disappointment was Johnnie's opportunity. A suitable motion was tabled to head off a potential Tory success in the second reading debate of the Reform Bill but when this was carried Derby responded by calling a general election. Derby gambled that his moderate stance on Reform would play well with the unreformed electorate. His ploy was spoiled by developments in Italy where Austria's mistaken ag-

gression gave Peelites and Liberals of all persuasions the opportunity to castigate the government for its incompetence. Nevertheless Derby gained the modest reward of an advance of around thirty seats – still not enough to give him a majority but enough to soldier on. Apparently, nothing had been resolved.

'A rope of sand'?

Hawkins gives no evidence that the Liberals realised that a golden opportunity had opened up or that they accepted that their agreements were greater than their differences or even that their sense of frustration was sufficient to overcome these differences. But something extraordinary happened. Inspired by a letter from the Peelite Sidney Herbert on 18 May 1859, Russell wrote to Palmerston. Two days later, Palmerston visited Russell at Pembroke Lodge. Bridges were being built but would they prove to be 'patching the quarrels of years' with a rope of sand¹⁰? Certainly the manoeuvres did not cease – both leaders expected the situation to work to their advantage – but enough progress was made to justify the famous party meeting on 6 June. Two hundred and eighty attended, from all sections of the Liberals. Symbolically, Palmerston helped Lord John up on to the platform. Each pledged to serve in a government formed by the other. Representatives of the different factions, Herbert, Ellice, Milner Gibson and Bright, promised co-operation.

A motion was tabled in the Commons under the name of new MP Lord Hartington and, after three days of debate and three days of worry by the whips, carried. But even at this stage there was a complication. The Queen, anxious to avoid the 'two terrible old men', sent for Lord Granville to form a government. Palmerston agreed to serve under Granville but Russell made impossible conditions. In the light of this, Granville returned his commission and Pam got his chance. Russell was accommodated with his choice of office and the presence of Milner Gibson in the cabinet.

Extraordinarily, Gladstone was also offered his choice of office and chose

the Exchequer. He had not voted to bring down Derby but, recognising the undertow, had made his peace with the Liberal leadership over Italy. His frustration at missing office over his prime years was finally assuaged; he had scrambled back from isolation just in time.

With the benefit of hindsight we know that this fragile first modern Liberal government survived until Palmerston's death. It left a strong record, particularly in the financial and commercial sphere led by Gladstone – the free trade agreement with France, the budgets and the abolition of the paper tax – but true to form, Palmerston never did resolve the Reform issue. However, as Hawkins makes abundantly clear, this outcome was not preordained. At the beginning of its life Derby thought that 'it would be easy to get a majority against the present government'¹¹, while Stanley of Alderley wrote, 'if the session had lasted three months the government might have been in trouble'¹². The inclusion of all the major Liberal factions diminished the risk of internal dissension while the (mistaken) expectation that Palmerston, in his mid-seventies, would not remain active for long, left open the hope of succession to both Russell and Derby.

Hawkins is a master of his sources but contents himself with the overwhelming demonstration that the outcome was not pre-ordained. In also demonstrating how close Russell came to achieving his ambition he reminds us that circumstance, as much as conspiracy or destiny, dictates history. The events of 1852–59 were the confusing climax of a political world in transition. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was coming to be seen as an interim, not a final, settlement. The aristocratic control of the Commons had deteriorated but had not been swept away. Politicians were elected in response to local conditions but were free, by and large, to arrange parties and governments to suit themselves. Indeed one of the surprises of Hawkins' book is how little electoral considerations played in the strategies of any of the leaders. After the Second Reform Act of 1867, it became neces-

sary to create majorities by appealing to a mass electorate. Gladstone and Disraeli had the skills to exploit the new environment, although both were products of the old. The expectation of the most experienced politicians in the period 1855–59 was that either Derby or Palmerston would create a centrist party combining the largest elements of the Whig, Peelite and Conservative parties. That natural majority would have forced the extreme wings of both sides – the more agricultural Tories, and the urban Radicals – to form separate parties. Instead Westminster had built a broadly two-party system, Liberal and Conservative, which needed to compete for the central ground of the electorate to achieve power.

Tony Little is the new Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group, and writes mainly on nineteenth century Liberal history.

Further reading

- John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–68* (Pelican). What was happening back in the constituencies, the sociological grounding of the party and the role of leadership.
- B. Conacher, *The Peelites and the Party System 1846–52* (David & Charles).
- W. White, *The Inner Life of the House of Commons* (reprinted by the Richmond Pub. Co.). Parliamentary sketches by a well informed source between 1856 and 1871.

- 1 K Clark *The Making of Victorian England* 1965
- 2 Russell to Minto 22 July 1855. Cited in Hawkins
- 3 Parkes to Ellice, 30 December 1852. Cited in Hawkins
- 4 Bright to his wife 20 February 1858. Cited in Hawkins
- 5 Palmerston Diary 20 February 1858. Cited in Hawkins
- 6 W. White *The Inner Life of the House of Commons* 1897
- 7 Hawkins p117
- 8 Lennox to Disraeli February 1859 Hughenden Mss. Cited in Hawkins
- 9 Lytton 22 March 1859, House of Commons. Cited in Hawkins
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Broughton Diary 21 June 1869. Cited in Hawkins
- 12 Stanley of Alderly to Panmure 30 July, Dalhousie Mss. Cited in Hawkins

The Unofficial Side

Dr Michael Brock describes the Bodleian Library's acquisition of H. H. Asquith's personal papers

The official part of the collected papers of H. H. Asquith (Prime Minister 1908–16) were given to Balliol College in 1941, and in 1964 the college gave them to the Bodleian. Now, the literary trustees of the late Lord Bonham Carter, and Mrs Priscilla Hodgson, have combined to add the family's personal papers to the Library's holdings.

The new acquisition, which includes the diaries of Asquith's second wife, Margot, and his elder daughter, Violet, includes more light relief than is found in official papers. After Asquith's Romanes Lecture in June 1918, Margot produced a vignette of Ottoline Morrell in the Sheldonian 'with a vast hat, half hearse, half chandelier'. The fun is balanced by important political and governmental information in concentrated form. Asquith hated using the telephone. He wrote, as he spoke, with pithy, fluent mastery; and letter-writing was one of his main recreations.

The proportion of the material which has been published is nowhere very large. The collection contains a small group of letters from Asquith's first wife, Helen, who died of typhoid after only fourteen years of marriage. By contrast, more than 760 of his letters to Margot survive, extending from 1891 to 1927. In the official, two-volume biography, published only four years after his death, J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith published no more than discreet extracts from either group. Much more personal information became available in 1964 in Roy Jenkins's *Life*, and with the publication eighteen years later of most of the Premier's let-

ters to Venetia Stanley in 1914 and 1915. But his letters in 1915–18 to Venetia's sister Sylvia (another generous gift to the Bodleian made a few years ago) remain almost entirely unpublished; and the third volume of selections from Violet Asquith's diaries, published in July 2000 and covering the years after the Second World War, reproduces, from more than two million words, no more than 150,000. Plans are in hand to publish selections from Margot's diaries – to reproduce them in their entirety would be impracticable.

The papers just acquired by the Bodleian contain many letters addressed to members of the Asquith family which are not within the copyright of the four donors. These will be much needed by historians striving for a synoptic view. Asquith tried to give his reticence posthumous effect. He did not conceal his attempts to impede even an intending biographer as sympathetic as J. A. Spender. Margot, by contrast, was happy to tell, and to retell, her tale; but she began to publish only after her husband's fall from power, by which time her resentments had distorted her memories and judgement. Some of the extracts from the diaries in her *Autobiography* (published in two volumes in 1920 and 1922) were freely adapted to heighten the drama of her narrative. Her book gives, for instance, no proper account of her fluctuating relations with Lloyd George during the years before 1916. What she published concealed the fact that in her prime she had been a careful (though intermittent) diarist. She had taken trouble over reproducing her husband's remarks, and he had corrected her detailed account

of the formation of Campbell-Bannerman's government at the end of 1905.

