

of Britain's Greatest Statesmen', a portrait sketch by Sir James Guthrie, RSA and – arrayed with a wreath of daffodils to mark the centenary – a marble bust by Paul Raphael Montford. Sir James (another Glasgow High School former pupil) also painted, in 1907, the portrait of Sir Henry in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Paul Montford was responsible for the bronze bust of Sir Henry in Westminster Abbey (1911) and the Stirling statue as unveiled by H. H. Asquith, then Prime Minister, on 1 November 1913.

Centenary Commemoration, High School of Glasgow

The High School of Glasgow – which has a bronze plaque of Sir Henry by Benno Schotz, RSA – will be having its own Centenary Commemoration in the autumn. Efforts are also continuing to have a new commemorative plaque erected at a more public location in Glasgow.

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both to be superficial and to omit explanations of key issues and individuals (for example, although the Corn Laws are referred to, there's no explanation of what they were or why their abolition was so controversial). The level of detail provided is too shallow for any reader who knows anything much about the background, but inadequate for those coming to it afresh. And the chapters actually say very little about the internal workings of the coalitions in question.

Even on its own terms this part of the book is pretty incoherent. Having rightly observed that most of the coalitions tended to be unstable because they were formed in the midst of crises (and therefore had a limited range of issues on which the coalition partners could agree), Oaten then criticises the Aberdeen coalition for *not* being formed in one, and therefore having nothing to bring it together. He does not attempt to consider what else could plausibly have happened in the hung parliament delivered by the 1852 election. He blames the coalition for the outbreak of the Crimean War (an accusation Disraeli also levelled), but never explains why. Having stated at one point that Asquith's large war cabinet was not a problem, he then argues that Lloyd George's much smaller one made a key difference. And so on.

Where Oaten provides a political viewpoint, it's essentially a right-wing one. Apparently the 1931 National Government should have made bigger cutbacks in the 'vast sums being wasted on social security benefits' – so much for Keynesianism, then. Throughout, ideological differences are sidelined; politics is almost entirely about personalities. Where the coalition leaders were weak, or where they were strong but disagreed with each other, the coalitions failed; where they worked well together, the coalitions

REVIEWS

Analysing coalitions

Mark Oaten: *Coalition: The Politics and Personalities of Coalition Government from 1850* (Harriman House, 2007)

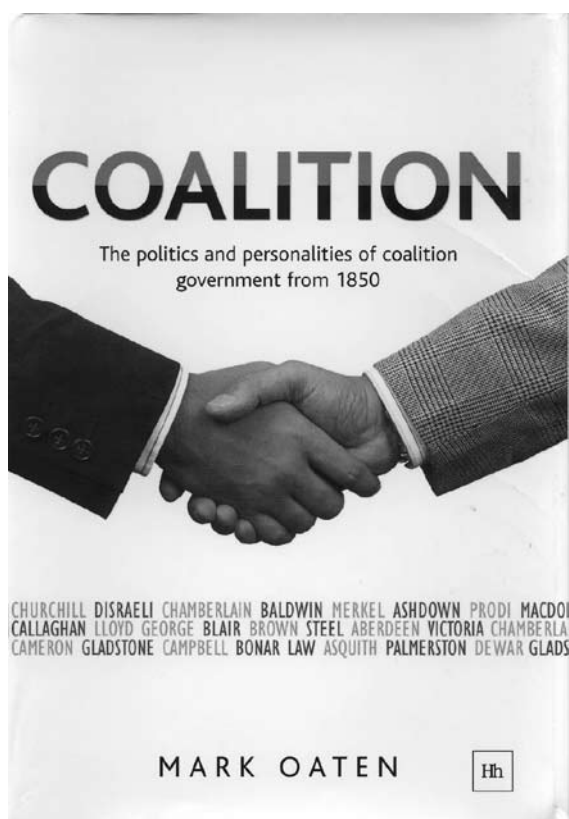
Reviewed by Duncan Brack

MARK OATEN'S book caused a small stir upon its publication, in September 2007, with its apparent call for the Liberal Democrats to consider a post-election coalition with the Conservatives. In fact, that conclusion is not put so starkly in the book itself – it stemmed more from the article Oaten wrote for *The Times* the week before publication ('A Lib-Con pact? You shouldn't rule it out', 6 September 2007). One conclusion, however, is clear from reading this analysis of coalition government in Britain and abroad: it's that if Mark Oaten wants to forge a writing career after his departure from the Commons, he'll have to manage a great deal better than this superficial, incoherent and poorly written effort.

