

REVIEWS

The 2005 general election

Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge (ed.): *Britain Decides – The UK General Election 2005* (Palgrave, 2005)

John Bartle and Anthony King (ed.): *Britain at the Polls 2005* (CQ Press, 2005)

Dennis Kavanagh and David Butler: *The British General Election of 2005* (Palgrave, 2005)

Pippa Norris and Christopher Wlezien (ed.): *Britain Votes 2005* (Oxford University Press, 2005)

Reviewed by **Tom Kiehl**

For the Liberal Democrats in the 2001–05 parliament there was something reminiscent of the sense of optimism and opportunity felt by the SDP/Liberal Alliance in the 1979–83 Parliament. In both cases the government had led the country into a controversial war based on questionable motives, the main opposition party was divided, ineffectual and stood little chance of winning an election and the main third party went into the general election anticipating a potential breakthrough following a string of sensational by-election results.

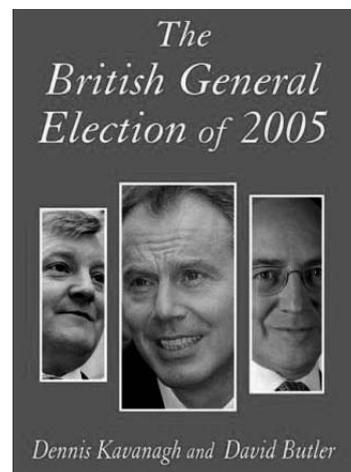
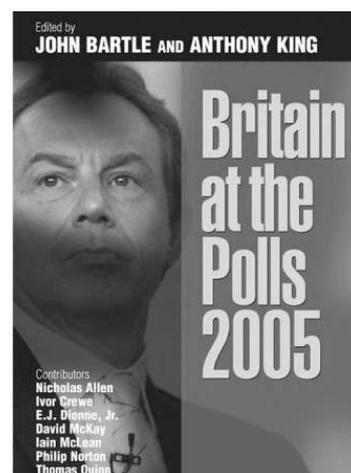
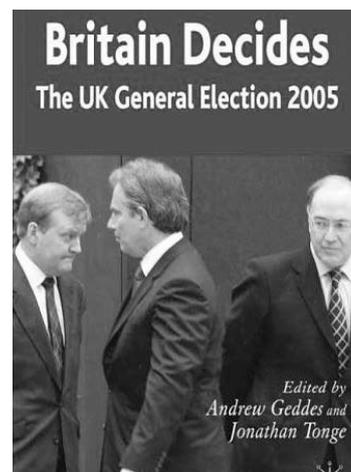
As was the case in 1983, the result of the 2005 general election was mixed. The percentage of the electorate prepared to vote for the Liberal Democrats in 2005 jumped from the teens to the twenties, as happened to the SDP/Liberal Alliance in 1983. However, a net gain of around a dozen seats in both contests did not quite give the main third party adequate grounds for proclaiming the breakthrough that the backing of a quarter, or thereabouts, of

the electorate may otherwise suggest.

As much a fixture of general elections themselves, numerous books are published in their aftermath to assess the campaigns, results and why the public voted in the way that they did. Four titles, to a greater or lesser extent, have attempted to get to grips with the question as to whether 2005 represented a success or a missed opportunity for the Liberal Democrats.

Although no specific tome focuses entirely on the Lib Dems, two have individual chapters on the Liberal Democrat campaign and the implications of the result for the party – *Britain Votes 2005*, edited by Pippa Norris and Christopher Wlezien, and *Britain Decides: The UK General Election 2005*, edited by Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge. A third, *The British General Election of 2005*, by Dennis Kavanagh and David Butler, has a 'Lib Dem and the others' chapter, but this merely sets the scene ahead of the campaign proper. The fourth, *Britain at the Polls 2005*, edited by John Bartle and Anthony King,

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The two titles which have individual chapters on the party are the most useful for scholars attempting to interpret the result from a Liberal Democrat perspective. These are further enhanced by the fact that the chapters were contributed by Andrew Russell and Edward Fieldhouse, the authors of last year's excellent *Neither Left nor Right – The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate*.