Diaries are always a difficult source to use; but historians owe much to the diarist's unquenchable vitality and urge to record the scene. After the Romanes Lecture 'a young man, a mixture of pedantry and impudence ... with a mincing air', asked Margot whether she 'knew Oxford'. She replied that she had known it since Jowett's time, but that she had not met other great men of that day such as 'Dizzy or Darwin. Instead of saying, as I *hoped* he might, "Surely you were too young?" he asked me "Why not?" This combination of mince and "sauce" revived me.' It did not take much to revive Margot into continuing with the record.

Michael Brock was Warden of Nuffield College 1978–88. Mrs Priscilla Hodgson has kindly allowed the reproduction here of extracts from the Asquith Papers

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Herbert and Margot Asquith in 1920 (Bodleian Library)



J.M. Hogge: Backbench Maverick

Every general election ends the parliamentary career of many backbenchers. Unless they are identified in the public mind with a cause such as the Repeal of the Corn Laws (in the case of Richard Cobden) or safety at sea (successfully promoted by Samuel Plimsoll), they can rarely expect to be remembered beyond their own generation. Such has been the fate of James Myles Hogge who, during his brief period in the Commons, became one of the finest backbenchers ever to represent a Scottish constituency.

Born in Edinburgh in 1873, he was educated in the city of his birth at the Normal School and the University where his dynamic energy was displayed as President of the Liberal Club, Senior President of the Students' Representative Council, Editor of *The Student* and Joint Editor of the 'Scottish Students' Song Book'. Initially intent on teaching as a career, he trained at Moray House, but then resolved to enter the ministry. To that end, he attended the United Presbyterian Theological and New College, then became assistant minister at College Street United Free Church in Edinburgh. During his period there, he undertook settlement work in deprived areas.

Hogge's religious commitment was an important consideration in his career. It may be difficult nowadays for many to appreciate how this affected politics in the second half of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century. As a modern historian expressed it, 'Presbyterianism remained the wellspring of national life and many Scots held their politics to be merely a secular version of it'.¹ The creation of the Free Church as a result of the Disruption of 1843 was followed by the emergence in 1847 of the United Presbyterians, formed when the two largest of the churches which had seceded, largely over the issue of patronage, from the Church of Scotland in the 18th century united. The Free Church and the United

Presbyterians came together in 1900 to form the United Free Church with a small but influential number of the former, still known as the 'Wee Frees' standing aloof from this merger. Politically, the established Church of Scotland contained a large number of Conservatives or Unionists whereas the United Free Church and its predecessors constituted sources of strength for Scottish Liberalism comparable to those supplied in England and Wales by Nonconformity.

Throughout his life, Hogge cherished the memory of having attended a meeting addressed by Gladstone in the Edinburgh Music Hall as a boy of twelve. Such was the drawing power of the GOM that the boy, in an age of Saturday pennies, was sorely tempted to part with his coveted ticket when offered a pound for it but resisted.

He was a founder member of the Young Scots Society in 1900, a remarkable and now almost forgotten movement which had a membership of thousands throughout Scotland before the first world war. Its prospectus stated its aim was 'to educate young men in the fundamental principles of Liberalism and stimulating them in the study of social sciences and economics'.² While never fully integrated into the party organisation it claimed a membership by 1914 of 10,000 in fifty branches. Hogge gave yeoman service to these radical shock-troops who campaigned passionately for Scottish Home Rule. From 1903, the Young Scots began a Free Trade campaign against Chamberlain's proposals for Tariff Reform, making special efforts in Tory counties. Their youthful dynamism sharpened Liberal electoral tactics while their radical emphasis on the need for social reform together with their success in securing the selection of many of their own members as candidates came to fruition in the general elections of 1906, and particularly in 1910 when, in contrast to England, Scottish Liberals consolidated their position.

Finding that social work attracted him more than the pulpit, Hogge left the ministry and went to York where for several years he undertook social investigations under the auspices of the Rowntrees and was the author of publications on themes such as betting and temperance. A vehement opponent of gambling, he later became Hon. Secretary of the National Anti-Gambling League. During his period in York he travelled to Germany, Holland and Belgium in pursuit of information about labour questions and to Russia, Norway and Sweden for inquiries about licensing systems there,³ as well as serving on the Town Council. In 1905, he married Florence R. Metcalfe of Malton and acquired a step-son who, as Second Lieutenant W. E. H. Metcalfe, was to gain the MC in 1916.

His strong views on social problems were matched by progressive ones on political issues. At a time when jingoism was rampant, he was among those Liberals who had opposed the Boer War. Never averse to proclaiming his radicalism, he urged that solution of many social evils depended on the cure of economic ones. He believed that society must address the question of intemperance which he deemed a waste of health and life and pressed for a wide measure of local option. He was a fervent advocate of parliaments in Dublin and Edinburgh, sought an enlarged electorate of both sexes and spoke publicly of the need for friendly co-operation with the German people to avert the danger of war. Holding such opinions, it was no surprise that he was tempted to enter the national political arena.

Returning to Scotland, he failed narrowly to win Glasgow Camlachie in the general election of December 1910⁴ due to the intervention of a Labour candidate. Hogge was chosen as Liberal candidate for a by-election in East Edinburgh in 1912, during which he was proud to have the assistance of W.G.C. Gladstone, grandson of the GOM and MP for Kilmarnock. He was encouraged by a message from David Lloyd George: 'We want more men in the House possessing your deep sympathy for social reform and your knowledge



of social questions'.⁵ In a hard fought campaign at a time of bitter political tension, he held the seat in a constituency with a large working class population whose tone was then Radical rather than Socialist, supported by a strong Irish element.

For the next twelve years Hogge became a widely admired backbencher who described his recreation as 'work'. Never a conventional party man, he thought out questions for himself, expressed his opinions fearlessly and had no qualms over voting periodically against the Asquith Government. Deeply committed to Irish Home Rule, he said at a meeting on 2 October 1912: 'The Scottish Covenanters signed a covenant that was to procure for them freedom of conscience in matters of religion. The fight Sir Edward Carson and the Ulstermen are taking up is to secure the arrogant ascendancy of bigotry in Ulster'.⁶ In 1914, he did not hesitate to oppose the appointment of the na-

tional idol, Lord Kitchener, as War Secretary, arguing that the part should be filled by a civilian while Kitchener's military talents were used as Commander-in-Chief. In view of some of Kitchener's insensitive actions during the next two years, Hogge showed foresight in his criticism.

Always concerned with welfare, Hogge intensified his work on issues of allowances and pensions which were aggravated by the war, devoting an enormous amount of time to seeing that widows and dependants of the killed and crippled received adequate pensions. By 1916, he was receiving 500 letters a week and as, in contrast to many MPs, he lacked private means and received only £400 as a yearly salary, he had to ask for stamped addressed envelopes.

Aware that thousands of claimants were refused on spurious grounds and anxious to alleviate their lot, Hogge, with help from Walter McPhail, the distinguished Editor of *Edinburgh Evening*

News, set up a Pensions Bureau which investigated individual cases of hardship and made recommendations for review. This led to the formation of the Naval and Military War Pensions' League. After 1918, his work in this sphere continued and he became president of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers. His efforts earned public appreciation as shown in a testimonial he won 'for his unselfish and devoted endeavours on behalf of men broken in their country's wars and of the widows and orphans of the fallen'.

As an uninhibited critic of some of the actions of the Lloyd George Coalition, he did not receive 'the coupon' in the 1918 general election but held his seat, in the absence of a Labour challenger, against a Coalition New Democrat Party candidate. He opposed a stern peace with Germany as he held it calculated to lead to future disputes. In his role as Joint Chief Whip of the Asquithian or 'Wee Free' Liberals Hogge was prominent in pressurising Asquith to stand in Paisley, thus effecting his return to the Commons in the 1920 by-election.