Having said that, the book is not entirely without value. Oaten's aim was to derive lessons from the history of coalition government in Britain and from the rest of Europe, in the belief – entirely reasonable in 2007, not so clear now – that the next election is likely to lead to a hung parliament. He aimed to look both at the process of putting coalitions together and the personalities that made them work, or fail.

Five chapters thus examine Aberdeen's Whig/Peelite administration of 1852–55, Asquith's and Lloyd George's wartime coalitions of 1915–16 and 1916–18, Lloyd George's post-war coalition of 1918–22, the National Government of 1931–35 and Churchill's wartime coalition of 1940–45. Unfortunately they manage

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succeeded. Needless to say, this analysis could also be applied to single-party governments. It's an essentially anti-ideological view of politics, an approach also seen in Oaten's praise for the non-party businessmen brought in to government by some of the coalitions, and his belief that party politics always gets in the way of good government – as though there is always a single solution to any given problem, and government is purely a matter of finding it.

Subsequent chapters are fortunately rather better. One chapter deals with the experience of coalitions in Europe, picking examples from Austria, Germany and Italy. The German example, though, is the 'Grand Coalition' formed between the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats in 2005 – not at all the typical German experience, which has tended to see coalitions of one big and one smaller party. This chapter is a good deal more interesting than the earlier ones, however, partly because of the interviews Oaten conducted

with politicians and political scientists in the countries in question, and the more detailed look he takes at the processes of forming and running the coalitions, and partly because, I guess, the material will be less familiar to a British audience. Once again, though, he criticises coalitions for doing things – like running out of ideas – that single-party governments are hardly immune from. His rather feeble conclusion is that 'in a strange way these coalitions all seem to work for their country' (p. 313). He does not consider why the UK should be different.

Three further chapters cover more recent British events: the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977–78, the Ashdown-Blair 'project' of 1994–97, and the Joint Cabinet Committee that followed, and the Scottish experience of 1999–2007. These are also a good deal better than the earlier chapters, again largely because of the interviews Oaten conducted with some of the key participants in the deals he describes, including David Steel, Paddy Ashdown, Jim Wallace and Tom McNally, as well as a number of political scientists. He makes some perceptive observations – I particularly liked the comment that 'Ashdown had a habit of making every decision the most important there has ever been' (p. 228). There are some interesting viewpoints from his interviewees, including Clare Short thinking that Blair could have pushed proportional representation through the Commons after 1997 (p. 245), and Neal Lawson arguing that 'there is nobody [now] left in the Cabinet that believes in the Jenkins dream of the reunification of progressives' (p. 283). Oaten's analysis of the Labour-Lib Dem Scottish coalition governments is interesting, as is their impact on politics (a less confrontational campaigning style, as parties appreciate that they might

have to work with each other after the election; a reluctance to stress key commitments too much, in case they may have to be dropped in negotiations) – though his conclusion that the coalitions were a failure because the Lib Dems did relatively badly in the 2007 election seems a bit narrow, to say the least. He raises the argument, without really developing it, that coalitions may be best negotiated by politicians who are in some sense party outsiders, such as Lloyd George, Churchill, Blair or Ashdown.

The penultimate chapter considers what may happen should the next election result in a hung parliament. Oaten reaches some sensible conclusions, including the need for some preparatory thought to the process for potential negotiations, and the need for a caretaker government to give them enough time. He points out the difficulty, for the Lib Dems, of putting Labour back into power once it has lost the election (a lesson also drawn from the Lib-Lab Pact), while minimising the party's policy differences with the Conservatives (though observing that most Lib Dem activists would hate a deal with the Tories). He stresses the importance of obtaining a guaranteed commitment to PR in any deal. He correctly identifies the flaw with Charles Kennedy's answer to how the Lib Dems should behave in a hung parliament (to judge each issue on its merits) which is that before the party gets that chance it has to decide how to vote on the government's Queen's Speech. 'Bluntly at this point you have to put up or shut up ... Whilst it sounds a good soundbite two years away from an election, the staying independent route is just not an option for a party that wants to be taken seriously' (p. 301).