Andrew Russell's piece in *Britain Votes 2005* is quite descriptive, though he makes some salient points. He argues that, had the party gained seats more evenly from the other parties instead of predominantly at the expense of Labour, this would have been preferable, even if the total net gain had remained the same. This is an interesting view that has not been heard much elsewhere. He also presents the party as looking more vulnerable to recovery on the part of either or both of the other main parties in a way not seen since 1997. His underlying concern is the party's strategic dichotomy and the fact that it has not yet demonstrated that it can appeal to both moderate Conservatives and those to the left of Labour in equal measure at the same time. Russell concludes that the logical future for the party may be to return to a long-term strategy of equidistance.

In his chapter in *Britain Decides: The UK General Election 2005*, Edward Fieldhouse, along with David Cutts, paints an even grimmer view of the election result and future prospects for the party. The overall tone of this chapter is that the election was more of an opportunity lost in an uneven performance for the Liberal Democrats. The chapter is not a direct attack on a poor campaign and makes it clear that it would be harsh to blame the Lib Dems for not making a breakthrough, given the electoral system. Yet there is a sense here that had

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the party not taken such a centre-left stance on most issues, success may have been more forthcoming. Fieldhouse and Cutts concede that there were positives for the party to draw from the result – the Lib Dems are clearly the only challenger to Labour in the big cities, and the real story in this election is in non-Lib Dem seats where the party increased its share by 4.3 per cent on average. However, what is striking about the Fieldhouse and Cutts piece are the numerous references to the Lib Dems running at a high-water mark or to a 'ceiling effect' in traditional areas and seats they already hold. The impression given is that the Lib Dems have now been boxed into a corner where they face a huge strategic dilemma and that the only rational response would be consolidate what they have got and hope for incremental gains.

Having Russell and, in part, Fieldhouse contribute these chapters acts as a fitting addendum to *Neither Left nor Right*, which was always going to suffer from being published so close to the 2005 general election.

Overall *Britain Decides: The UK General Election 2005* is preferable to *Britain Votes 2005*. Both dissect the election with individual chapters on the effect of the leaders, media and issues; however, in *Britain Decides* the robust conclusion by the editors of the book is a particularly powerful rallying call for voting reform. The style of *Britain Decides* is also more accessible. Several constituency contests are highlighted for closer inspection at the end of each chapter – six involving Lib Dem battles; five of them are Lib Dem victories and one Lib Dem loss. The book might have also benefited from an analysis of one or two near-misses – either where the party expected to gain (Orpington) or where they came from nowhere almost to take the seat (Islington South & Finsbury).

Both *Britain Decides* and *Britain Votes 2005* have their fair share of useful statistics and tables to mull over, though if this is what you are looking for then you should undoubtedly choose *The British General Election of 2005*. Taking the same format as they have done for many years, Kavanagh and Butler's style is the most identifiable to readers and, unlike the other books, is helped by being written almost entirely by the two principal editors. Although the Liberal Democrats rarely come under special attention in this book, it does make good observations about their campaign. It suggests that the party had the clear support of *The Independent* newspaper, a paper which gave the most positive coverage of the election and also one of the few to increase its circulation during the month. One could take the view that the party's slight improvement during the campaign may in some way be attributed to this. However, *The British General Election of 2005* makes the criticism that the party needs to improve its national campaign to complement its well-established targeting. John Curtice, Stephen Fisher and Michael Steed are brought in at the end of the book to analyse the results. They highlight potential new trends in favour of the Lib Dems amongst Muslims, students and tactical-voting Conservatives while also emphasising the opportunity offered by 2005's substantive growth in the number of second places.