Hogge was onscious of the dismay felt by those loyal to the Liberal Cause throughout the country over disunity and became actively involved in efforts to reunite the two sections. While he had no reason to feel friendly to Lloyd George, whose National Liberals had sought to unseat him in the 1922 gen-

eral election, he was a man of good sense who realised that disunity was ruining any chance of a Liberal revival. Hence he was involved in preliminary talks to that end, despite little encouragement from many Asquithians. A lack of personal rapport between Asquith and Hogge was an inhibiting factor. The Asquithians not only found his personal character unacceptable but had doubts about his political reliability. Nevertheless, in March 1923, Hogge was the leading author of a 'memorandum for speedy reunion signed by a group of seventy-three rank-and-file MPs from both sections. The numbers are even more impressive when it is noted that about twenty "leaders" from the two sections were not invited to sign.'⁷

Liberal reunion was achieved in November 1923 when Baldwin opted for a policy based on tariffs in opposition to traditional Liberal adherence to Free Trade. Despite this, there were strong pressures among Scottish Unionists for an anti-Socialist pact; Hogge was involved in conversations with Sir George Younger but the issue of tariff reform prevented any agreement.⁸

The 1923 general election led to a hung parliament with a resurgence of Liberal support and representation increased to 158. In Edinburgh, for example, Liberals outpolled the other parties and were returned in four of the six seats, Hogge securing 68% of the votes in East Edinburgh.

Subsequent conditional Liberal support for the short-lived Labour Government of 1924 was disastrous for the party. Hogge was loud in his condemnation of Labour's defects in tackling unemployment, notably over its tardy recognition of the claims of ex-Servicemen. Despite this, he was one of twelve Liberal MPs who did not vote for the Asquith motion which led to the Government's resignation.⁹ His action proved fatal as he faced a three-cornered fight in the 1924 general election. Although Hogge received splendid support from branches of the British Legion, and, at a time when the public meeting was a principal feature of elections, held enthusiastic meetings – 1,000 at Portobello Town Hall followed by an open air one for 400 who could not gain entry – he was overwhelmingly defeated by Labour, finishing third with a vote reduced from 68% to 27%. A contemporary wrote, 'In street after street where Liberal support had been solid for decades, there was nothing but a display of Labour posters. The working classes had transferred their allegiance to the Labour Party'.¹⁰ His fate mirrored that of Asquith in Paisley and of a majority of his colleagues whose number was reduced to forty-two with only eight from Scotland.

The massive rejection of Liberal candidates in Scotland in favour of a now well entrenched Labour Party, despite its loss of the election, and of a revitalised Unionist one indicated the future trend. 'With the advent of class politics the bourgeoisie had good reason to think it was safer to support the Unionists than the ostensibly classless Liberals.'¹¹

The bitter blow of defeat virtually ended Hogge's career, leaving him without an income, as the modest supplementary payment he received as a feature writer for the *Edinburgh Evening News* ceased when he lost his seat.¹² The tragedy was that he was so soon forgotten and died in 1928.

In many respects, Hogge was a figure more typical of the early rather than the later decades of last century. His work as an ardent social reformer

concluded on page 32

Election results

1910 (December)	Glasgow Camlachie	1922	Edinburgh East		
H.J. Mackinder	Lib. Unionist	3,479	J.M. Hogge	Liberal	10,551
J.M. Hogge	Liberal	3,453	S. McDonald	Nat. Liberal	7,088
J. O'Kessack	Labour	1,539	<i>Majority</i>		3,463
W.J. Mirrlees	Independent	35			
<i>Majority</i>		26	1923	Edinburgh East	
1912 (by-election)	Edinburgh East		J.M. Hogge	Liberal	10,876
J.M. Hogge	Liberal	5,064	C.J.M. Moncur	Conservative	5,045
J.G. Jamieson	Conservative	4,129	<i>Majority</i>		5,831
<i>Majority</i>		925			
1918	Edinburgh East		1924	Edinburgh East	
J.M. Hogge	Liberal	8,460	T.D. Shiels	Labour	9,330
A.E. Balfour	Co. NDP	5,136	C. Milne	Conservative	6,105
<i>Majority</i>		3,324	J.M. Hogge	Liberal	5,625
			<i>Majority</i>		3,325

Reports

The Limehouse Declaration and the Birth of the SDP

Evening meeting, January 2001

With speakers including Lord Oakeshott and Sir Ian Wrigglesworth

Report by Neil Stockley

The Liberal Democrat History Group's January evening meeting was an occasion for some nostalgia. For it marked twenty years, almost to the day, since the 'Gang of Four' – Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – published the Limehouse Declaration, publicly announcing their aim to quit the leftward path that the Labour Party had taken. Within two months, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was born.

The events of 1980–81 were placed firmly in the context of the bitter battles within the Labour Party between the 'left' and the 'right' (a.k.a. the 'moderates' or 'social democrats'). Sir Ian Wrigglesworth, a Labour MP who switched to the SDP, traced the birth of the SDP back to the record of the Wilson Governments from 1964–70 and the resentment of the 'left'. By the end of the 1970s, there were three litmus issues. On the question of whether Britain should join the Common Market, nearly all of the right was in favour and the left opposed. On defence, the left supported unilateral nuclear disarmament, but the right were multilateralist. Finally, there were proposed changes to Labour's constitution. The left saw the Wilson and Callaghan Governments as a bitter betrayal which must never be repeated. There was an organised campaign for the mandatory reselection of MPs and to have Labour's leadership chosen by an 'electoral college'. The right saw this as an affront to parliamentary democracy.

Matthew Oakeshott had been Roy Jenkins' special adviser at the Home Office. For him, the road to Limehouse began with Jenkins' Dimpleby lecture in 1979. He recalled being inspired by the 'depth and completeness of Roy's analysis of the failings of the two-party system' and even more, by Jenkins' clear call for a new party as the only way to reverse Britain's decline. Oakeshott was particularly struck by his call on the moderates to give up trying to save Labour. 'I remember Roy standing there saying they would have to break out of the parts of the old citadel that they were trying to defend and fight a battle on new and higher ground.' From the beginning of 1980, Oakeshott was part of a small group of Jenkinsites who met regularly to plan tactics, build up a skeleton organisation and try to persuade their colleagues within the Labour Party to make the break. The group's list of likely breakaway MPs and senior party figures built up steadily all year with each new disaster – 'and they rolled thick and fast' – for the moderates inside the Labour Party.

Indeed, after the defeat of the Callaghan Government in 1979, it became clear that the left was gaining the ascendancy. Tony Benn was rampant and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) had lost the will to fight. With the changes in the constituency parties and the alienation of the normally reliable trade unions, this meant that the social democrats were fatally weakened. In Oakeshott's words,

Callaghan 'sold the pass' at the Labour Commission of Inquiry in June 1980, when he conceded the right of Labour MPs to choose their leader. Both Owen and Rodgers promptly dis-owned this. For Sir Ian, the surrender had started long before. The calls from many fellow moderates to stay and fight were 'pretty ripe coming from some of them who had never fought an inch ... to be told by the Healeys, the Callaghans, the Hattersleys of this world that one should stay and fight when they'd never lifted a finger in the period prior to 1980–81 was something I found pretty galling'. Whereas he had been a key organiser in the right-wing Manifesto Group within the PLP, they were the 'guilty men' who had allowed the left to take over.

At what Sir Ian termed the 'thoroughly unpleasant' Labour Party conference in September 1980, the party became committed to leaving the Common Market and to unilateral nuclear disarmament. It was at this stage, Oakeshott believed, that Rodgers and Williams decided to bolt. Soon after, a proposal from Owen and Rodgers to have the leader elected on the basis of one-member-one-vote was rejected by the Shadow Cabinet.

Both speakers agreed that Dr David Owen played a key part in the birth of the SDP. Matthew Oakeshott recalled that in early May 1980, Owen had 'torn into' leading members of the right-wing party organisation, the Campaign for Labour Victory, saying that they should be prepared to fight on for years. Then, after he was booed at the May special conference, Owen's mood clearly changed. Following the September conference, there were intensive discussions among moderate Labour MPs about what to do. Owen then played what Sir Ian called 'an outstanding role' in a small group that organised within the PLP and liaised very closely with groups outside, including the Jenkinsites and the Campaign for a Labour Victory.

The final straw was the election of the veteran left-winger Michel Foot as leader of the Labour Party. This caused great consternation amongst moderate MPs. Both Oakeshott and Wrigglesworth touched on the oft-

repeated suggestion that as many as five Manifesto Group MPs may have voted for Foot, in order to hasten a split.