In the concluding chapter Oaten mostly sides with Disraeli's famous aphorism,

'England does not love coalitions', while at the same time completely failing to explain how else the country is supposed to be governed under a PR electoral system (which he clearly does support). He argues that coalitions do not tend to provide strong government (while slightly undermining his own case by accepting that Lloyd George and Churchill in fact did) and mainly ends up with the conclusion that 'if a coalition government can have a strong leader it stands a greater chance of success' (p. 322). Well, yes; yet again, one could say the same about single-party government.

The book is littered with errors, over dates (the London bombings of July 2005 are given as 2004), election results (in 1931 the Liberal Party is simply omitted, though the Liberal Nationals (wrongly called 'Coalition Liberals') are there), events (the Liberal-Liberal National split happened before 1931, not after; Charles Kennedy became Lib Dem leader in August 1999, not spring), issues (the 1909 People's Budget and the 1911 Parliament Act are treated as though they're

the same thing) and places (Bute House, not Bude House, is the home of Scotland's First Minister). Words are misused ('attributed' where he means 'allocated', 'contingency' instead of 'contingent', 'denouncing' instead of 'renouncing', 'throws' instead of 'throes'). The grammar is erratic, and references are incomplete and sometimes wrong.

Coalition is a frustrating book. The topic is a good one, and there's enough of interest in the text to think that it could have turned out much better if it had gone through a couple of further drafts and been properly proof-read before publication. As it is, Geoffrey Searle's *Country Before Party* (Longman, 1995) is far better on the historical side; and we still await a thorough analysis of recent experiences in Scotland and Wales. But Oaten deserves credit at least for raising a series of good questions. Let's hope that the hung parliament that might provide the answers isn't too long coming.

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the eighteenth century were largely out of power. Moreover, Mitchell classifies the short periods when they were in government as 'ugly experiences' (p. 1) and argues that their taste for self-destruction was so marked that, from time to time, 'their political opponents were driven to beg them to pull themselves together' (p. 1) for the good of the nation. Yet this was the period in which the traumatic events of the American and French Revolutions laid the foundations of the divisions between the parties in succeeding generations and in which the nature of Whig opposition to the authoritarian Tory governments of the period was a contributory factor to the avoidance of a revolutionary outbreak in Britain. Eventually the Whigs did get their act together and the contribution of their administrative brawn to the Victorian Liberal governments was significant in the constitutional transformation of the nineteenth century. But, because he is not trammelled by the chronological dictates of the life of the various administrations, Mitchell is able to perform a more valuable service. He constructs a sociology of the Whigs, describing their character and their mode of life, building a picture of the archetypal Whig.

Gladstone, who joined the Liberals from the Peelite wing of the Conservative Party, was reported by a Whig of the later Victorian period as complaining that 'a man not born a Liberal may become a Liberal, but to be a Whig he must be born a Whig'.¹ Mitchell concurs, arguing that Whigs were 'made by nature and confirmed by nurture' (p. 6). Born to a rich aristocratic family comprising a mother and father of similar backgrounds and similar intellectual and political outlooks, indeed possibly cousins, the young Whig went through his formal education in the company of other Whigs and in a suitably

No one likes us, we don't care

Leslie Mitchell: *The Whig World 1760–1837* (Hambledon Continuum, 2005)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

AT THE beginning of his final chapter, Leslie Mitchell claims that 'Whiggery is no more' (p. 175). And like many extinct creatures, by their disappearance the Whigs have created something of a mystery, which continues to intrigue Liberal Democrats, who claim the Whigs as part of their ancestry but who mostly know little about them. For any such Liberal Democrats Leslie

Mitchell has written an enticing introduction to the world of the Whigs.

Despite the title, Mitchell's book is not a narration of political events during his chosen period, which covers the reigns of George III and his sons, up to the accession of Queen Victoria. Superficially, this choice would appear odd as at this time the Whigs, who had been so dominant in the early part of