Of the four books, *Britain at the Polls 2005* is the least useful for those wanting to analyse the election from a Lib Dem perspective. The whole feel of this text is that it is aimed far more at an American market where the idea of three-party politics is quite alien. This book is more of a collection of essays about disparate topics grouped loosely under the umbrella of the 2005 general election. Still, some interesting ideas are addressed

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in a couple of the chapters. Anthony King, in 'Why Labour won – again', contains a beautiful illustration of the diversity of the UK national picture and its no longer being about uniform national swings, by comparing the contrasting fortunes of the Lib Dem 2001 gains in Cheadle and Guildford. In his chapter, 'New Labour's Hegemony: Erosion or Extension?', Ivor Crewe provides the most damning indictment of the Liberal Democrats' campaign and its result to be found in any of these books. Yet he does concede that, provided there is a change in overall strategy, the party has put itself in a position whereby it could make its much-vaunted breakthrough at the next election.

At the beginning I implied that you could be forgiven for feeling a sense of *déjà vu* on

the morning of 6 May 2005. Of course, 2005 was better than 1983. Achieving sixty-two seats in a night made up largely of gains is better than winning twenty three seats in a night mainly of losses. However, the sense on the one hand of moral victory and on the other of total exasperation is one that has not been felt in the same way since 1983. There is enough information and advice in all four books to ensure that the Liberal Democrats do not have to wait another generation for their potential breakthrough to come about again. Party strategists would do well to read these books and take heed of them.

Tom Kiehl works in the Liberal Democrat Whips' Office in the House of Lords, and is Deputy Reviews Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

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when the dispossessed burst the silence 'by the only power at its command'.

The Village Labourer caused a sensation when it was first published in 1911, selling over a thousand copies in the first six months. It caught the wind of the public debate on the 'flight from the land' which had found its precursors in F. G. Heath's *The English Peasantry* (1874) and G. C. Brodrick's *English Land and English Landlords* (1881). More importantly, it added to the debate surrounding the land reforms of the Liberal government, particularly after the publication of *The Land* in 1913, the report of Lloyd George's Liberal Land Enquiry Committee. Upon reading *The Village Labourer*, Arthur Clutton-Brock claimed never to have seen so powerful an argument for 'democracy in all its aspects'. A. E. Zimmern thought the style 'quite Thucydidian' and Graham Wallas praised its 'over-mastering sense of dramatic force'.¹ G. M. Trevelyan felt that if a cheap version of the book were made available to the poor, Britain might face a revolution.

Formal academic opinion, however, has been less kind to the Hammonds. The assault started with J. H. Clapham, who disliked the bias against the upper classes. For him, enclosure was necessary to increase productivity, and he criticised the Hammonds for the naivety of their statistical analysis. This gave rise to one of the longest running historiographical debates of the twentieth century, the so-called 'standard of living' controversy.

On the one hand were ranged the 'catastrophic school' epitomised by the Hammonds and the Webbs and continued by E. P. Thompson. On the other side were the economic historians, such as Clapham and – later – Chambers and Mingay, who stressed the effectiveness of enclosure in stimulating industrial growth and feeding a growing population. Like

The radical soul of liberalism

J. L. & Barbara Hammond: *The Village Labourer*

(Nonsuch, 2005)

Reviewed by **Tom Villis**

The conventional view of the enclosure movement, today as in 1911 when the *Village Labourer* was first published, is that it provided for the modernisation of agriculture, helped feed a growing population and kick-started industrialisation. Changes in agriculture can often be analysed in rather abstract ways: in terms of rising labour productivity, for example, which made a surplus of labour available for manufacturing. What Barbara and Lawrence Hammond remind us – and we cannot be reminded too often – is that such 'efficiency' was achieved at the cost of immense suffering and the degradation of the rural poor. The authors do not deny

that enclosure made England economically more productive. However, in a series of chapters written in Lawrence's powerful prose and backed up by Barbara's scrupulous research, the reader is shown how enclosure was in effect a series of legalised thefts perpetrated by a parliament which acted only in the interests of the landed gentry. These acts, the Hammonds argue, stripped the village labourer of his common land and his economic independence. In an attempt to alleviate the distress which followed, the Speenhamland system of poor relief merely institutionalised pauperism. The final part of the book then describes the swing riots of 1830