Even so, what shocked many moderates was the scale of Foot's support from the PLP. By the end of 1980, Sir Ian said that he and his allies 'had become frustrated with our inability to change the way in which the Labour Party was moving'. They were not leaving Labour, Labour had left them. What the social democrats wanted, to coin the operative phrase of the evening, was 'a left-of-centre party with broad-based appeal.' If Labour could not be that party, they (or at least some of them) would start a new one.

At a meeting on 18 January 1981 with the other members of the 'Gang' and their closest advisers, Jenkins provided a draft statement of principles. Oakeshott said that there was 'no serious disagreement' about the contents. The final version was released at Limehouse on 25 January, the day after Labour's special conference gave the trade unions the single largest role in selecting the party's leader. Most of the protagonists agreed that the key words were the document's conclusion: 'the need for a realignment of British politics must now be faced'. But there was some doubt that Shirley Williams would accept them. Oakeshott recalled 'there were other drafts floating around ... like 'we need to call for an assertion of social democracy' ... but then without very much discussion she finally said "all right, that's OK" so we were there.'

He argued that the Limehouse Declaration was significant not so much for what it said but because it brought the split out into the open. 'After going public, we were swept along by a complete wave of excitement, euphoria ... the co-operation was wonderful, the spirit was wonderful, the excitement was wonderful ... we were absolutely swamped by the reaction.' Sir Ian also remembered that the Declaration 'was received with enormous acclaim. It started a bandwagon rolling, momentum that could not be stopped.' The bagloads of mail that the Gang and their supporters received, the enthusiastic support of such a wide range of people, most of

whom had not been involved in politics before, made it impossible not to start a new party. It was, he said, 'a most remarkable experience'. He and his colleagues began preparing for the formal launch of the SDP, which took place on 26 March.

But Sir Ian reminded the meeting that for many Labour MPs and activists, it was a very harrowing period. Even by Limehouse, very few MPs had committed themselves to forming a new party. The twenty-eight who finally did defect took their choices as individuals, not as part of any faction. Crucially, many who were natural social democrats chose, in the end, to stay with Labour. He was sure that this was because of emotion and sentimental attachments, which Sir Ian stressed, are so important in politics because people invest their beliefs, commitments and values in a party, sometimes for their whole adult lives. For those involved in parties, he argued, politics, friendships and social life are all bound up to the extent that, for some, even contemplating leaving Labour was like breaking a marriage.

Interestingly, at the time of Limehouse, the Liberal Party did not feature in the social democrats' minds. Sir Ian was clear that they saw the SDP as a vehicle for recreating the party that they had joined and not as a rival or an ally for the Liberal Party. Most social democrats had little knowledge or experience of the Liberals. There had been contacts with David Steel and Richard Holme, and there was a general acceptance that 'we would work with our friends in the Liberal Party [but] it wasn't with the intention of forming an alliance that we wrote the Limehouse Declaration and set up the SDP – it was entirely a reaction to events in the Labour Party'.

The meeting spent a great deal of time discussing what the Declaration means today. On the values and policies, Matthew Oakeshott suggested that the Declaration 'still reads well as a statement of social democratic principles'. But former SDP members who have since gone from the Liberal Democrats to 'New Labour' now lay claim to the vision set out by the Gang of Four. As we saw at the meeting, they

argue that Tony Blair's New Labour Party is the 'broad-based party of the centre-left' that delivers the hopes invested in the Limehouse Declaration. In particular, New Labour is a professional party, where 'one member has one vote' and has a class-unifying, rather than a divisive, appeal. They point to the Declaration's aim to 'promote greater equality without stifling enterprise', the claim that 'we need the innovating strength of a competitive economy', and its call for 'Britain to play a constructive role within ... the European Community', are echoed in Tony Blair speeches. But Matthew Oakeshott pointed to specific ways in which Blair does not lead a Limehouse government. These included the Declaration's call for 'an open, classless and *more equal society ... with a fair distribution of rewards*'. And he contrasted its support for 'a healthy public sector and a healthy private sector without frequent frontier changes' with the Government's privatisation of NATS and the London Underground.

As for the other aspect of Limehouse, the SDP did not, of course, succeed in bringing about 'the realignment of British politics'. The meeting discussed a number of possible reasons. When Denis Healey narrowly beat Tony Benn for Labour's deputy leadership, many Labour MPs finally decided to stay put. Only one Conservative MP came to the party. The Falklands War greatly bolstered Mrs Thatcher's prestige. The Darlington by-election, in which Labour held a seat where the SDP had high hopes, was a major disappointment. By the 1983 election, the public's expectations of their political leaders had changed, leaving the SDP appealing to a kind of nostalgia. Then Labour failed to implode, leaving the Alliance pursuing a doomed 'balance of power' strategy. Labour remained the principal party of the centre-left, thanks in no small part to Neil Kinnock.

But the speakers were reluctant to have the SDP cast as a total failure. Sir Ian disagreed with Crewe and King that its achievements were nugatory. He argued that Labour would not have changed had the SDP not 'put a pistol

to its head'. While that was not what the party set out to do, an electable Labour Party was 'good in national terms'. Further, had the merger with the Liberals been better handled inside the SDP, the new party may well have provided the fulcrum for a new shift in politics. For his part, Matthew Oakeshott argued that, with 26 per cent of the popular vote in 1983, the SDP had 'come close' to blowing apart the two-party wall.

After an enjoyable and stimulating evening, one question was left unanswered. As asked by Duncan Brack, what was the effect of the SDP on the Liberal Party? To take it further, was it essential for the revival in the early 1980s of the Liberals' fortunes? Would the Liberal Democrats, 2001 model, have happened without the SDP? Maybe a future meeting – the twentieth anniversary of merger, perhaps? – will proffer some answers.

and saw at first hand how local people were able to make use of key information which would otherwise be kept from them. To the fury of Labour and Conservative city council groups, the force of sustained and informed local action caused them to amend their plans.

Community politics is exceptionally difficult to practice, particularly in a political atmosphere in which sitting Councillors – and MPs – feel the need to win votes on the visible basis of what they have done, as opposed to the more intangible perception of what they have enabled. It is not a panacea and, then as now, I tried to warn against its mutation into mindless activism and the immense pressures that that placed on local representatives, particularly in huge big city wards.

Robert Ingham

John Meadowcroft is right in emphasising the importance to the Liberal Party of the 1970 community politics resolution (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 28, autumn 2000), but in most other respects his account of the development of community politics is wrong.

Meadowcroft ascribes to the Liberal leadership and the Young Liberals of the 1960s a significance in the development of community politics which is largely unwarranted. Like most Liberal MPs of the time, neither Jo Grimond nor Mark Bonham Carter had much interest in local government elections. Local elections were not fought by political parties in Orkney & Shetland, and in Devon, Bonham Carter opposed Liberal intervention, for example when Paul Tyler stood for election to Devon County Council as a Liberal in 1964. Although, as Meadowcroft shows, both paid occasional lip service to local politics, there was certainly no national strategy for fighting local elections and nor did the Grimond leadership see a link between national and local politics.

The establishment of the Local Government Department was an important factor in the Liberal Party's capacity to fight local elections, but this was a personal initiative of Richard Wainwright and was not strongly

Letters to the Editor

Michael Meadowcroft

No special familial interest was required for me to be intrigued and challenged by the lines of thought in John Meadowcroft's paper 'The Origins of Community Politics' (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 28, autumn 200). His reference to T. H. Green's practical political work was particularly welcome. Green's membership of Oxford City Council is often mentioned in despatches and it would arguably be a fruitful line of research to ascertain whether there was any linkage between theory and practice.

However, I beg to differ with David Rebek (*Letters, Journal* 29) who played an important role in the 'second wave' of local Liberal representation in Bushey and thereabouts. He equates conscientious ward casework and effective communication between a councillor and his or her constituents with community politics when, in fact, the former, though a vital aspect of the Liberal's perception of the councillor's role, is only part of the means towards a much more radical end. Also in this context, his roll of honour should have included Cllr Frank Davis of Finchley, who invented the ubiquitous 'Grumble Sheet'. (It was the same Frank Davis

who provoked the law enabling party names to be on the ballot paper, by changing his name to 'Frank Liberal Davis' when contesting the Acton by-election in March 1968. It didn't, however, prevent him from leaving his deposit behind there, nor subsequently joining the Labour Party. I often wondered whether he then went through the formality of changing his name again.)

I was in charge of the party's Local Government Department from 1962 and, together with my then boss, Cllr David Evans of Southend, formed the Association of Liberal Councillors in 1965. However, in retrospect, however successful we might have been in increasing the effectiveness of Liberal councillors, the tactics we promoted were nothing intrinsically to do with 'encouraging individuals to take and use power'; indeed, if anything, we encouraged even greater dependence on councillors who resolved problems for constituents.

Speaking personally, I stumbled across community politics in 1968 when, as a city councillor, having moved to Leeds from party headquarters, I circulated to each house the housing clearance plans for the area

backed by Grimond and his allies. Pratap Chitnis and his successor, Michael Meadowcroft, identified and made contact with Liberal councillors but their efforts to persuade the Liberal leadership to link local and parliamentary electioneering failed. Michael Meadowcroft hoped that the borough, county council, London and parliamentary election campaigns of 1964 would be fully coordinated, but Grimond's General Election Committee did not discuss local elections during the 1963–64 period.

The development of community politics before 1970 cannot be claimed as an achievement of the Young Liberals. Their activities and publications before 1970 were concerned with philosophical questions – the relationship between liberalism, socialism and Marxism, for example, and the relevance of parliamentary democracy – and social issues such as housing, but not local politics. Direct action related to street protests, not leafleting.

So where did community politics spring from? 'Report back' leaflets from local councillors, grumble sheets, all-year-round campaigning and the like developed in the 1950s in several towns separately, most notably Rugby and Southend. By 1960, community politics-style Liberal activity was also noticeable in Finchley, Orpington, Greenock and Liverpool (where 'report back' leaflets were christened *Focus* for the first time in 1965). These activities were inspired by tactical not philosophical considerations. In the face of unremitting electoral defeats at parliamentary level, Liberals turned to local politics where national party labels mattered less, electorates were smaller and local effort counted for more. The striking successes of Liberals in Southend, Finchley and Orpington undoubtedly influenced Wainwright in establishing the Local Government Department, but the importance of community politics techniques had not permeated the Liberal leadership until after 1970, when the likes of Cyril Carr, Trevor Jones and Gruffydd Evans took up senior positions in the Liberal Party Organisation.

Community politics techniques were rooted in the Liberal theory of

Green and others mentioned in Meadowcroft's article. Surprisingly, Meadowcroft makes no reference to Sir Percy Harris, whose election material could have rolled off the photocopiers of the Association of Liberal Councillors. The theory of community politics followed the practice, however, and was developed only after 1970. In the 1950s and 1960s, community politics was a tactical activity intended to win council seats as a step to winning parliamentary seats, rather than a way of giving power to the people.

Dr Peter Hatton

Dr Michael Brock (Letters, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 29, winter 2000–01) appears to wish to present Asquith's government's progression to war in 1914 as inevitable and undisputed. This seems to me to be an oversimplification.

The Colonial Secretary, Lewis Harcourt, on whom I wrote my doctoral thesis, maintained that the Cabinet had always agreed with his contention that Britain had no alliance with Tsarist Russia and at some point or other between 1911 and the July crisis over half of the Cabinet advocated an understanding with Germany. This was opposed vehemently by most Foreign Office officials: the Permanent Under-secretary went as far as to inform the French that this 'radical-socialist Cabinet (of) ... financiers, pacifists, faddists and others ... will not last, it is done for and with the Conservatives you will get something precise' (quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford 1954), p. 479). Burns and Morley resigned from the Cabinet rather than agree to the British ultimatum to Germany. Harcourt, Simon, Beauchamp and I think Haldane considered such action on either 2nd or 3rd August before agreeing to follow the Asquith-Grey majority. The political disadvantages of the Boer War Liberal split (see Iain Sharpe's article in *Journal* 29) was there to remind them. Party unity was needed because the Tories were eager to fight on the Franco-Russian side and Asquith's was,

after 1910, a minority government. Any sizeable party split would cause a coalition or Tory government and Asquith, Grey and Churchill would not tolerate neutrality. Therefore Peter Truesdale's vision (*Journal* 28) of Liberal England continuing in 1914 neutral and united is also counterfactual.

The book originally reviewed by Truesdale, John Charmley's *Splendid Isolation*, is an important addition to the debate which seemed to die quiet after my generation of young historians had done all they could by the late 1970s on the origins of the First World War, although its emphasis is earlier. What struck me most was the fact that in 1912 the Russians considered partial mobilisation practical (bottom p. 383) and that therefore the Russian military informing the Tsar of the opposite in July 1914 was not a technical judgement but a determination to keep to the plans agreed with France. On technical diplomatic matters, Charmley gives Grey no credit for picking up and running with the Kaiser's 'halt on Belgrade' plan. Now one can reach the Tayloresque conclusion that the Kaiser launched it 24 or 48 hours too late, but it was the crisis' best diplomatic chance and my military conclusion was that Austria-Hungary could have captured Belgrade and held it if this is what Germany wanted. She did of course mobilise with all reserves against Serbia but was forced into a confused reverse by German insistence on previous plans being followed (majority of German forces against France; majority of Austrian forces against Russia). Charmley gives no credit for diplomatic conferences ending previous Balkan and Moroccan crises with international agreement rather than great power military conflict.

If Professor Charmley wishes to deplore 'the end of isolation' he never seems to face up to the fact that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Anglo-French Entente were the actions of the pre-1905 Tory Government. Landsdowne, who had been a weak and incompetent Secretary for War in the run-up to the (Second) Boer War concluded from a conflict which utilised nearly half a million British and Imperial troops and cost some £230

million that Britain could not risk facing multiple (i.e. China, India, Venezuela, Sudan and South Africa) extra-European crises at the same time. So he moved out of isolation.

May I add that I am not convinced that in 1914 the Boer War split would have appeared so disastrous. The agitation against imported Chinese labour on the Transvaal gold mines played well in the 1906 general election and responsible government under Het Volk in 1907 and the Union of South Africa in 1910 were deemed a success – the alternative Liberal policy in South Africa had worked after the failure of Milner's reconstruction in the Transvaal. The burning question was, however, Ireland. Asquith had to assure Herbert Gladstone (first Governor-General of the Union of South Africa) that he must do the best for South Africa and if the Tories cited his actions as evidence of what a self-governing Ireland would be like then Asquith would just have to answer them as best he could. The Tory venom against a self-governing Ireland is difficult to believe today.

The Asquithian solution very nearly worked. I have only relatively recently realised that Asquith's 1914 concessions on Ulster were the result of the direct intervention of George V, who seized upon the reference to an eventual elected House of Lords in the preamble to the Parliament Act of 1911 (words Grey had insisted on and Asquith sought to avoid) to argue that until then he was the sole bulwark against the tyranny of the House of Commons. Likewise I realised very late that the Sinn Fein Irish majority in the general election of 1918 was not only the result of first-past-the-post distortions but also deliberate sabotage by several members of Redmond's Parliamentary Party – on the grounds that SF would win and the Irish had better be united on a unilateral declaration of independence. I had long known that the decision to apply conscription to Ireland, taken in panic after the German offensive of March 1918, was the main reason Irish opinion moved away from Asquith's solution during 1918. So it would seem that the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was a direct cause of the Sinn Fein victory.

Reviews

Audacious – but fundamentally flawed

The Ashdown Diaries – Volume 1: 1988–1997
(Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000; 638pp)
Reviewed by Tony Greaves

This stunning book sets out the attempts of the then leader of the Liberal Democrats to make dramatic and permanent changes to the centre-left political landscape.

It consists of excerpts from the daily diary which Paddy Ashdown kept from his election as party leader in 1988 to the 1997 general election. Over fifty pages of useful appendices include position papers, Ashdown's Chard speech in 1992, a 'letter abandoning equidistance' in May 1995, two drafts of a 'Partnership for Britain's Future' intended as a joint Lib-Lab election appeal, and a memorandum on negotiating participation in government following the election.

The 300,000 words have been edited down from 800,000 which will in due course be deposited at the London School of Economics to provide more material on the Liberal Democrats during that time, and the relationship between the party and its leader. I was disappointed that most of that material has been cut out of this book.

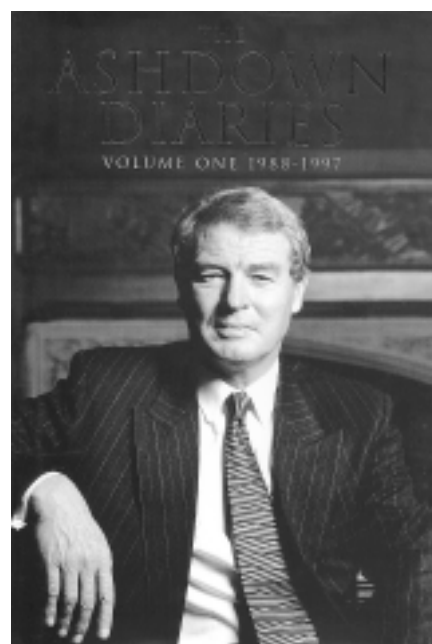
One major sub-plot – Ashdown's visits to Bosnia during the war – makes riveting reading. Few party leaders put their life and safety on the line in this way! History may come to record that Ashdown played a significant role in the survival of Sarajevo.

But this is the story of a man with a covert and obsessive mission to change the face of politics for ever by forging a new relationship between his own party and the Labour party, based on a common progressive agenda of which a new proportional

voting system would be an indispensable component.

It is extraordinary how few people were in on the plot and how few of them really supported 'The Big Thing', which was to be a common platform before the 1997 election and co-operation afterwards, even if Labour had an overall majority. Ashdown described it as 'the coalition government that [Blair] and I had considered for so long'.

Ashdown's dilemma was that he could tell neither his party nor the country what he was trying to do. The paradox is that he was an outstandingly successful conventional party leader, particularly in the first few years, when despite some tactical gaffes, such as the party name, and together with its local government activists, he dragged the party back from the abyss.



The result was that Liberal Democrats loved their leader but, insofar as they sensed his strategy, most wanted none of it. The 'what if' question must be how much more could have been achieved if all that time at the top and personal energy had been spent on something other than 'The Project'.

The dreams started at once. Only five days after becoming leader Ashdown met Tessa Blackstone and John Eatwell to talk about 'think tank' co-operation with Labour and the following April he and Richard Holme were talking about some sort of Lib-Lab 'Programme for Britain'.

Before 1992, discussion of working together in Parliament was about a hung Parliament. The day after polling day Ashdown held a strategy meeting and wrote 'We must make use of this opportunity to realign the left'. Three days later he was hoping to open a dialogue with Labour which 'will develop into a genuine partnership and perhaps even, in the long-term, an electoral pact'.

A position paper urged 'we should refrain from attacking [Labour] openly'. This and the Chard speech caused a furore among MPs and Chard set off a debate in the wider party. Ashdown got a tough reception at the ALDC conference in July and commented 'Why is it difficult to get people to see beyond the end of their noses?'

Ashdown had now started his campaign to abandon 'equidistance' (between the other two large parties). This fairly common sense idea nevertheless met resistance and took eighteen months to achieve. He was trying to take the party in directions it did not understand and about which it was often unhappy and usually hostile.

Contacts had been made with Labour figures such as Peter Mandelson and Robin Cook but John Smith was not interested and the idea of co-operation was going dead. Then a key event took place in July 1993 when the Ashdowns and the Blairs were brought together for dinner by Anthony Lester and clearly hit it off. A dinner followed at the Blairs when Ashdown was impressed by Blair's call for 'new ideas' based on 'community' and a 'new contract between the citizen and the

state', possibly his first introduction to the new communitarian vogue!

Realisation of the dreams became possible with the death of John Smith and his replacement by Blair. Ashdown sent a note urging him to stand and in August 1994 Blair initiated new contacts. Another dinner followed which set a pattern for the next three years. There was lots of enthusiasm for co-operation and circular talk around 'The Small Thing' (co-operating on issues) and the preferred 'Big Thing' – in September Ashdown first considered Labour and Liberal Democrats working together even if Labour had a majority.

The question of PR became the central problem. For almost three years over at least sixteen documented meetings Ashdown pushed Blair but Blair was 'not persuaded'. The process resulted in the Cook-Maclennan agreement: PR for the Scottish and Welsh devolution elections and PR for the 1999 European elections – but no more than the promise of a commission to look at an alternative system for Westminster followed by a referendum.

A small 'Jo Group' of close advisers was set up by Ashdown to advise, plan and control all relations with Labour on the Project. But for another thirty months it was Ashdown who was pushing these ideas amongst his close colleagues and the MPs and Jo Group who were pulling him back. Entry after entry shows his frustration with them and his feeling he is on his own. Yet he is driven to go on with it against almost all advice.

In October 1996, typically, Ashdown writes 'I am very exposed and with very few supporters of the project. But I am still determined to go ahead.' Earlier that

summer it was Richard Holme, no less, who told him to be wary of a 'film script that you have written in your head'.

In the end, by early 1997, it was Holme, the Jo Group itself and Archy Kirkwood as Chief Whip who pulled the plug on the most ambitious pre-election parts of the Project. Yet Blair and Ashdown still fantasised that they could suddenly spring a coalition on their parties after polling day. In the most bizarre entry of all Ashdown phones Blair from a college in Taunton on the afternoon of general election polling day to discuss prospects!

So the final 'what if?' must be – could Blair and Ashdown really have carried their parties in a coalition government in circumstances of an overall majority after 1 May 1997? It is obvious to me that at best Ashdown would have split down the middle the party which a few years earlier he had rescued from potential oblivion.

What is incontrovertible is that both leaders were engaged in an audacious but fundamentally flawed attempt to manoeuvre their parties into a wholly new long-term strategy without the slightest attempt to gain the prior consent of those parties or even to tell them what they were doing.

In the event the pre-election Project was fatally shackled by Blair's unwillingness or inability to deliver PR. We await the next instalment which deals with how they tried to revive the Project after the election. Meanwhile we need the breathing space to pick ourselves up off the floor.

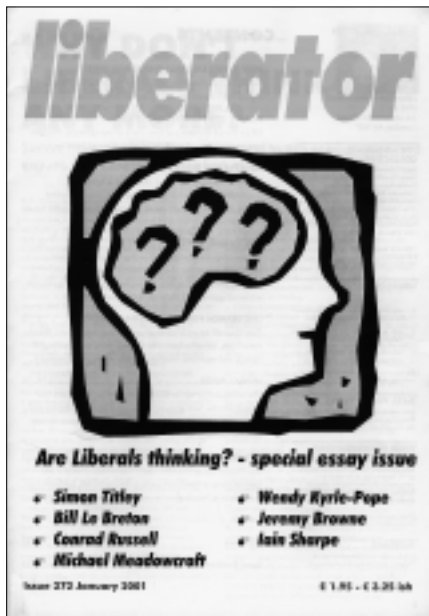
Tony Greaves is a Liberal Democrat peer. He has been a local government activist and leadership sceptic since the sixties.

Thirty years of *liberator*

Reviewed by John Smithson

Liberator's survival for thirty years is a wonderful achievement given the track record of all other vaguely similar Liberal publications. Its success has

been based on the hard work and dedication of a relatively small (but changing) group of individuals, together with its continuing distinctive



stance within the awkward, radical, argumentative wing of the Party. Its history can be divided into three phases – from its inception to the summer of 1976; to July 1978; and to the present time – based on its format, focus and controlling group rather than on any mere political events.

Its launch in 1970 was an exciting initiative during one of the more depressing periods of Liberal history. It accurately heralded itself as 'A NEWSPAPER OF THE YOUNG LIBERAL MOVEMENT' and by April 1971 could claim to have established itself as the monthly campaigning newspaper for Young Liberal ideas and action within and outside the Young Liberal Movement.

It acted as mouthpiece and communications channel for the YLs and helped them to be challenging both inside and outside the Party. Its content varied but it had the vibrancy and earnestness of the YLM at the time. There was much about the internal activities of the YLs as a body, together with articles on relevant issues and concerns of the period such as racism, South Africa, women's rights, community politics, the dual approach, industrial democracy, and there was even then the occasional book review. It spoke much of direct action but in reality there was not very much about campaigning in the active sense.

In the end, while it achieved notoriety and irritated a number of Party big-wigs into writing the

occasional letter, it was never perceived as any threat to the Party as a whole or inspiration for it to be challenged or changed. The campaign issues were seen to stem from the idealistic naivety of young people and had little relevance to much of the main body of the Party. Amazingly it fudged entirely the Thorpe crisis of 1976, suggesting it was either boring to YLs or that the alternatives to Thorpe as leader were even worse.

Despite its extremely close links with the YLM leadership *Liberator* was always (and still is) published independently by Liberator Publications. The name most closely associated with this period is Peter Hain, who infamously joined the Labour Party in September 1977. Hain was a continuing member of the group and the longest serving editor (from September 1973 until October 1975) during that time.

The next phase saw *Liberator* taken over by a Manchester collective and adopt a tabloid format. It was still very much a YLM newspaper but the change and the new format (which in effect doubled its size) did generate a surge in news about YL branches up and down the country while retaining all the other features. There was more about action and guidance for getting directly involved in campaigns. The masthead changed in January 1977 from the somewhat Victorian appearance of the YL eagle to a cartoon of somebody using a spray can (a symbol of direct action despite the adverse environmental overtones!) The whole presentation was also much livelier than the previous somewhat drab A4 format with full pages of text and relatively few breaks. However it must also be recalled that technology was changing and the inclusion of photos and artwork became much easier.

1976 to 1978 was very much a period of retrenchment for the Liberal Party as a whole as it recovered from the debacle of the Thorpe affair and later entered the Lib-Lab pact. *Liberator's* contribution was certainly significant at least so far as the YLs were concerned and it was commendably vociferous in demanding more out of Lib-Labbery.

Suddenly in August 1978 *Liberator* changed its format (and editorial board) entirely and declared itself to be a magazine. The new layout – twenty-four pages, A4 size, stapled – also meant a lot more content. There was much more about Liberal activity on local councils and local campaigning but the articles on specific issues together with the book reviews remained. It ceased to be just a YLM publication and set out to widen its appeal and its coverage. A clear coup was an interview with Alan Beith then, as now, Deputy Party Leader, in August 1979 and this was followed by further interviews including one with David Steel, Party Leader, in the Assembly issue of 1979. The magazine's circulation expanded significantly and the twenty-four-page format has more or less been maintained ever since, although Conference issues tend to be larger, with September 1998 reaching fifty-six pages.

These events coincided with *Liberator's* steadily increasing influence within the Party. Party big-wigs, such as President Elect Richard Holme (as he then was) and Paddy Ashdown MP (not then Party Leader) became willing to write articles for *Liberator*. There was almost a danger that it might become respectable but was saved this ignominy by the invention of its gossip supplement 'Liberator Insider' which thankfully developed into an effective defence. Its note on Joyce Arram, describing her most productive contribution as her knitting, 'which like her comments lacks any shape or coherence' gives the general flavour ...

Two further events strengthened *Liberator's* position in this respect: a negotiated take-over of the more or less moribund *Radical Bulletin* and the emergence of the SDP. The latter in particular enabled it to become a rallying point for many Liberals who were either nervous of, or totally opposed to, any deal with the SDP. The fact that a deal was made was of no consequence in this sense – many party members were concerned and upset and identified with *Liberator's* more purist line, so consolidating its position as the radical voice of the Party. The establishment of a 'Commentary'

editorial as an introduction to the magazine also enhanced its impact.

The collective also steadily became larger. From around six in September 1978, it grew to fifteen by April 1981 and reached twenty in 1988. This has clearly been, and remains, a great strength. There are people to write articles, to search out information and encourage others to do the same. The genuinely collective approach has worked and no doubt is one of the main reasons for its continuing success. Nevertheless it is worth pointing out that the vast bulk of all the people in the collective live within what could be fairly described as the London Region. This has led to the occasional blunder – e.g. the condemnation of regionalism within the Party as unwanted.

Throughout the period of the Alliance (from 1981 to the summer of 1987), *Liberator* was able to maintain a steady and persistent opposition to the whole idea. While it had long retained a suitably irreverent attitude to the Party's collective leadership, the Alliance brought out the best in it. Its points and arguments were largely irrefutable and it acted as a comfort zone for the many who continued to feel uncomfortable but were too idle or too cowardly to do anything about it. Undoubtedly this constancy consolidated its position and importance for Liberals as a whole.

Following the merger in January 1988 *Liberator* continued to follow a clear radical line. Describing David Steel's decision not to stand for the leadership of the newly merged party as 'the first bit of good news for months' is a typical comment of the time. A mark of its continuing status and deemed importance was the ease with which it could command both leadership candidates (Ashdown and Beith) to answer in detail a series of questions and publish the results.

The first two years following the merger were a dark and gloomy period in the history of Liberalism. Many radicals were totally disillusioned and confused about which way to turn. *Liberator's* role in this period was crucial: it contained articles from and about the SLD, the Liberal

Movement and the (continuing) Liberal Party, while at the same time managing never to take sides. It simply maintained its radical Liberal stance, supporting any such idea or initiative regardless of its source. The relative calm and progress that has followed and the fact that so many radicals stayed within the fold is due to many factors but *Liberator's* continuing faith and robust promotion of Liberal ideas and principles clearly helped.

For the last decade *Liberator's* overall quality and status and the affection for the magazine have not waned. It has now become an established part of the Liberal scene and has retained and refined its irreverent approach, which continues to make its impact to good effect on the Party's conscience. 'Lord Bonker's Diary' first appeared in June 1990 and still retains its satirical sharpness and relevance.

Liberator has continued to address the main issues of importance to Liberals. In 1993, as if to prove its Liberal pedigree, it got really excited over Liberal Democrat constitutional changes. It expressed outrage over the disastrous Tower Hamlets 'racist' fiasco and also encouraged the 'sogs' (Roger Liddle *et al*) to go back to Labour.

(They did.) *Liberator* has consistently supported Scottish and Welsh devolution but Paddy Ashdown's ever increasing love affair with Tony Blair (including the Cabinet Committee) was condemned from the start to Ashdown's demise. During the leadership election it remained neutral but opposed to Charles Kennedy. It covered positively the Annual Assembly of the (Meadowcroft) Liberal Party up until the last one in 1999.

So where now? The *Liberator* Collective is well established and includes new younger members as well as old established ones. *Liberator* appears regularly and is much appreciated by its subscribers and, I feel, by the Party as a whole. It has never been boring (at least not for long), has always been irreverent, and has generally risen to the occasion. With the other two main parties now both Conservative, its continuation is essential to ensure a radical outlet within a Liberal Democrat party that is still capable of forgetting its roots.

John Smithson edited Radical Bulletin from 1970 to 1976. He has been a councillor on various authorities for nearly thirty-five years.

A man of government

Robert Skidelsky: *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937–46* (Macmillan, 2000; 580pp)

Reviewed by David Gowland

The publication of (Lord) Skidelsky's *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain 1937–46* marks the culmination of over thirty years of scholarship which began with *Politicians and the Slump* in 1967. It is important to examine the changes in attitudes to Keynes over this period and Skidelsky's role in this process.

In 1967, Keynes' reputation was at its peak and that of economics with it. Keynes was hailed as the man who had made full employment possible by

showing how demand management could enable governments to use activist economic policy to ensure lasting prosperity. But in 1968 Milton Friedman's Presidential address to the American Economic Association started a movement which has culminated in Gordon Brown's proclamation of the opposite of the post-war consensus:

The avoidance of inflation is now the only goal of economic policy. The Chancellor believes high employment

will follow – but not through the work of governments whose role is only to provide a framework of stability. Expectations are not – as for Keynes – animal spirits to be tamed, but stabilising forces to be assuaged by independent central banks and other nostrums designed to achieve credibility, Mr Brown's oft-proclaimed goal.

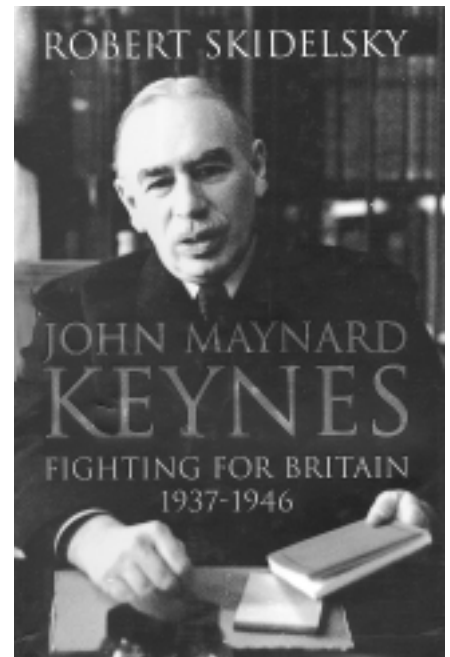
It has become conventional wisdom that events in the 1970s and 1980s proved Keynes wrong. This is not the place to consider these debates but the reviewer would argue that economics students do not read Keynes enough and that there is much more in his writings than fashion allows. His incisive analysis of financial markets is still as good a guide to the behaviour of internet shares as any. Keynes emphasised the role of people's beliefs about what other people believe about third parties' expectations of yet others' actions. Moreover, the pendulum has swung too far away from Keynes' belief in activist economic management. The change is based as much on a very partial reading of Friedman *et al.* as policy in the 1950s was based on a partial reading of Keynes, Skidelsky, Gilbert and others have argued.

Indeed, the fact that Skidelsky's has become established as *the* Keynes biography reflects both the neglect of Keynes the economist as well as the book's qualities – erudition, painstaking scholarship and lucidity. Around the time that Skidelsky commenced his labours the Royal Economic Society started to publish Keynes' collected works and this spawned numerous studies, notably Moggridge's biography. Skidelsky's political approach has dwarfed these. However, Skidelsky also emphasises Keynes as a man of government, exemplified by the title of his third volume. Clarke and others have analysed Keynes as a liberal/social democratic thinker. Keynes was a Liberal activist, *quondam* adviser to Lloyd George and frequent contributor to the famous Summer Schools. To modern eyes, his views can seem more like those of a Thatcherite, in lauding the role of inequality and inherited wealth as a means of achieving cultural diversity and

advance, and in countering the threat of over-powerful governments. Nevertheless, it is intriguing how little space is devoted to his critique of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*. Skidelsky rightly emphasises in the preface that it illustrates Keynes belief in free markets. However, having cited Keynes as agreeing with 'virtually everything in it, morally and philosophically' he does not mention in the preface the 'but –'. Basically, Keynes tackled the question to which the centre left has returned in the 1990s – how to delineate a major role for government in the economy, having accepted the virtues of the free market.

Skidelsky's Keynes is a man of government who started his life as a financial expert in the Treasury in the first world war and returned to his métier after digressions during the second world war. There is much in this. If one re-examines the potted biographies of Keynes which appeared in textbooks in the 1960s it is easy to see Skidelsky's greatest achievement. Keynes was presented as a radical outsider. Skidelsky magisterially demonstrates that he was always an insider. Indeed, much of his character and writings are explained by Keynes' establishment nature and his always viewing life through the windows of Harvey Road, Cambridge. Initially, he was an unsuccessful speculator and was bailed out by his father to the tune of £10,000 in the early 1920s. Thus he was a man of privilege who wanted to do things in government from a mixture of a sense of duty and a love of the game – akin to Halberstam's *Best and Brightest* who led the US into Vietnam, which illustrates that this Whiggish activity has its dangers as well as its benefits.

The editor generously invited me to write an essay rather than a narrow review. For reasons beyond both our control other reviews have already appeared. Some have left the feeling that much of the material is of interest only to specialist historians. This is unfair. The role of the IMF and World Bank are critical to much debate today. This volume demonstrates much about the foundation of the modern



economic order which is highly relevant as well as fascinating in its own right. Skidelsky has contributed a major but not uncritical component to the revisionist school of British history, dubbed Thatcherite by critics such as Paul Addison. This emphasises the extent of Anglo-American rivalry in the second world war and criticises Churchill for not standing up for Britain. Many of its adherents will feel that Skidelsky's analysis of the Anglo-American loan agreement is not only brilliant history but demonstrates the dangers of subordinating exchange rate policy to political considerations (shades of the EMU...?).

Skidelsky's analysis of *How to Pay for the War* is perhaps the best part of his book. It demonstrates not only Keynes' intellectual incisiveness but also his penchant for the gadget – compulsory saving as a means of war finance.

Skidelsky has undoubtedly written a third volume that matches the first two in erudition and scholarship, and perhaps surpasses them. His is the standard and classic biography of Keynes. Regrettably, such praise may suggest a book that will never be read. In fact not only is it lucid and indeed compelling, it contains much of interest to contemporary economists and political scientists alike.

David Gowland is Professor of Economics at the University of Derby.

From Midlothian to Direct Mail

Parliamentary and Political Campaigning in the 19th and 20th Centuries

On the eve of the first general election campaign of the twenty-first century, this meeting will examine the development of campaigning techniques since the Great Reform Act of 1832.

From the introduction of electoral registers, the gradual elimination of corruption, and the appearance of new forms of communications – railways, the telegraph and newspapers – to the computerised and direct-mail based innovations of the SDP, have campaigns changed out of all recognition, or do they remain the same at heart?

Speakers: **Professor Michael Rush** (Exeter University) and **Bill (Lord) Rodgers**. Chair: **Graham (Lord) Tope**.

8.00pm, Friday 16 March 2001

Arlington Suite, Toorak Hotel, Torquay

J. M. Hogge

continued from p.22

and pertinacious radical who tried to lead rather than follow public opinion was animated by his Christian conscience. The loss of the United Free Church's support after its Union with the Church of Scotland in 1929 was one often overlooked reason for Liberal decline in many parts of Scotland. Since Hogge's time, links between political parties and religious denominations have loosened. Hogge was a victim of the calamitous fate of his party in 1924 which showed the danger of a smaller third party holding the balance of power under the first-past-the-post electoral system. His defeat was a reflection of the upsurge of the Labour party in urban areas, a development which Liberals have been unable to reverse in Scotland at parliamentary level. It illustrates likewise that a backbencher, however industrious and respected, has little chance of survival against a strong tide of opinion against his party.

In any roll of distinguished Scottish backbenchers of last century, James Hogge has a strong claim to rank high. It would be pleasing to hope that we may see more of his ilk in the next Westminster parliament.

R. Ian Elder graduated in history from Edinburgh University, and is a former Rector of Webster's High School, Kirriemuir.

1. Michael Fry, *Patronage and Principle, A Political History of Modern Scotland*. p.94
2. Richard J. Finlay, *A Partnership for Good? Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880*
3. J. M. Hogge, Papers, National Library of Scotland
4. See Box for outcome of election contests.
5. J. M. Hogge, Papers
6. J. M. Hogge, Papers
7. Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party, 1895-1970*, p.169
8. Michael Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvident Democrats, The Scottish Electoral System 1884-1929*, p.127
9. Roy Douglas, p.180
10. Information from the late John G. Gray, former Liberal Councillor in Edinburgh whose father was a Liberal agent in East Edinburgh in the early 1920s
11. Michael Fry
12. East Edinburgh returned a Liberal MP between 1931 and 1935. In the 1935 general election it reverted to Labour.

History Group website

The History Group's website, at www.liberalhistory.org.uk is gradually being developed. When finished, it will contain up-to-date news of the Group's activities, a complete list of *Journal* contents, together with downloadable copies of earlier issues, a short history of the Liberal Party, SDP and

History Group News

Our apologies to anyone who tried to send emails to the new email addresses we announced in the last issue of the *Journal*. Unfortunately, thanks to the incompetence of our website hosting company, none of them were available. We have now solved the problem (by changing company), and are happy to announce that the following email addresses do now work:

- Any correspondence about subscriptions to the *Journal* and membership of the Group:
subs@liberalhistory.org.uk
- Any correspondence about any other aspect of the *Journal*, including letters to the editor, articles and reviews:
journal@liberalhistory.org.uk
- Any general queries about any aspect of Liberal, SDP and Liberal Democrat history:
enquiry@liberalhistory.org.uk

Liberal Democrats, and a resources section for researchers.

Offers of technical assistance with the establishment of the site would be very welcome – please contact Duncan Brack on webmaster@liberalhistory.org.uk.